

Improving citizen's participation in governance

By: *Eniayo Ibirogba**

Policy Recommendations

- *The government should run the local governments effectively and efficiently to promote development at the grassroots.*
- *Citizens should endeavor to join political parties so as to increase the avenue for participation in governance.*
- *Citizens should insist on transparency and accountability especially on government projects in their local communities.*
- *Citizens should take advantage of the rise in technology to effectively monitor government activities.*

Introduction

To achieve meaningful progress in development before the next election cycle in 2023, there is a need to increase participation in governance beyond the elections. Citizen's participation in governance which entails more than voting and seeking public office, ensures that citizens are carried along in government decision making processes. As an author puts it, "the Nigerian political system and acts of governance as presently constituted does not encourage the mass participation of people. It is discretely skewed to be elite driven"¹. This absence of meaningful citizen's participation has been a reason for the lack of confidence in political leaders, thereby leading to mutual suspicion between the

government and the citizens. For instance, there were over 70 million eligible voters who were registered before the 2019 elections, however, only about 30 million voters took part on the election day. With challenges ranging from bad governance to a struggling economy, there are enough incentives for Nigerian citizens to get more involved in the decision making process. With the conclusion of the 2019 general elections, Nigerians now have a duty to hold newly elected officers accountable and closely monitor their actions.

Economic reality of Nigerians

Nigeria's population of about 200 million will make it the third largest population in the world by 2050 after China and India. However, almost half of this number presently live in extreme poverty. This reality means about half of the Nigerian people are mainly concerned with economic improvement, leaving no room for any interest in political or public participation. Most Nigerians remain preoccupied with only activities that would help generate immediate income for survival. A recent World Bank report warned that by 2030, 25% of persons living in poverty globally, would be found in Nigeria. This level of poverty is having an adverse effect on the socio-economic development of many families and communities. This situation also provides an avenue for political elites to build and consolidate patronage networks instead of an accountable political system. They often distribute items of economic value in small quantities to the poor masses during election periods. Rather than hold public officials accountable, the high level of poverty in the land has created a reality where the poor look up to political office holders as sources of economic relief. In turn, political office

¹ A Muse, Sulaimon & Narsiah, Sagie. (2015). Challenges to Public Participation in Political Processes in Nigeria. Journal of Social Sciences.



holders treat their positions as their personal property and appropriate public resources for personal gains to help sustain the political support.

Weak structures of local governance

Nigeria operates a federal system of government at three levels. The local government as the third tier is the closest to the grassroots. The needs of the population at the community level such as primary health care, primary education and waste disposal falls within the responsibility of the local government. Although the local government is the closest form of government to the people, most local government councils within the country remain redundant. This in part is due to the fact that most state governments have taken over the control of local governments within their states. Allocations to the local government by the federal government are usually deposited in the coffers of state government. This leaves the local administration at the mercy of their respective state governments. With little or no accountability on local government accounts, local councils remain under-funded and lack the capability to function properly. For instance, other than serving as a spring board for a career in politics, most local government councils in the country perform little or no governmental function. Where the local governments fail to carry out their functions, it means that governance at the grassroots is eroded.

Political Platforms with no ideologies

Political parties are the bedrock of political participation. The Nigerian constitution expressly provides that a candidate for public office must be sponsored by a political party. This makes them highly indispensable. Parties are the platforms on which politicians compete to be elected to public offices. Political parties are formed based on

ideologies which serve as a guide to its members. Across the country, the number of card carrying members of political parties are low compared to the population as a whole. This is owing to the fact that most political parties in the country lack the ideology to attract citizens to join them as members. Most parties in Nigeria are formed solely for the personal gains of the ruling class. Since political parties operate with no guiding ideology, members concern themselves solely with personal interests, and switch political platforms at will. The absence of coherent ideologies guiding political parties has remained the biggest hindrance to citizen participation. For instance, issues around ethnicity and religion still create divides within the political space in the county and this has largely kept most Nigerians away from political participation beyond elections.

The way forward

Nigeria's system of governance is rife with massive corruption which majorly stems from the absence of transparency regarding government activities. Over time, public office holders have enriched themselves primarily by circumventing laid down procedures, invariably contributing to the sluggish pace of development in the country. Most Nigerians are oblivious of the government decision making process and how government functions. This absence of proper information on the workings of government at all levels, contributes to the culture of corruption. Specifically, government procurement is an area that remains susceptible to corruption. Inflated figures for projects is a common occurrence in the country. Although there is a Procurement Act, most Nigerians are unaware of its provisions. The absence of proper information regarding government spending makes the implementation of the Act difficult.



Local Participation

Presently as the poverty capital of the world, Nigerians owe it to themselves to get involved in governance and help shape decisions to be taken by public office holders. Since all parts of the country falls within the administration of a local government council headed by an elected chairman, one way by which citizens can enhance participation is to get involved in the operations of the local governments within which they reside. In order to participate meaningfully in government activities at all levels, there should be better citizen's education programs, including at the communal level. These should aim at shedding more light on how government works with a focus on the roles and functioning of the local government. This program would also provide opportunities where citizens can contribute directly to governance activities like traffic management. To achieve meaningful participation at the local government level, the residual list of the 1999 constitution which specifies the roles and functions that fall within the jurisdiction of the local government serve as a guide and also must be better publicized. Where a local government council has failed to carry out any of these duties, Nigerians within such locality have a duty to hold the administration responsible. By increasing participation at the local level, transparency and accountability can be improved upon.

Following the Money

In a bid to help plug the system, organizations like *BudgIT* have leveraged on technology to participate in governance by monitoring government expenditures. One way by which citizens can participate more in the activities of governance is by paying close attention to how financial resources are managed. Citizens should equip themselves better to be able to follow the disbursement of funds for government projects. Organizations like

Connected Development who are committed to community development achieve this by keeping track of government spending on particular projects in communities. These initiatives provide a platform on which ordinary citizens can be involved in governance while also promoting transparency and accountability. With the President's statement that about one trillion naira has been spent on constituency projects in 10 years, there is indeed a need to keep the discussion around government spending on development going on for as long as possible.

Party Invasion

Since political parties remain the platform upon which political participation rests, Nigerians should join or form a political party with an ideology they can relate with. Over the years the only form of participation by ordinary Nigerian citizens takes place during the election season. The lack of participation by citizens in governance beyond the general election continually excludes them from the decision making process of government. With Chapter 4 of the 1999 constitution guaranteeing the freedom to form and join any association, individuals in communities across the country should come together to form political blocs, to facilitate and implement development at the grassroots. Where government at the grassroots fails to carry out its responsibility, these blocs can become pressure groups upon which a formidable opposition can be built. Political participation at the local government level would also serve as a medium to educate the ordinary citizens on how government functions. To experience any meaningful growth and development, citizens have to be more involved in political activities, as well as the governance process and should start within their local communities. In participating at this level, citizens can influence government decision that directly affect them and also hold public office



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holders accountable. More meaningful participation by citizens can help increase the legitimacy enjoyed by the government of the day. It will improve government responsiveness and reduce the apathy that currently exist between the government and Nigerians. To achieve the principles of democracy that allow for mass representation, full participation by the citizens is required at all levels of governance. This would enhance citizen's civic awareness, increase flow of information for proper political accountability, and ensure better representation leading to good governance.

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