The Role of Civil Society Organizations and Political Parties in Intergovernmental Relations in Nigeria

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Abstract

Civil society and political parties are interest groups that bridge the gap between the governed and the government. They possess the instruments of conflict management. They have come to be recognized as veritable groups whose activities are geared towards change advocacy at the local, state and national level of society. They operate in almost all sectors of societal lives and their activities in influencing intergovernmental relations for enhanced citizens satisfaction are legendary. This paper examines the role of civil society and political parties among governmental actors, the relationship between civil society groups and government as well as the reason why civil society and political parties are not performing the way they should. The findings of this paper points to the fact that given the right atmosphere and the enabling environment, these interest groups will influence positive interactions between governments.

Keywords: legendary, advocacy, intergovernmental, civil society, political parties

Introduction

It is instructive to note that civil society organizations and political parties have played decisive roles in consolidating or marring intergovernmental relations in Nigeria. Civil society has been defined by Diamond (1999) as "the realm of organized social life that is

voluntary, self generating (largely), self supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by a large order and a set of shared rules". The civil society is more than just a formation. It is a site, a realm a theatre and an instrument (Ikelegbe, 2003). It possesses the capability to cooperate with, engage, antagonize, contend and influence the state on behalf of the citizenry. On the other hand, a political party is a political organization that typically seeks to influence government policy, usually by nominating their own candidates. It should be noted that if parties are nationally integrated. Intergovernmental relations may take the form of relations among fellow politicians, but if there are fairly distinct party systems, at the national and the regional state levels, intergovernmental relations can adversely be affected.

The trust of this paper is to examine the effects civil society has had in intergovernmental relations in Nigeria and also to ascertain the impact that the political parties had in consolidating intergovernmental relations in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

- **Civil Society:** This is an intermediary entity standing between the private sphere and the state. It is distinct from society in that, it involves citizens acting collectively in the public sphere to express their interest, position and ideas, exchange information, achieve initial goals and make demands on the state and hold local state officials accountable.
- **Political Party:** A political party is a political organization that typically seek to influence government policy, usually by nominating their own candidates to take over the helm of affairs.
- **Intergovernmental Relations:** Intergovernmental relations are interactions that exist between governments in a state. Relationships between governments constitute intergovernmental relations.

Role of Civil Society Organizations

Civil society groups are very important to the state as they are better placed to know population needs in terms of development and good governance. In recent years, civil society groups have become more prominent, more visible and more diverse all over the world. One of the factors influencing the growth of CSO's has seen the increased challenge to imbalances of power between state and its structures on the one hand and civil society on the other. This has been driven by many forces such as reactions to centralized authority in state structures, dissatisfaction with state performance on public services and dissatisfaction with policy positions taken by the state in international arena. CSO networks have been formed within and across countries to promote a wider support for

public interest. They also provide a legal authority for public participation and the enhancement of civil education and expanding opportunities for greater involvement in governmental programs.

Attahiru Jega enumerated roles of civil society in Nigeria as follows:

- ✓ The promotion and defense of the Constitution and rule of law.
- ✓ The enhancement of the integrity and efficacy of the democratic institutions and processes as well as
- ✓ The development of a viable democratic political culture in the polity. In other words, civil society can positively contribute to sustainability of democracy by legitimizing and entrenching institutions, processes and the culture of democracy, as well as by contesting, de-legitimizing and opposing authoritarian, undemocratic and uncivil practices and dispositions (Jega 2007:247).

Role of Civil Society in Intergovernmental Relations

Intergovernmental relations have been supplemented by the contributions of civil society through an increasingly vocal actor on the political scene: The number of civil societies groups are growing exponentially, reflecting every imaginable interest, agenda and ideology. The installation of democratic governance was largely in part due to civil society activities. However, there has been genuine concern as to the continued effectiveness of civil society consolidating democracy in Nigeria. Civil society can be more effective if they maintain a high degree of independence from the government. The struggle in Nigeria to advance the frontiers of democratization and sustain democratic state craft has not been an easy task. Most of these civil society groups have their role defined or occasioned by the environment factor that created them.

