

Paper Presentation

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Topic:

Cooperation of CSOs and the Media in the Preparation for the coming Elections

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Preamble:

Permit me to proceed on the assumption that a gathering such as ours needs not be bored with concept definitions such as what is Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) or the Media. If my assumption is wrong, there will be an opportunity at the end of the presentation to set the two in their right contexts. The paper also is restrictive in scope as it speaks to Civil Society Organizations in the sense of organized groups with interventions or planned interventions around the electoral processes ahead of the coming elections. The other pardonable assumption here is to go with the age long public perception of CSOs and the Media.

The organized civil society groups are seen as the conscience of society, the moral nucleus that balances the ills in society both by speaking up against such; as well as carrying out practical interventions to breach certain development gaps in society. The claim of being virtuous has become very conventional and inherent with civil society actors. Whether they live up to this virtuous claim or not, is open to value judgment.

The media on the other hand enjoys the public perception of an institution committed to offering the trusting public; valid information that seeks to close the knowledge gap in the society. The inherent dangers with these perception is that the CSOs may have depreciated to less than a conscience-perhaps into a dead conscience, while the media may have been offering information that is everything but truth. However, it is not the case here in Nigeria as civil society organizations and the Media have evidently attained some milestones in their respective mandates, and enjoy relative space and freedom to operate.

The question of legitimacy and regulation

The media in Nigeria is regulated by the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) empowered by Act no. 38 of 1992 as amended by Act no. 55 of 1999. Among several other functions of NBC; mandates D, G and N in that order of their functions allows the commission to:

“Regulating and controlling the broadcast industry, upholding the principles of equity and fairness in broadcasting, and Determining and applying sanctions, including revocation of licenses of defaulting stations, which do not operate in accordance with the broadcast Code and in the public interest”.

Meaning the media does not operate in a vacuum and holds such a clear and unambiguous duty to society. As for the social media, the Bureau of Public Enterprises plans to roll out a legal framework for the regulation of the social media in Nigeria. Whether this is the right path for the country and her people; is left for the citizens to decide in due time.

As for the CSOs, even though civil society organizations in the Nigerian context have no known established and legitimized enactment that regulate activities of CSOs, regressive trend in our societal life have tended to strengthen the rise of CSOs based on the need to raise the capacity of citizens to address social, economic and political developmental challenges. Also the over thirty years of repressive and unpopular governments in Nigeria in the period before 1999 and strangely beyond have served as impetus for the proliferation of CSOs that seek to challenge the legitimacy of policy, programs and ultimately the existence of these governments.

Interestingly, here is a public Opinion poll on Media and CSOs:

- A. Broadcast coverage of 2011 elections generally gave every party a fair means of reaching the public. 57% said false. (NBC, 2014)
- B. Should there be a regulatory framework for the work of civil society organizations in Nigeria? 88% said yes. (NNNGO, 2014)

What are the CSOs doing?

At the moment, a day hardly passes by without a conference, seminar, and workshop or strategy session being convened by one CSO or the other. Both Anambra state election failures as well the buzz 2015 general election seems to be creating are obviously responsible for the series of engagements ongoing. Most of these engagements bother on INEC preparedness, the status of the continuous voter registration, security challenges, citizen mobilization, and electoral reforms, youth and women empowerment for political participations and civic education.

From 28th – 30th of January, 2014, Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth & Advancement convened a national youth conference on the road map for 2015 election; which drew participants not just from every state but also across the entire African continent and even beyond-the outcome and commitments made at the conference will bear in time. On the 6th of February, 2014 TMG assembled over one hundred and eighty (180) CSOs to engage INEC on the status of the continuous voter registration; in response to the gap and silence around a nationwide voter registration exercise to capture those who have turned 18 years since 2011 January/February voter registration. On that same day, PLAC convened a strategy session on repositioning of civil society Election Day situation room. TMG again held a public presentation of Anambra election reports on the 27th February, 2014. Yar' adua Foundation is currently leading an effort along with over 18 CSOs towards building content aggregation system for election observation (CASE 2015) which will create the biggest single platform to assemble Election Day observer reports; open to the public ever-such an intervention will raise transparency levels in the process. These are but a few decisive efforts some CSOs are leading; all aimed at making the coming elections both transparent and credible with high citizen participation.

