

**RETHINKING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR  
DEMOCRATIC SUSTAINABILITY IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*Nigeria's democracy, although enduring since 1999, faces significant challenges that hinder its full potential. This paper explores the concept of civic engagement, tracing notable citizen participation during the colonial and military eras to critically reevaluate contemporary civic engagement practices. It identifies key obstacles to citizen participation in Nigeria's democratic system, including political apathy, lack of trust in government, and limited civic education. The paper proposes multi-pronged strategies to reinvigorate civic engagement, such as fostering political literacy, promoting active electoral participation, and incorporating civic education as a core subject in the national school curriculum. Additionally, it advocates for inclusive participation through digital tools and community-based initiatives, alongside strengthening mechanisms for citizen feedback and government accountability. The paper concludes with suggestions*

*aimed at enhancing rapid civic engagement, which would solidify Nigeria's democratic foundation and pave the way for long-term political stability and development.*

**Keywords:** Civic Engagement, Democracy, Sustenance.

## **Introduction**

Nigeria's path to democracy has been shaped by a history of colonialism, military rule, and civil unrest. Despite these challenges, the country achieved a significant milestone with its transition to democracy in 1999. However, issues such as corruption, ethnic tensions, and a disconnect between citizens and the political process have continued to hinder its democratic development (Osaghae, 2018). One essential factor in addressing these challenges is to enhance civic engagement. Civic engagement encompasses a wide range of individual and collective civil and political participation, including community service, volunteering, political involvement, and activism. It specifically refers to the active participation of citizens in the state's decision-making processes, granting them substantial influence over democratic policies and programs, ultimately improving the socio-economic well-being of the citizens. According to the UN Public Sector Report (2008, cited in Okafor, 2023), civic engagement, or citizen participation, involves citizens in policymaking activities such as determining service levels, setting budget priorities, and approving physical construction projects. This process ensures that government programs align with community needs, gain public support, and foster a sense of unity within neighborhoods.

However, prior to the return of democracy in Nigeria, during the colonial and military eras, citizens participated in a variety of activities aimed at the development of their communities. These activities included the establishment of vigilante groups, organizing boycotts, and creating security outfits to ensure the safety of their neighborhoods. Both young people and adults actively participated in community development efforts, such as building schools, religious centers, markets, and recreational facilities, as well as maintaining environmental cleanliness. Additionally, town criers

played a crucial role in communicating important information to the citizens, promoting individual involvement and raising awareness in community development, thus fostering rapid civic engagement at that time. Herbalists and healers, who attended to the health needs of the community, also contributed to active civic participation. With Nigeria's attainment of independence and transition to democracy, however, there is now a pressing need to reconsider and strengthen civic engagement to sustain and enhance the country's democratic system.

In a well-functioning democracy, the public sector is expected to provide services that improve citizens' welfare, such as affordable healthcare, quality education, and essential infrastructure. These services are crucial for fostering civic engagement in governance (Rajkotia & Gergen, 2016). Unfortunately, in many African countries, including Nigeria, many citizens remain disengaged from democratic and governance processes, resulting in non-responsive governments with poor service delivery.

Since Nigeria's transition to democracy on May 29, 1999, following years of military rule, there has been a gradual increase in civic engagement, with civil society organizations and political groups voicing their opinions through mass media and the internet (Chiluwa, 2012). However, civic participation remains insufficient. It is vital for governments at all levels to prioritize citizen involvement in decision-making, as this enhances government legitimacy and strengthens democratic stability (Asante, 2020; Okewale, 2019). This paper therefore, explored the concept of civic engagement, tracing notable citizen participation during the colonial and military eras to critically reevaluate contemporary civic engagement practices.

### **Civic Engagement Practices**

The active involvement of citizens in governance is essential for upholding democracy and fostering national progress. Civic engagement is a fundamental pillar of democracy, as it allows citizens to participate by either running for office or voting for representatives. Through such participation, citizens can influence

and take ownership of public decisions. Additionally, when citizens engage in the public sphere, it enables the government to implement policies and programs that address the needs of the people (Spiegel, 1998 as cited in Okafor, 2023). Hence, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of enhancing the connection between the governing body and the populace to prevent political turmoil. Political instability arises when the powerful minorities isolates the privileged majority, neglect providing essential social services, and prioritize their own interests. However, when citizens actively exert pressure on the government, it promotes transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to public needs.

