

Invigorating Nigeria's Democracy through Citizens' Engagement

By

Harry Yerikema

Abstract

Nigeria, a democracy that is still developing, continues to face issues like widespread poverty, insecurity, low living standards, irregular elections, and violations of human rights. Despite the nation's democratic structure, genuine democratic governance is threatened by these political and economic problems. Voter turnout and general civic participation may be impacted by these undemocratic tendencies, which may be exacerbated by a lack of active citizens' engagement in national civic affairs. According to research, democracy can only flourish when the people are actively engaged in social and political issues. However, repeated transgressions of democratic principles and a lack of public participation define Nigerian democracy. In the light of these worries, this paper examines the advantages of citizens' engagement and how it might improve Nigeria's democracy. It makes the case that greater citizens' engagement can be extremely important. The paper first examines the state of Nigeria's democracy, then looks at the concept of citizens' engagement, and finally followed by invigorating Nigeria's democracy through citizens' engagement.

Keywords: Democracy, citizen and engagement

Introduction

Arikawei, Yerikema, and Ladan (2021) quote Aniemeka (2008) as saying that one of Africa's most pressing issues is still creating democratic, stable states. Aniemeka asserts that a stable democratic state promotes a political and legal climate that is favourable to economic development and guarantees the fair allocation of resources required for expansion. But for such advancements to be significant, economic growth must be accompanied with policies that address social welfare, healthcare, education, and poverty. As Aniemeka (2008) highlights, residents' dedication and collective will are essential to achieving these goals.

In an increasingly dynamic and complex global world, citizens' engagement is especially important for bolstering democratic values. For people to grasp their civic duties and make a significant contribution to governance, democracy necessitates political involvement. In addition to encouraging people to become involved in politics, this engagement improves their political literacy, empowering them to make knowledgeable choices regarding representatives, candidates, and grassroots political initiatives (Aminigo, 2006; EAEA, 2019, as cited in Arikawei et al., 2021). Democracy, which is commonly characterised as a government of, by, and for the people, cannot operate well without active citizens' engagement. Mayegun (2012) referencing Ake (1986), stated that democracy is a system in which representatives chosen by free and fair elections rule on behalf of the people. These delegates answer to the electorate, who have the ultimate authority to change the leadership on a regular basis. Ojo (2022) goes on to say that public sovereignty, respect for the law, legal legitimacy, freedom of choice, and accountability in government are all fundamental components of democracy. According to Ojo (2022), Benet (2006) supports the notion that, when maintained through active citizens' engagement, democracy can be used as a weapon to fight tyranny (IDEA, 2003, as cited in Duru, 2017).

Nigeria has had decades of subpar political leadership since separating from the United Kingdom in 1960, which has resulted in military takeovers and divides along ethnic, religious, and cultural lines. Both local and foreign observers have expressed concern about the alienation of citizens from the nation's democratic processes, which is mostly the result of political leaders' actions (Ojo, 2022). Many anticipated a period of peace, stability, and progress as Nigeria made the democratic transition in 1999 (Omotosho, 2008, as cited in Duru, 2017). But rather than promoting progress and national harmony, the nation has seen ongoing political unrest and violent crimes against many communities and religious groupings. Proponents of democracy contend that enhanced individual liberties and national development should be the

ultimate results of democratic government (Duru, 2017). But according to Iroghama in Ojo (2022), Nigeria had a drop in voter turnout in the 2007 national elections, which prompted calls for electoral reform. Some interest groups have taken advantage of the growing national skepticism brought on by this disengagement for their own ends (Iroghama, 2012; Odo, 2015, as cited in Ojo, 2022).

In the light of Nigeria's past and present difficulties, democracy is still essential to its existence. Nevertheless, democracy has not yet significantly raised the standard of living for a large number of Nigerians. In spite of this, it is still the only system of governance that can bring the country's many political traditions, faiths, and ethnic groups together. Hoffmann (2022) stated that democracy is the only form of government that can promote a just society without using oppression or exclusion. One of the main causes of Nigeria's continuous political and socioeconomic problems has been found to be the people's unwillingness to actively engage in national affairs (Aminigo, 2006; EAEA, 2019, as cited in Arikawei et al., 2021). In order to revive Nigeria's democracy, this paper aims to encourage citizens' engagement.