Ahead of the 2015 general elections, I can confirm that TMG for instance; is working on deploying not less than 15, 000 observers across the country all in an effort to deter election fraud and serve as the eyes of the citizenry in seeing that the votes count. The story is not too different for several other CSOs ahead of Ekiti and Osun state elections as well as the 2015 general election. INEC is being engaged almost on a daily bases towards strategic collaborations that will ensure credibility in the coming elections.

What is the media doing?

Most of the CSOs forums have invitations extended to the media as it has become common practice to find sign-in sheets specially designated for the media participants at workshops or conferences. But I am worried about what the reality of the media participation at these CSOs forums has become. The media reporters breeze in just in time to cover the opening ceremony of the event where opening remarks and goodwill messages are said; immediately afterwards the reporters pack up and leave the event just about when the crux of the event is to be discussed. Most appalling is the buzz they departing media practitioners create on their way out as regards their demand for transport allowance.

Sometimes it gets so bad that a CSO that holds a conference or workshop without the financial muscle to pay transport allowance to media participants run the risk of having their story killed.

On the upside of things, several media outfits have well followed political programs that accommodate electoral related issues to which discussants are drawn from both public analyst and CSOs. And few days to elections almost every media outfit gives unprecedented coverage and airtime to the election, sustained up until the Election Day itself; this is both good and not so good. Good because there is coverage at all, but not good enough as the momentary coverage minimizes the impact a longer period of attention to the election would have created especially as relates to citizen mobilization.

No offence intended above as the media practitioners I am sure have good reasons for some of these practices. After all, most run as profit making ventures and the fact that one reporter may have to cover several other news making events on the same day without transportation being provided at the office. That is exactly why the forum today explores the possibility of a strategic cooperation between CSOs and the Media in preparation for the coming elections. The expectation is to see CSOs and the media roles as complementary rather than the strict contractual arrangement of what I will like to tag “you play your part; and I play mine”.

Largely the media gives seasonal coverage and this is not very helpful as it looks more like let's 'get over with'. The media needs to make it a part of its mandate to committing time and resources to building the democratic process which will in turn ensure the fundamental right of expression.

Areas of cooperation for CSOs and the Media

There is no doubt in my mind whatsoever as to the critical role CSOs played in clamouring for the return of democratic governance in Nigeria which eventually yielded in 1999. There is every glimpse of what the civil society can achieve than ever before, in ensuring that democracy is not only preserved but also nurtured to grow to maturity. It is even more obvious what the media have done in the past in rewriting the history of Nigeria. Most of CSOs works get visibility and transmittal to targeted audience only through the complementing instrumentality of the media. However, the current trajectory both sectors

are headed no longer seems to serve the common good of society which drastically betrays the societal perception of what these represents.

Against this background, the following areas for cooperation of CSOs and the Media especially as preparation for the coming elections pace up are more than due:

Electoral Reforms: A case in hand to show how powerful CSOs/media team up can be was demonstrated during the third term bid of president Obasanjo. The media coverage of very strong and constructive opposition stance of the civil society, as well as the sustained reportage of the intrigues on the process was unprecedented. Eventually, it got every Nigerian talking and the unison with which the citizenry through the instrumentality of the media opposed the idea forced the hand of the senate to act aright.

In a similar vein, the current CSOs push for electoral reforms in order to enhance more transparency and credibility in our electoral system needs the public support. A deliberate partnership between the media and CSOs in this matter can significantly force the issue. The public pressure in this regard is very critical and that can be achieved by putting it on the front burner. Groups like partners for Electoral Reforms have been doing their best but how many Nigerians even know the contentious sections of the electoral act that needs to be amended? The Uwais led reform report is still not being fully implemented, and several other efforts that are on-going require sustained media coverage for the right amount of pressure that will get the entire citizenry talking. Eventually it comes down to the people but unless and until they are informed, they rarely act.

