



RE-CONCEPTUALISING A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN POST-COLONIAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

In post-colonial Nigeria, civil society actors occupy a paradoxical space. Hailed as agents of democratization, due to their involvement in the fight in the nation's pursuit of democracy, socio-economic development, and human rights campaigns pre and post-independence civil society associations remain important force for nation building. Yet, in the face of Nigeria recent social crisis (such as poverty, corruption and poor governance), civil society associations have had very limited role. Actors within previous organisations that engaged in civil society activism have in most cases become co-opted by political elites, raising critical questions about the relevance of civil society engagement in nation-building in post-colonial Africa. This paper develops a normative and practical framework for civil society engagement in Nigeria by drawing on the philosophical foundations of social contract theory, communitarianism, and deliberative democracy. The proposed framework emphasizes institutional independence, localized engagement, deliberative platforms, strategic alliances, and safeguards against elite capture. In doing so, it outlines a model of civil society that is resistant to co-optation and capable of fostering participatory governance in a fragmented, post-colonial polity.

Keywords: *Civil society, philosophical compass, civic engagement, fragmentation, digital technologies.*

Introduction

Nigeria's vibrant civil society sector has played a pivotal role in the country's struggle for good governance, socio-economic development, and promotion of human rights. From its engagements in pro-democracy movements that challenged military dictatorships in the 1990s, to contemporary advocacies for peace and tackling issues such as corruption, environmental justice, and gender inequality, this sector demonstrated the capacity to mobilise citizens, amplify marginalised voices, and hold the Nigerian state and its institutions accountable. However, as associations within this sector grew in influence at the return of democracy in 1999, they have conversely become institutionalised, complacent and noneffective in engaging on meaningful public participations and advocacy for current pressing social justice courses (Nwangwu & Ezeibe, 2019). In most cases, such associations (which are meant to serve as a counterweight to state power and vested interests) have become tools used by the very Nigerian politicians, to avert justice and perpetuate corruption in the socio-political space.

This seeming diminished role of civil society's engagement in genuine socio-political activism is arguably rooted in the institutionisation of civil society that evolved at the dawn of Nigerian fourth republic (Obadare, 2014). The institutionalisation of civil society groups at the dawn of democracy in 1999, enabled the shifting of many organizations from grassroots mobilization to mere formalised, donor-driven structures, which focused on professionalism, funding, and bureaucratic survival. As a result of this, many of them became increasingly dependent on foreign aids and international partnerships, often aligning their agendas more with donor expectations than with local realities or mass mobilization efforts.

The limited engagement of the Nigerian civil society in socio-political activism is further compounded by the Nigeria's rich ethnic and diverse religious affiliations (Obadare, 2014), fanned by colonialism. With over 250 ethnic groups and a complex tapestry of traditional beliefs, Islam, and Christianity, Nigerian civil society actors struggle to navigate the delicate balance between respecting cultural particularities and upholding universal principles of human rights, democracy, and social justice (Obibuaku, & Edeji, 2024). Moreover, with the colonial legacy, which enthroned ethnic division, and fostered a political culture of suspicion and mistrust toward activism, uniting under a common purpose, under one civil curse has become even more difficult in the Nigerian context (Nkemakolam and Amaechi, 2025).

Additionally, there is the legacy of military rule and authoritarian governance, which has left a lasting imprint on the philosophical landscape of Nigerian civil society (Obadare, 2014). While the transition to civilian rule opened new spaces for civic engagement, the scars of the Nigerian

turbulent history created poor philosophical orientations and skepticism towards state institutions that pervade segments of Nigerian civil society. As Olasupo, Olayide, & Ijeoma, (2018) rightly argues, that with various actors and movements drawing upon disparate ideological frameworks and pursuing divergent agendas. Amidst such lack of unifying philosophical compass, civil societies are bound to lack coordinated common interests. In fact, they become fragmented, inconsistent, inefficient and, at times co-opted by the very forces that the civil society organizations seek to counterbalance; hence discouraging civil engagement in the current Nigerian polity.