The State of Nigeria's Democracy

With roots in ancient Greece, democracy is still a form of government in which the people themselves have the power. It is based on the people's agreement, as they feel they have the right to select or run their own government (Okoroafor, 2010; Odo, 2015; Yio, 2012; in Ojo, 2022).

After Nigeria gained independence from Britain in October 1960, it legally embraced a democratic system that permitted citizens to run for office and political parties to form. However, for more than 30 of the country's 64 years of independence, military rule upended the democratic underpinning. Nigeria was not able to return to civilian democratic administration until May 29, 1999. Notwithstanding this change, the protracted military era had long-lasting consequences, such as structural issues

including calls for the establishment of more states and local administrations, discussions about revenue-sharing schemes, poor infrastructure, and widespread corruption. The government's propensity for command over negotiation was also influenced by the military era, as evidenced by the way ethnic militias were handled, especially in the Niger Delta, and the tense relationship between the legislative and executive branches, particularly during the first democratic term (Odo, 2015 in Ojo, 2022).

Violence resulting from political rivalry, resource disputes, ethnic and religious tensions, and poor governance poses serious dangers to Nigeria's democracy (USAID, 2022). Corruption permeates every aspect of life, making many government organisations ineffectual and restricting their interaction with the public and commercial sectors. Furthermore, civil society lacks the means and ability to engage with the government and push for reforms.

In a similar vein, Hoffmann (2022) contends that the civil war and the consolidation of power during military rule have seriously undermined Nigeria's democracy. An affluent and frequently dishonest elite was established when the war concentrated oil profits in the hands of military leaders. Additionally, military dictatorships militarised the political climate of the country by stifling the growth of democratic institutions and culture. Security and law enforcement issues are made worse by Nigeria's democratic institutions, which are nonetheless brittle. The nation has not yet established strong democratic institutions, such as an independent judiciary, a credible electoral system, and adherence to the rule of law (Odo, 2015 in Ojo, 2022). Good governance and the people's sovereignty are undermined when political legitimacy is eroded as a result of faulty elections. Governance turns become a means of achieving personal benefit rather than serving the public interest in democracies where elections lack legitimacy. Because of this, Nigeria's democracy seems more procedural than substantive; elections are held to provide the appearance of democracy, but it is unable to function properly due to a lack of robust institutions

and guaranteed rights. Infrastructure development, access to high-quality healthcare and education, economic growth, and the institutionalisation of the rule of law are all crucial components of good governance that have not yet been achieved.

Paradoxically, the 1999 restoration to democratic governance has exacerbated public disenchantment with Nigeria's democracy. Public trust in the government fell from 76% to 44% between 2000 and 2003. In a same vein, trust in national leadership decreased from 78% to 26% between 2000 and 2005, while faith in democracy decreased from 81% to 25% (Ukertor, 2019; Afrobarometer, 2006 in Ojo, 2022). Only 15% of respondents said they trusted the Nigerian government (Ayodele, 2014 in Ojo, 2022). Similarly, only 31% of Nigerians trusted their government, compared to 86% in neighbouring Niger (Afrobarometer, 2016 in Ojo, 2022).

Dutu and Diaconu (2017) in Ojo (2022) listed a number of elements that influenced Nigeria's limited experience with democratic governance after gaining independence:

1. The breakdown of long-standing political regulations.
2. Gross misuse of political authority.
3. The slow degradation of personal liberties.
4. Nigerians are denied the opportunity to vote due to election tampering.
5. Politicians' extravagant expenditure in the face of pervasive poverty.
6. Regional administrations that opposed the flimsy federal system were forcibly removed.

Democracy is the most sophisticated type of government (Abiola and Olaopa, 2006). Democracy according to Osuji (2020) and Abdellatif (2003) has the following essential characteristics:

1. The defense of human rights and essential freedoms.
2. Decision-makers' public accountability.
3. The lack of prejudice against people on the basis of their gender, race, ethnicity, class, or other characteristics.
4. Policies that take future generations' needs into account.