Civic education/Citizen Mobilization: The increasing citizen apathy is one other area that calls for concerted efforts in addressing. Several civil society organizations are working on civic education so as to raise citizen participation in the coming elections; the media can do well to team with such organizations by providing airtime and coverage so that the experts of the CSOs will have yet another robust platform to drive up the mobilization efforts.

The previous voter turnouts have been very low and embarrassing of a country that boasts of about 73million voters as reported by INEC. Ekiti state has less than 1million voters, with a deliberate team up of the media and relevant CSOs, the scheduled continuous voter registration exercise in the state will attract unprecedented turnout. If same effort is sustained, it will be the majority of the citizens that will be deciding the next governor of the state and not the 37% or 40% as has been the case with most state elections.

Groups like TMG now have adopted election observation methodology that allows for tabulation of polling units results to enable them independently verify the accuracy of the official results that INEC announces. With the right media reportage of such an effort, citizens' confidence that their votes will actually count and possible manipulation exposed can scale up.

Strategic coverage of Election Day: One other lacking essential ingredient in our electoral system is transparency. A lot of the time ward result collations are not properly conducted, sometime even skipped and passed over to local government collations. And those who have experience with elections, can attest to the fact that elections are no longer largely rigged at the polling units level, it is on the road to the ward collation center that alien ballot boxes get smuggled into line, result forms miraculously materialize new figures and several other manipulations. If the Media will team up with CSOs observing the coming elections especially is sharing as much partial results as possible, it will make it difficult for right thinking persons to try to manipulate a result that has already been aired and reported extensively in the media. This is one area the social media can serve the citizenry interest in mandate protection. An aggregated election observation platforms that will share in real time over 75% of the partial results will have significantly raise the level of transparency and blocked the space for possible manipulations.

Political Party campaigns/spending: one area that has been identified to be of negative impact on our electoral process is money politics. Certain populations have been technically excluded from equal participation due to a lack of matching financial capability. Women, youths and persons with disabilities generally cannot compete against the money loaded politicians. The relevant CSOs and the media can cooperate in exposing the financial breaches being carried out by these politicians and calling for legal sanctions on them. The partnership can also take the path of constantly putting out to public the prescribed financial regulations on every electoral position upon which defaulters can be identified and documented to help serve as legal evidence for those disadvantaged aspirants.

Conclusion

There are several other grey areas of concern that calls for cooperation of CSOs and the Media, but these prescribed in this paper in no particular order largely can form a start. If

the partnership delivers positively on these fronts, it will be a matter of time before the society and its leadership will be detected by the masses.

Going forward, both the CSOs and the media should consider a strategic partnership with the sole aim of ensuring that transparency and credibility become the hallmark of the coming elections. This can be achieved through well-articulated program design that is inclusive and has a shared vision of the media. CSOs need to sit down with relevant media organizations in clearly defining rules of engagement; in a manner that helps the media houses factor well ahead of time in their program schedule. The Media on their part need to understand that the tensed atmosphere been created by the current political intrigues requires nothing short of objectivity and balanced reportage. One-sided coverage is only going to heat up the polity and leave the stage volatile and susceptible to violence.

We all owe it a duty to preserve the unity of Nigeria for our children and the generation unborn.

References:

1. <http://www.nnngo.org/content/should-there-be-regulatory-framework-work-civil-society-organizations-nigeria>
2. <http://www.nbc.gov.ng/ourmandate.php>
3. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999(As Amended).

Concept clarification:

***Civil Society Organizations** refer to a collection of non-governmental organizations and institutions that primarily exist and function towards attainment of citizens' interest. These organizations are largely independent of the government and are referred to as a conscience of society due to their objective and common good stance.*

***The Media** in this context refers to the collective journalistic mediums of cultivation, conveyance, or expression of information based principally on truth, disclosure and editorial independence. Currently, Social media has become a critical component of the media which is about interaction among people in which they create, share, and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks.*