The proliferation and strengthening of Civil Society Organizations, (SCOs) influence public policies in different spheres of the social political life of Nigerians. These civil society organizations cut across the academia, charities, clubs, organizations, cooperatives, churches, cultural groups, environmental groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations, trade unions, women groups etc. some of the prominent civil society organization are the Save Nigeria Group, ASUU, NLC, OPC, Ijaw Youth Movement, Global Call to Action against Poverty, National Association of Seadogs (NAS) and the Girls Power Initiative etc.

Other Roles of Civil Society Groups Include:

1. They serve as watch dog to check the excesses of government and expose, curtail violations of human rights, abuse of the constitution. They thus exercise control over democratic political institutions.
2. They support the role of political parties in stimulating political participation, increasing political efficacy and skills and promoting appreciations of the obligations of democratic citizens. In a democratic setting, the more important role of political parties stimulating political participation will be much more visible if such roles are complemented by the various civil society groups that we have in the society. In the case of Nigeria, it has been observed that an average Nigerian is skeptical about the various political parties and profess membership of it because of selfish interest (Adele 2001).
3. They provide a crucial arena for the development of such democratic attributes as tolerance, willingness to compromise and respect for opposing view points.
4. Civil society organization help in the recruitment and training of new political leaders in technical, administrative skills and normative standards of public accountability, transparency, responsiveness and inclusiveness.
5. They are important channels of information dissemination and thus help citizens to collectively pursue and defend their interest and values.
6. These are associations which promote, defend and project certain civil, social, political and related interests. Non-governmental organizations, advocacy, human rights and activist groups fall under this category. A typical example is the campaign for Democracy.
7. Advocating dialogue as an alternative to armed violence, they can catalyze public mobilization for peace, whether through demonstrations, petitions or media campaigns. For instance, Girls Power Initiative, a civil society organization based in Edo State has been in the fore-front through media campaigns kicking against the exploitation of the girl child.
8. Facilitating dialogue between the parties. The coalition of civil society group in Edo State led by Mr. Austin Osakwe mediated in the industrial disharmony between Edo State Government and Health workers in February, 2011 over emoluments issues.
9. Civil society monitors compliance and violations. Civil society groups were at the Vanguard at ensuring that Governments at all levels in Nigeria implement the new national minimum wage.
10. Participating at the negotiating table. In areas of dispute among levels of government or between a tier of government and the people, civil society groups

are always present at the negotiating table at least, to ensure that compromises are reached and that no party to the dispute is short changed.

Civil society groups have been very relevant in intergovernmental relations, they have ensured stability in areas where peace has been threatened and have assisted a great deal in dispute between Edo State Government and the Nigeria Medical Association in February, 2011. This timely intervention forestalled what would have resulted in a major strike action by the Nigeria Medical Association.

Governments may directly gain form the expertise of civil society groups concerning the effects of environmental policies or meeting legal environmental commitments. Both groups may mutually increase their bargaining power by supporting each other's demands. Interactions between civil society groups and organs of government are mainly centered on development, poverty reduction and delivering the dividends of democracy to the citizens. Civil Society groups promote alternative development strategies to those provided by the government. The economic recession being witnessed in developing countries like Nigeria and the poor performance of many government programmes have made civil society groups more relevant than ever. They play an increasingly important role in rural development in particular and social development in general, for which extensive education is one of their policy instrument.

The impacts of civil society interventions show that there are changes in living standards, income generation, access to infrastructure and also change in literacy levels.

Definition and Origin of Political Parties in Nigeria

A political party is an organized group of persons, who seek to control the government of the state. Section 229 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, clearly explains a political party to include any association whose activities include whose activities include canvassing for votes in support of a candidate for election to the office of President, vice – president, Governor, Deputy Governor or membership of a legislative house or of a Local Government Council. To Coleman and Rosberg (1966), a political party is a formal association whose primary purpose is to gain and maintain control of governmental machinery and policy. Drawing inference from this definition, Ikelegbe (2004) concludes that as a political association, political party unifies and organizes people, articulate and aggregate views, formulates programmes and policies, mobilize people to participate in politics and at election times, select candidates and mobilizes the support of the citizenry through campaigns, rallies and propaganda.