5. Economic and social policies that consider the needs and desires of the populace.

It is clear that Nigeria fails to operate as a true democracy when the current political climate, as noted by Dutu and Diaconu (2017), is contrasted with the democratic norms delineated by Abdellatif (2003) and Osuji (2020). Scholars contend that Nigeria's democratic growth is hampered by deeply ingrained corruption, dwindling voter turnout, public mistrust of the government, the erosion of civil liberties, and frail democratic institutions (Hoffmann, 2022). Likewise, Amaechi (2010) as referenced in Ojo (2022), stated that democracy in Africa is still lacking and needs to be tailored to Nigeria's particular difficulties and sociopolitical conditions.

Citizens' Engagement

Although it is becoming more and more common in conversations today, citizens' engagement has its origins in Greece. In order to promote human fulfillment and happiness, Aristotle argued for active participation in governmental matters. Paulo Freire later developed the idea, and his conscientisation theory impacted grassroots rural development initiatives throughout Latin America (Brown & Chikagbum, 2017; Egenti, 2005). According to Morgan in Egenti (2005), international health organisations started supporting and funding citizens' engagement globally in the 1970s, which is when it became an important idea.

Egenti (2005) contended that, in spite of its increasing acceptance, groups that advocate for marginalised groups—such as religious organisations, revolutionary movements, peasant associations, urban guerilla groups, and private voluntary organisations—acknowledged the importance of citizens' engagement long before it was widely accepted. With an emphasis on the importance of citizens' engagement for success, these organisations started industrial development initiatives in places where access to government social programmes was restricted.

According to Reid in Okafor (2011), a key component of an empowered community is citizens' engagement. Citizens become actively involved when communities assume full responsibility for recognising, addressing, and resolving their problems. The United Nations also in Okafor (2011), emphasised that citizens' engagement entails giving every person of the community the chance to take part in, have an impact on, and profit from development initiatives. Since it depends on local dynamics and demographics, the process is intricate and lacks a general blueprint. However, without active engagement from beneficiaries in planning and execution, development cannot be successful (Egenti, 2005).

In the same vein, Arnstein (1969) in Brown and Chikagbum (2017) saw citizens' engagement as a process whereby the general population takes part at different levels to affect decisions about how to allocate resources and raise living conditions, especially in rural regions. In order to ensure that citizens make well-informed decisions regarding the roles they accept or reject in decision-making structures, he established the "ladder of participation" as a framework for public involvement.

According to Reid in Bappi, Singh, and Dahiru (2018), voting, going to community meetings, and making financial contributions to development projects are important examples of citizens' engagement. One characteristic of a well-functioning society that assumes responsibility for resolving its problems is active citizens' engagement. The United Nations (2005) stated that citizens' engagement guarantees inclusive participation in development and gives people the power to influence their communities. Similar to this, Kumar (2002) maintained that by empowering rural communities to recognise their needs and participate in project planning, execution, and evaluation, citizens' engagement enhances political and economic networks (Bappi et al., 2018; Laah, Adefila, & Yusuf, 2013).

Thomas Ehrlich in The Policy Circle (2022), defined citizens' engagement as an endeavour to improve communities by cultivating the information, abilities, and drive

required for active involvement. It includes both non-political and political initiatives meant to enhance the welfare of the community. Citizens can engage in a number of ways, such as:

- Voting, registering to vote, or working as an election official are examples of political participation.
- Teaching the populace about governance and history.
- Volunteering or taking part in community service initiatives with groups that promote the welfare of the community.
- Promoting legislative and policy changes.
- Holding public office or being appointed or elected to a position on the municipal council.

The following are important ideals linked to encouraging citizens' engagement, per The Policy Circle (2022):

- 1 Acknowledging and upholding the right to self-determination of a community.
- 2 Granting decision-making responsibility to people, especially those who are most impacted by problems.
- 3 Fostering general well-being and building communal bonds.
- 4 Actively including locals in decisions that affect their communities and way of life.
- 5 Promoting involvement, openness, and responsibility.

Invigorating Nigeria's Democracy through Citizens' Engagement

Many scholars, such as Mayegun (2012), Johnson (2014), Dalton (2017), NDI (2017), Arikawei et al. (2021), The Policy Circle (2022), Hoffmann (2022), and Ojo (2022), have emphasised the connection between democracy and citizens' engagement. Citizens are the engine of a democratic society, while the government is

the means to an end. Similar to how a driver controls a car's motion, citizens influence how government is run. A nation's citizens ultimately decide its condition and have the ability to change it if they are unhappy. By choosing or designating reliable officials to supervise governmental operations, they exercise this power. However, unaccountable and illegitimate representatives may arise when individuals abstain from elections or appointments, undermining democratic values.

