

# **Civic Education Strategy for the Electorates - Election Observers' Perspectives**

**Being a paper presented by Herbert Prince Ezechinyere, General Cordinator, WANEO (West Africa Network of Election Observers) on the occasion of round-table parley between media organizations and civil society organizations, on Tuesday September 9 2014 at KAS/ Media/ CSOs Roundtable meeting.**

## **Introduction**

We are examining the challenge – and need for comprehensive voter/ civic education from the civil society perspective. This takes into account the assumption that government has inputted its own component as provided by the electoral body, INEC.

We must begin then by re-examining the reasons and need for the civil society and media practitioners to engage in educating the electorate on their rights and need to participate in the electoral process.

## **Definition of Terms**

We have two terms to review.

*Voter Education* generally describes the propagation of information, materials and programmes intended to inform voters about the particulars and procedures of the voting process for election. It involves providing information on who is eligible to vote; where and how to register; how electors can check the voter lists to ensure they have been duly included; what type of elections are being held; where, when and how to vote; who the candidates are; and how to file complaints.

*Civic Education* on the other hand is a more far-reaching concept. It attempts to convey knowledge of a country's political system and framework, which might include information on the system of government; the nature and powers of the offices to be filled in an election; the principal economic, social and political issues facing the nation; the value of democracy; the equal rights of women and men; and the importance of peace and national reconciliation.

When considering issues affecting the democratic process in Nigeria, it is instructive to look again at the definition of the terms above. The problem or challenges of the electoral process are easily discerned by a review of what terms we are working with. We have drifted from what is, be our supposed need to attain a home-grown democracy. Frankly there could be nothing like a home-grown democracy in the true sense, seeing that democracy is a universal phenomenon, which follows certain basic procedural steps.

In every election, voter and civic education are necessary to ensure that all constituents—men and women alike—understand their rights, their political system, the contests they are being asked to decide, and how and where to vote. For an election to be successful and democratic, voters must understand their rights and responsibilities, and must be sufficiently knowledgeable and well informed to cast ballots that are legally valid and to participate meaningfully in the voting process.

Over the years, we have observed the recurrence of certain key issues in the Nigerian experience. To these issues I must attempt to address myself. They include:

#### FOUR AREAS OF FOCUS

- I. ELECTION VIOLENCE/CONFLICT (pre and post election)
- II. GENDER ISSUES
- III. PERSONALITY BASED POLITY
- IV. VOTING AS CIVIC POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY

#### **Election Related Conflicts and Violence**

When any crisis is termed political, we are to understand that it has its root in a democratic exercise. There are conflicts that have a long gestation period, such that by the time they degenerate into full blown conflicts, hardly anyone remembers their causes. In some others instances, crisis that might have fizzled out, become inflamed into full-blown conflicts due to poor management of issues involved. This is my analysis of the matter.

There is no part of Nigeria where election-related conflicts – and violence does not exist. We must not become overly ambitious by assuming that education and public enlightenment would stop this phenomenon. It is integral to the process. We can however participate in its reduction.

For example, when civil societies (local and international) collectively publish their opinions of an election, and adjudge it to be free and fair, it goes a long way to determine the public perspective on that election. In turn, it sets the mood for the result or out-come. It becomes far more difficult to mobilize the public to violence when they are made to see that the election was fair – as acclaimed by those who have no vested interest in the exercise.

Another aspect of this is the ability to mobilize the society to reject politicians who are dubious or who have history of economic crimes – proven or not. They should insist on representatives that would deliver democratic dividends. When this culture takes root, there would be fewer agitations and motivation to violence.

Furthermore, youths and community leaders can be educated against the tendency to be used as political thugs or as agents for social dis-order. A lot is being done about this, and the effort must be sustained. If youths shun violence, it will cease. They can do so when they are educated to see the larger picture, which includes that they are the losers in the end, and that for a plate of porridge today they are selling of their future and those of their unborn children.

### **Gender Issues**

Gender issues in democracy are often rooted in culture and the social and religious system. In many instances, women’s rights are tied to their fathers, husbands and family. This has affected her ability to exercise her constitutional guaranteed rights.

Voter and civic education can be critical in enhancing women’s participation in elections, hence civic education can help enhance women’s participation in elections particularly through the dissemination of positive images of women as voters, leaders, and participants in all aspects of the political process.

This observation is also shared in other contexts by the UNDP. In a published report, it was claimed that: “A creative approach can help ensure information spreads further and is better understood. While some election management bodies may limit themselves to posters other groups might organize materials or activities such as street theatre, role playing, radio spots, jingles, songs, comic strips or Internet campaigns to ensure that all voters—women as well as men—have access to the information they need to participate intelligently in the voting process. Women’s groups can be especially effective in developing material that will resonate with women voters. Ideally, election

management bodies should also check privately generated voter education material to ensure that it is gender-sensitive.”