This paradox of diminished civil engagement raises profound questions about the relevance of civil society organisations in post-colonial African states. Under the current institutionalised state, donor influence, and political patronage for example, can the Nigerian civil society reclaim its activist roots?" In other words, what is the best possible model of civil society activism in post-colonial Nigeria? These questions invite a critical exploration of both the mode of activism of civil society associations and the broader structural legacies that influence the performance and continued motivation of socio-political activism of civil society associations. Exploring such questions also enable a critical analysis of challenges confronting civil society associations and their risks of becoming fragmented, inconsistent, or even co-opted by the very forces they seek to counterbalance in the midst of different structural and environmental factors, in post-colonial African states.

The Rise of the Nigerian Civil Society Associations: A Historical Review

The origin of Nigerian civil society can be traced back to the pre-colonial mutual aid groups such as the age-grade associations, rotating credit unions and traditional councils that existed among various ethnic groups before colonisation (Ikelegbe, 2012). Before the establishment of the Nigerian state, these institutions have served as platforms for collective action, dispute resolution, and the promotion of shared values and norms within their various communities. Their activities were deeply intertwined with cultural and religious belief systems that reflected the holistic worldviews that governed social relations and individual conducts, within their societies (Obadare, 2014). However, with the advent of colonial rule and the imposition of Western governance structures, the functions and role of these institutions gradually disappeared.

With the evolution of the new system of government, and introduction of Western-based liberal thought, civil engagements gradually became a national project (Obadare, 2004). Little

community-based associations, became less relevant, unless subsumed within a national framework. Soon, indigenous associations within small communities were forced to align forces with others in other areas, to have influence. Thus, the emergence of national civil society associations, with inherent philosophical tensions and contrasting worldviews, within the Nigerian pre-independent state.

Yet, civil society organisations were able to evolve around common interest, playing a pivotal role in mobilizing resistance against British imperial rule, and drawing upon philosophical traditions that emphasized self-determination, cultural autonomy, and the rejection of foreign domination (Ekeh, 1975). By the late 1950s, civil society associations such as the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) (who became increasingly vocal in the 1950s for advocating for better working conditions, educational reforms, and broader national development); Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) (who contributed to the development of legal and constitutional debates, offering critiques of colonial legal structures and supporting reforms necessary for self-governance before the independence); Trade Union Congress of Nigeria (TUCN) (one of the most influential labor unions in the 1950s, to engage in labour strikes and advocacy for workers' rights; the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) (who arguably laid the groundwork for youth and intellectual engagement in civil matters in Nigeria); and the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), (who were led by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and were particularly active in resisting colonial taxation and promoting women's rights), have all emerged. The civil society associations also played significant roles in the Nigerian socio-political space before the emergence of the Nigerian independent state.

Two contrasting, but interesting frameworks within the political science are used to justify the evolution of these civil society associations in the Nigerian context: the liberal model and the participatory model. The Liberal Model explanations, which is rooted in the classical liberal tradition emphasizes individual rights, freedoms, and the primacy of the market (Rubinstein, 2000). Within this framework, the Nigerian civil society organizations are seen as voluntary associations that emerge organically from the free choices of individuals, operating independently from the state and driven by market forces (Remi-Aiyede, 2003). Every vibrant civil society requires vibrant organisations of divergent individuals, with minimal government intervention and possibility for the individuals and organizations to pursue their interests and goals without undue interference (Obadare, 2014). Such organisations should also place strong emphasis on private philanthropy, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and non-profit approach, which helps the organisations to address societal challenges. Even though these

aspects may at times introduce over-reliance on market mechanisms, which leads to the commodification of civil society initiatives, it also prioritizes efficiency and civic democratic accountability (Ehrenberg, 2017).