Roles of Political Parties

Some of the functional roles of political parties include the following;

1. Political parties aggregate the interests of various members or groups in the society.
2. Political parties form alternative government and thus provide alternative leadership.
3. Political parties express and manage conflict within a political system
4. Provide opposition to government in power; they provide instruments for mobilizing and winning popular support i.e. legitimizing of authority and political succession.
5. Bridge the gap between the governed and the governments.
6. Political parties examine government policies and their implementation; and inculcate national pride, self-reliance in members, representatives, and the public generally, for instance, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) through a press statement on ITV and NTA on Thursday, 10th November, 2011 raised alarm over the use of tax payers money to celebrate the 3rd year in office of Comrade Adams Oshiomhole led government in Edo State.
7. Political parties help to structure electoral choice
8. They help to conduct the business of government under a party label or banner
9. They help to decide which party or coalition of parties should govern for a fixed number of years
10. Political parties in a liberal democratic system, provides the medium through which the accountability of the executive and the legislators to the electorate is exercised through periodic elections under a multiparty electoral politics.
11. They educate and sensitize the populace on political issues.
12. Political parties enhance development of a state with their level of intergovernmental play.

A Critique of the Role of Civil Society / Political Parties

There is no doubt that civil society organizations/ political parties are very well suited as instruments of positive inter governmental relations. In spite of this apparent endowment, it is pertinent to note that there are certain limitations that can inhibit the effective functioning of civil society groups. Some of these limitations include.

1. Inadequate planning organization and management.
2. Inadequate staff training
3. Inability to ensure sustainability
4. Inability to effectively collaborate at appropriate levels with government agencies

5. Lack of co-ordination of efforts of individuals
6. Little attention paid to leadership training
7. Inability to learn from the mistakes, other civil society groups/ political parties make
8. They do not reflect agents of positive change as majority of them are self seeking and undermines the reasons for their set up.
9. Issues of funding.

Relationship between Civil Society and Government

Civil society groups are likely to relate to the state in one of these ways.

1. **Complementing the State:** This entails that civil society partners with the state in providing services which the state would otherwise not be able to provide. The civil society becomes an instrument of government policy implementation.
2. **Opposing the State:** Civil society opposes the state through various pressure groups in an effort to engage government with regards to policies affecting the people.
3. **Reforming the State:** Civil Society represents interest groups that can engage government in negotiating in order to improve policies that have direct bearing on the people.

It is instructive to note that civil society cannot function like government and governmental actors cannot function like civil society groups. It is therefore important that they complement each other.

Recommendation and Conclusion

Intergovernmental relations emphasize the relationship that exist among entities within the domestic sphere of a state rather than diplomatic relations among sovereign states. As noted earlier, civil societies in Nigeria tend to form arena where self autonomous groups engage the state in hegemonic and counter hegemonic struggles for domination, accommodation and opposition (Ikelegbe, 2005). By implication, various interest are largely articulated in the scheme of the nation's policy making processes for an enhanced socio-economic and political development in Nigeria (Omodia $ Erunke, 2007). On the other hand, political party is one of the critical elements that affect the nature of intergovernmental relations. In Nigeria, the ethnic oriented nature of political parties from the pre independence period has been a major source of intergovernmental conflicts in Nigeria until the 1990s, political parties were created along the major ethnic lines. This has in no small measure complicated the effort at "consolidating the unity of its people".

Thus, in an attempt to ensure that parties are nationally integrated, the 1979 constitution made elaborate provisions to affect the character of political parties. The goal of these provisions was to ensure that parties that quality to field candidates for elective posts were nationally represented in their internal structures, symbols and general outlook. For this purpose, they had to situate their headquarters in the federal capital. But as observed these parties were defeated by forces of tribalism.

The two (2) political parties founded by the Babangida administration was hoped to be national and free from hijack by money bags or ethnic leaders. But the positive effects of these national parties were lost to the crisis that attended the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections. Thus the 1999 constitution retained the major provision relating to the formation of political parties in the 1979 constitution. The problem of ethnic parties seems to have been overcome with the sweeping victory of the People Democratic Party (PDP) in the 2003 elections. There is an increasing party cooperation especially those of same political parties at the state level. For example states controlled by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) tend to interact and pursue same policies in their respective domain, thereby bringing about a free flow of intergovernmental relations.

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