Diller (2001) defines civic engagement as a collaborative effort to enhance the welfare of the community. One common form of civic engagement is participating in elections by casting votes. Voting allows individuals to exercise their right by selecting their preferred candidates for public offices and removing unpopular officeholders (Olaleye & Ayobade, 2021). Alternatively, citizens can engage in advocacy for causes they support, an individual's words can have a significant impact. This could involve joining discussions on social media platforms like Twitter, endorsing political candidates or movements through Instagram stories, distributing flyers and brochures, and initiating conversations in public spaces. Citizens hold the ability to advocate through various channels. Elected officials are expected to stay connected with the concerns of the people they represent during their term in office. Town hall meetings are also an effective method for citizens to engage with their community. During a town hall meeting, which is an informal gathering, citizens have the opportunity to express their views on government policies and programs that impact them. According to Olaleye and Ayobade (2021), it creates a platform for people to hear the responses of public officials and elected representatives on these issues. Research indicates that civic engagement can contribute to the maintenance of a strong democracy.

The participation of citizens in civic activities can influence the democratic government to be more responsive to the needs of the citizens and decrease corruption. When the public puts pressure on

the government, it can prompt changes in their behavior, ultimately reducing corrupt practices. Additionally, civic engagement can result in more effective allocation of the state's budget and improved public service delivery. According to Bhargava (2015, as cited in Okafor 2023), citizen engagement is essential for the functioning of democratic governance, and this holds true for Nigeria as well. Engaging with citizens goes beyond voting and running for public office, it also provides the opportunity for citizens to participate in decision-making processes (Ibirogb, 2019).

The current structure of Nigeria's democratic space is said to discourage meaningful civic engagement, as many citizens are noticeably absent from democratic and governance processes due to a lack of trust in the political class. This has led to an atmosphere of suspicion toward the democratic government. For the country to achieve significant progress and socio-political development, citizens must actively participate in governance, particularly at the grassroots level. When civic engagement is recorded at this level, citizens can influence government decisions and hold those managing state resources accountable. Moreover, greater citizen involvement strengthens the legitimacy of the government.

To broaden civic engagement, it is essential to provide comprehensive, high-quality, and accessible education, especially for the younger generation. A well-educated society can cultivate a mindful, dedicated, and actively involved citizenry, capable of critically assessing and addressing societal issues. Additionally, high unemployment and a lack of economic opportunities hinder citizen engagement in political processes. As Olusegun (2012) notes, politicians exploit citizens' economic vulnerabilities, particularly the youth, during elections by offering financial incentives to encourage participation in violent and undemocratic behaviors. To address this, substantial employment opportunities must be created, and economic access must be broadened for all citizens.

### **Challenges in Citizen Participation**

The concept of civic engagement in the democratic sphere is gaining widespread acceptance across the globe. The aim of promoting civic

engagement is to ensure that citizens play a full part in the democratic and governance process and enhance public accountability for positive development outcomes (Chiweza, 2005; Hussein, 2003 cited in Okewale, 2019). It is undeniable that a large proportion of citizens worldwide do not actively participate in the political and socio-economic decisions that influence their lives. Frequently, the majority of citizens avoid involvement in the political and socio-economic processes that impact their lives. The influence of elite preferences often shapes the creation and implementation of policies, leading to advantages for a privileged minority and further disadvantages for the less privileged majority, thus widening the inequality gap. Civic engagement is crucial for the overall socio-political and democratic well-being of any nation. Unfortunately, some countries still demonstrate a lackluster approach in this area. Nigeria is one of the countries with a low level of citizen participation in the democratic sphere. In Nigeria, citizens' involvement has been quite discouraging, primarily due to electoral misconduct in the political realm and the self-serving nature of the political leadership.

In today's Nigerian democracy, the dominance of the dollar over the naira has made it easier for individuals with more dollars to purchase their way into elected positions, even if they have not been chosen by the citizens. Various factors, such as political, socio-cultural, attitudinal, and bureaucratic factors, also hinder citizens' participation in the country. Okewale (2019) emphasizes that the country's history, characterized by insufficient citizen engagement, creates an atmosphere of governance dissatisfaction and development discrepancies. Essentially, the government's ability to prioritize the demands of the people depends on how actively citizens engage in the governance process. Citizens' lack of enthusiasm towards the democratic process may be a result of the prolonged period of oppressive military policies that marginalized them from participating in democracy.

Furthermore, the extended military rule has had adverse effects on citizens' involvement in the democratic process. The military regime, which lasted for twenty-seven years, violated citizens' rights to engage in democratic and governance processes. Under various

military juntas, especially during Sani Abacha's regime, not only were political activities banned, but social activists, critics, journalists, and politicians were also dealt with harshly (Chiluwa, 2012). Ojo (2008) effectively supported this claim, emphasizing that the prolonged military rule has left psychological marks on the majority of the Nigerian population, dampening the natural inclination of young people to demand change. This viewpoint was also confirmed by other academics who expressed that, the hidden and evident state-sponsored violence by the military rulers had significant psychological repercussions. The brutal and direct force used against innocent activists and university students resulted in a complex web of interconnected causes and effects, (Ekpo & Argoye, 2018). This could be seen as a significant reason why a large portion of Nigeria citizens, especially the youth, has shown little interest and enthusiasm in democratic and governance matters.

