

Chapter 78

Strengthening Performance of Civil Society Through Dialogue and Critical Thinking in Nigeria: Its Ethical Implications

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses dialogue and critical thinking as a tool for civil society's performance and achievements in contemporary societies. The problem statement raises the need for knowledge of what dialogue and critical thinking is, as well as the competence in how to employ and apply its tools in policy engagement. Drawing upon extensive contemporary literature on civil society and policy engagement, this study examines how to enhance the performance of civil society organizations through the paradigm of dialogue and critical thinking. Findings reveal that critical thinking and dialogue is crucial in the success story of civil society organizations, just as the quality of the work accomplished is contingent upon the quality of the ideas, critical thinking and analysis of the problems to be solved. This chapter therefore, has a significant implications for cumulative research on the nexus between critical thinking and dialogue in Civil Society in contemporary societies

INTRODUCTION

Despite the growing significance and enormous influence of civil society organizations in the developing world especially Africa, the institution remains partially understood. Civil society has been a core concept of social theory and scholarship for centuries. This explains why the issues involving civil societies in many cultures have been contested within political philosophy, sociology and numerous humanities discipline for hundreds of years, yet, many issues are still unresolved (Aiyede, 2012). Classical debates from leading thinkers, like Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Tocqueville and Gellner, around civil

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society had the issues of proofs and understanding at the heart of their discussion, but in contemporary research, the goal post have been extended to subjects like ethics, dialogues, critical thinking, and engagement strategies. Civil society in contemporary societies and rapidly changing world is generally recognised, accepted and established as a diverse and ever-wider bionetwork of individuals, communities and organizations (Mundy, 2010). They constitute a genuine constituency that sits alongside other stakeholders in the society to foster sustainable development through governance processes, service delivery, and transformative behavioural pattern. This lends credence to why civil society organizations in many societies are playing an increasingly important role in the efforts to achieve sustainable development on many spheres of life. The organizations have been working alongside with governments in activities pertaining to the goals on poverty reduction, empowerment of women, increased transparency, and notably to encouraging people's participation in decision-making and policy implementation (Weijer & Kilnes, 2012).

Nonetheless, current discussions regarding civil societies have tended to a shift emphasis toward the harsh realities of increasing global inequalities, poverty, and lack of development as a major concern to the international community over the years. Thus, while many witness economic growth and prosperity in some parts of the world, there are more than a billion people who continue to live in poverty with a purchasing power of less than a dollar a day. In Nigeria, and other sub-Saharan African countries for instance, about one fifth of the children in the first year of their birth die, nearly half of those who survive are malnourished and a significant proportion of the population does not have access to clear water, sanitation, basic health services and education (Essien, 2016). Here then lies the clarion call on civil society for solidarity and determination for a sustainability thinking and action.

Evidently, there is an increasing emphasis on the concept and role of civil society in contemporary which explains why it has become a buzzword within international development circle. This however, is not surprising, since the organisation has seen unprecedented growth having become aware that policy engagement and advocacy can have greater impact than contestation especially as it as has the capacity to spur more widespread benefits on the poor. For instance, civil society organisations in Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Zimbabwe and Kenya as well as many other African and Asian countries now provide over 40% of auxiliary services such as healthcare services and education (Aiyede, 2012). In other instances, networks such as OKPO in Nigeria provided health services like "operation kick polio out" to over 8,000 villages in Northern part Nigeria (Edwards, 2004:39). Interestingly, Africa has experienced a phenomenal increase in the number of registered NGOs from 4500 in 2011 to over 100,000 in 2015 (Brewer et al., 2008:66). It is popularly estimated that NGOs has been able to reach 15–20% of the world's poor (Fowler, 2000:45). Development NGOs have an annual global budget of some US\$15.5bn. Obviously, they have attracted increasing policy and research attention of late. Similarly, there has been a great deal of literature on civil society and its involvement in international development and service delivery over the last decade. However, there is remarkably little systematic work on the use of dialogue and critical thinking as CSOs attempt to influence policy processes and draw strategies of engagement (Brown & Jagadananda, 2007). The big question then is does dialogue matter to CSO work? If so, how, when and why? Can the use of dialogue improve the performance and effectiveness of CSOs? This paper attempts to respond to these questions with a view to bringing out the increasing importance of these actors in social development.

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