According to democratic philosophy, democracy is strengthened when all members of society actively participate. Bartels (as cited in Dalton, 2017) emphasises that successful government depends on an involved and fairly equal populace and cautions that policies that benefit the wealthy can result from excluding marginalised groups from political involvement. Without a strong sense of citizenship, democracy is pointless (Ake, 1986 in Mayegun, 2012). As demonstrated in Nigeria, a democracy that lacks true citizens' engagement whether as a consequence of force, manipulation, or poor engagement is doomed to fail, bringing chaos and instability.

Johnson (2014) stated that participation in local governance affects how citizens view democratic institutions. Research indicates that participation at the local level strengthens the credibility of political institutions and promotes democratic values. Public trust in government is not always restored by greater participation, even though it does increase appreciation for democratic governance. Rather, a critical and watchful populace is necessary for representative democracy. In the end, citizens' engagement develops people who think they can and ought to participate in the democratic process (Johnson, 2014).

In order to bring new viewpoints and tackle important national challenges like energy, climate policy, jobs, and security, Nigeria needs more young people involved in politics. Long-term citizens' engagement is crucial for bolstering democratic institutions and promoting long-lasting change after elections. But Hoffmann (2022) opined that one of the biggest obstacles to young democratic activists in Nigeria is the

clientelist political system, where the main goal of power is to dispense patronage. Political change, the emergence of strong political parties, a diversified and independent media, a strong electoral supervision body, and a well-funded court are all necessary to strengthen Nigeria's democracy. Consolidation of democracy depends on these aspects of citizens' engagement. Ojo (2022) reiterated that citizens' engagement can assist remove these barriers by fostering democratic principles, equitable rights, and participation in governance. Ojo also notes the difficulties in advancing democracy.

In addition to strengthening democracy, citizens' engagement is essential for developing laws, rules, and regulations. As demonstrated by the partnership-in-planning method, it offers a forum for a range of viewpoints, guaranteeing fair decision-making and creative solutions (Okafor, 2011). NDI (2017) emphasised that creating democratic institutions and procedures alone is not enough; these frameworks must be actively used to enhance the lives of citizens. Effective governance depends on informed, organised, active, and peaceful citizens' engagement. Citizen-centered activism, driven by genuine community needs, is a transformative force for democracy.

The Policy Circle (2022) underscores that democracy relies on citizens' engagement, as it stimulates debate, problem-solving, and civil discourse to address social concerns. Active engagement improves democracy while empowering individuals to have a voice in their communities. Strong networks for putting community-driven solutions into practice are created by shared causes, which also foster empathy and trust. Dalton (2017) believes that the more individuals engage in democracy, the stronger it gets. Nations with significant political involvement frequently enjoy better governance, as an informed and interested public drives governments to be more responsive and effective. In the end, democracy produces better decisions than autocratic alternatives because it aims to fairly balance the interests of society rather than just be efficient.

In order to shape local government objectives, influence policies, and create stronger, more cohesive communities, citizens must be actively involved. It guarantees that all voices are heard, builds trust, and gives marginalised groups more power (Zencity, 2022; Gordon, 2000; Jung & Sea, 2012; Parker, Spires, Farook & Mean, 2008, as referenced in Ojo, 2022) Active citizens' engagement is essential to the efficient operation of democratic governments and institutions.

Conclusion

No matter the form, nature, or intervention, citizens' engagement in all facets of society is essential to preserving a positive social structure. By utilising social capital and cultivating both individual and communal trust, citizens' engagement is essential to balancing diverse societal interests and strata (study.com, 2024). It also fosters efficiency in the social and political spheres while fostering an open and accountable culture. Finally, Erude, Mukoro, and Taiwo (2024) posited that those who are actively involved in society are more likely to become socially conscious, influence policy, and enjoy a number of advantages at the local, state, and federal levels. Both the government and the people must take crucial steps in the democratic process to guarantee that democracy flourishes in Nigeria through citizens' engagement.

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