### **Personality Dominance in Politics**

We have observed with concern the ability of certain powerful individuals to influence, exert and determine the outcomes of political exercises. Without doubt, democracy cannot do without the ‘powerful personality’ because, after all, it is a popularity contest. However when such individuals run the machinery of elections to benefit them and their cronies, it short-charges the larger society and falls short of the call to serve which political office should be.

There are two positions regarding what dominates a political sphere. It could be ‘issue-based’ or person-based’. Issue-based politics assumes that both politicians and electorates are focused on solving issues of general interest, therefore the representatives of the people go to the public service arena with the ‘issue’ as his or her key agenda.

The personality-dominated political set-up, breeds distrust, disaffections and conflicts because ultimately, the people would decry the self-serving representative who has turned the collective mandate into a tool to serve a personal agenda.

### **Civic Rights and Responsibilities**

That time when the electorates in Nigeria fully embrace the provisions of democratic legislations, and demand that their elected representatives are accountable on all counts, would mark the defining moment of democracy. That point is not a mirage. It is achievable through education.

Government would be ineffective in providing the sort of education that could motivate the people to mobilize and demand a change – since those who run government, also control the machineries of social conditioning and orientation. This is where the civil society must come in.

Nigerian voters can be re-oriented to expect a democracy that works as well here as in any other country whether they are first, second or third world. The factors that make the process work in any of those are the same as are needed to make it work in this

country. These include an informed electorate that own the system and that effectively own their elected representatives and expect accountability. Voting is only a minute part of the rights and responsibility of the electorate. I can boldly say that demanding proper and accountable representation is by far the larger part of the matter.

### **CSOs and Media United**

It is safe to posit that the civil society cannot exist on its own without the mass media, and vice versa. This is so because, while the civil societies provide the soul, the engine, the media provides the channel through which the message is effected.

There are various activities of voters and civic education that should be supported, some of these activities would need to be improved on, while the messages of some activities would need to be altered to suit the changing times and peculiar settings. For example, the focus is shifting from building democracy to sustaining it. And as the process gains ground in Nigeria, attention needs also to be paid to new/first time voters who have come of age during the subsisting democratic dispensation. These are factors that determine the direction and message of the public/mass education programme

If the current attention being given to gender issues in politics is sustained, the eventual result would be a balance between male and female in political office. These social changes will take very long time, and one may not be realistic to assume that even a 45% percent is achievable in the Nigeria of today, or that by simply fulfilling the number quotas, we would have a better Nigeria. The problem with Nigerian democracy is not that it is predominated by males, but that the people who attain to power through the people's will – male and female, have collectively failed to fully deliver the benefits of democracy to the people.

The gender-sensitive message ought not to ignore or neglect this vital fact.

Let us look at three (3) key areas of collaboration that would prove very effective in the promotion of valuable education for the electorate.

#### *1. Promoting programmes and platforms*

Promotion of programmes and platforms that provide electorates unfettered access to engage their elected representatives. Here they can ask questions, make inputs and even ventilate.

Putting elected officials in the proverbial 'hot-seat' will encourage accountability by helping them step down from their high-horses and removing their heads from the clouds to attend to the realities of life as experienced by the voting public. It also empowers voters with a means to making their votes count and democracy work for them.

### *2. Publishing facts about the performance of Political office holders*

Facts can speak for themselves. They should be made to speak for politicians; for good or for bad.

There are people who must not go anywhere near any government office by reason of their ghastly records and activities. Perhaps if the public know some the sordid details of the lives of some of those aspiring to leadership, they would exercise a collective action against such, regardless of what the party leaderships fell.

Naming and shaming is a two edged sword. The good that men do would also speak for them and promote their causes. Those who have done well should also be shown to the people.

Often, the published activities of political office holders are simply a show of lies and ineptitude. Imagine a governor shamelessly announcing the commissioning of a zebra crossing as one of the achievements of his administration. It is not the government propaganda mill that should feed the voters half-truths and outright lies about what is (not) being done. The civil society and media coalition should capitalize on its higher credibility rating instead to tell the world what is really the case.

### *3. Sponsoring discussions on social and mass media that engage youths to speak*

If given the chance, youths would intelligently articulate a path that lead to a better country. Unfortunately, those who purport to speak on behalf of the youths do so under government sponsorship, or under the influence of some vested interests. The social media is usually a stage for free speech. If the political class attempts to understand the mood in those media, they would know what youths really think about them and about what is going on.

**Note:** *In this context, social media represents internet portals, while mass media refers to traditional broadcast platforms such as television, newspaper and radio.*

## **Conclusion**

Democracy will work when the electorate knows its right, exercises its rights and fully participate in the secure sustainable development. These are achievable through effective education. These are attainable goals, the pursuit of which I call on everyone present to commit to.