Furthermore, the way corruption has become ingrained, where personal connections determine one's significance, the frequent occurrences of human rights abuses, the growing levels of electoral misconduct during elections, and the overall dismissive and apathetic behavior of the political elite towards the citizens. Therefore, in order to mitigate these issues, it is crucial to implement effective reforms and civic engagement to be rapidly inculcated in the democratic space. In light of the detrimental impact of inequality on society, it is crucial for individuals to actively participate in democratic and governance processes. Engaging with civic matters in a substantive and involved manner serves as a remedy for inequality. This involvement has the potential to provide empowerment to groups that are underrepresented and marginalized, often finding it challenging to make their voices heard, influence decisions, and hold governments accountable. The exclusion of civic engagement by the political elite from the governance process has led to significant negative consequences for democracy. This has resulted in the democratic and governance processes being controlled by a minority of incompetent, corrupt, and self-serving political leaders. The actions of this political class have largely contributed to the precarious or nearly failing state of the Nigerian democratic government.

The country's democratic experiences have been influenced negatively by their actions, as outlined by Bolarinwa and Osuji (2022). Furthermore, as Iyekokpolo (2020) notes, ethnic and religious sentiments are often used by the political elite to manipulate conflicts and control citizens, distancing them from governance processes. This manipulation has played a major role in the unchecked corruption and the deterioration of essential services. Corruption has hindered efforts to address Nigeria's infrastructural deficits, poor public education, deteriorating healthcare, unsafe roads, rising inflation, and widespread insecurity. Consequently, many citizens have disengaged from the democratic process, disillusioned by self-serving politicians who seek power for personal gain rather than genuine improvements to the country.

### **Rethinking Civic Engagement Strategies**

To rejuvenate democracy in Nigeria, a comprehensive approach to civic engagement is essential in addressing the challenges the country has faced since independence. Urgent action is needed to breathe new life into the democratic system, focusing on expanding citizen involvement beyond just elections. While voting is crucial, civic engagement encompasses more than casting a ballot. Actions like signing petitions, participating in protests, and advocating on social media can be equally impactful in holding leaders accountable (Okeke, 2017). In a true democracy, criticizing the government is not criminal; rather, it encourages leaders to enhance their commitment to the nation and its people.

The government should create an environment that encourages citizens to access important information about governance and policies, utilizing ICT platforms like social media. These platforms offer new opportunities for civic engagement, particularly for Nigeria's younger generation. By leveraging online tools for voter education, mobilization, and government accountability, significant progress can be made (Agbaeze, 2019). ICT simplifies governance by enabling the rapid dissemination of information, thus promoting increased citizen participation.

To tackle civic apathy, civic education in schools and

communities should be reinforced. This education should move beyond rote learning, fostering critical thinking and a commitment to civic responsibilities (Egbuju, 2020). It is vital for young people to understand the importance of civic engagement and its role in both society and personal growth. Civic engagement should be a foundational subject throughout their education.

Given Nigeria's growing youth population, it is crucial to engage young people in addressing their specific challenges, such as unemployment and education (Ibeanu, 2021). A strong democracy depends on a thriving civic culture. By redesigning civic engagement strategies to be more inclusive, innovative, and responsive to Nigerians' needs, the country can ensure the sustainability of its democratic experiment and pave the way for a more secure, prosperous, and equitable future for all.

### **Conclusion**

Engaging with the community is crucial for sustaining democratic governance in any nation. Active citizen participation in shaping decisions that affect their lives is vital for a thriving democracy. However, civic engagement in Nigeria's democratic governance has been less than satisfactory, with low citizen participation in democratic affairs. Factors such as a lack of trust in the government and its officials have significantly contributed to the apathy of the average citizen toward government policies and programs. To sustain Nigeria's democratic system, the following suggestions should be considered:

### **Suggestions**

To enhance civic engagement and strengthen Nigeria's democratic system, several key measures must be implemented. First, the participation process should be expanded through political reforms and the adoption of good governance practices, ensuring that citizens are actively involved in the democratic process, especially at the grassroots level. This will empower individuals to have a direct influence on decisions that affect their communities. Additionally, civil society organizations (CSOs) must work more collaboratively

with local communities and government agencies to improve democratic outcomes, moving beyond their often adversarial relationship with the state. By fostering partnerships, CSOs can play a more constructive role in governance. The utilization of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) should also be prioritized as a tool for increasing transparency and access to vital information, such as government budgets, constituency allowances, political reforms, and financial expenditures. Finally, governments at all levels should introduce policies and initiatives that encourage civic engagement, ensuring that citizens have the resources, education, and opportunities to actively participate. This comprehensive approach will not only strengthen democratic foundations but also promote long-term political stability and socio-economic development.

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