Participatory Model in contrast to the liberal model, envisions a more active and engaged citizenry, emphasizing grassroots initiatives, social movements, and collective action (Ehsassi, 2024). The model draws from the communitarian and deliberative democratic traditions, stressing the importance of civic participation, decentralized decision-making processes, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. Advocates of the participatory model argue that true civil society cannot be reduced to a collection of voluntary associations; rather, it requires a sustained commitment to democratic engagement, critical dialogue, and the cocreation of shared values and norms (van Beek et al , 2025). In this case, the Nigerian civil society organizations supposedly serve as vehicles for social transformation, challenging existing power structures and promoting inclusive and equitable policies, albeit in the midst of divergent views (Ehrenberg, 2017; Nwosu, & Vogt, 2024).

Notably, the diversity in thoughts and the philosophical tension within the civil society associations also persisted in the years leading to independence, shaping debates on issues of cultural authenticity, national identity, and the role of civil society in the building up of the independent state (Weber et al, 2024). As Nigeria transitioned from a colonial era to an independent state, the diversity enabled the civil society associations to become platforms for divergent views. Pro-democracy movements and human rights organizations that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the Campaign for Democracy (CD) and the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), were forged on the platforms of such diversity of thoughts and crucible of resistance against state repressions and the struggle for democratic governance (Obadare, 2014). The philosophical foundations of such associations and activism drew upon a diverse array of influences, ranging from Marxist and socialist ideologies, to liberal democratic thought, indigenous traditions of resistance and self-determination.

Arguably, the diversity of thoughts within the civil society associations was not necessarily negative, as it, allowed for a broad coalition of actors to coalesce (Githethwa, 2024). It also sowed the seeds of future ideological evolution and engagement in divergent activities, which in the modern era, continued to shape the philosophical landscape of Nigerian civil society in the post-colonial era.

The Nigerian Civil Society and the Independent State

Other than the diversity of thoughts, the socio-political activism of civil society associations in Nigeria has been shaped by the historic legacies of colonialism, military dictatorships, and challenges of democratic consolidations. With national independence established, the Nigerian civil society witnessed a new form of antagonism, and sometimes violent repression, from the Nigerian state, particularly during the successive military regimes that ruled the country from 1966 to 1999. As the philosophical underpinnings of most of the prodemocracy civil society associations, which emerged during this period were grounded in liberal democratic thoughts, it clashed with the authoritarian ideologies of the military juntas (Obadare, 2014). Notable examples of such civil society associations include the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) and the Campaign for Democracy (CD), which played pivotal roles in the pro-democracy movement of the 1990s. Under the military authoritarian regimes, these civil society organizations served as bastions of resistance, advocating for human rights, democracy, and good governance (Kew & Oshikoya, 2013).

The transition to civilian rule in 1999 ushered in a new era of engagement between Nigerian civil society and the state, marked by both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, the expansion of democratic spaces and the legal recognition of civil society organizations opened new avenues for advocacy, policy engagement, and civic participation (Orji, & Ikelegbe, 2005). It has today, led the Nigerian civil society to encompass a diverse array of actors, including NGOs, community-based organizations, faith-based groups, professional associations, labor unions, and social movements. These organizations engage in a wide range of activities, from service delivery and community development to policy advocacy and government accountability (Aiyede, 2017).

On another hand, the emergence of democracy also opened doors for political co-optation of the civil society associations, as most actors within such associations have become politicians (Obadare, 2022). Amidst the state of corruption and Nigerian politics of self-aggrandisement, other civil society actors who did not become part of the political class have become co-opted into political structures through appointments or partnerships within the state. Thus, blurring the line between activism and political patronage. Such co-optation has weakened civil society engagements' independence, credibility, and capacity to challenge power, thus reducing their role in driving transformative socio-political change (Ficek, 2024).

Related to the co-optation of actors is also the formalisation and institutionalisation of the civil society associations that emerged at the dawn of democracy (Moallin et al , 2025). While this

situation created space for alliance with foreign networks, opportunity for foreign aids and growth of civil society organisations, it also enhanced complacency and ineffectiveness of the civil society associations (Green & Sriskandaraja, 2024). By shifting their focus from grassroots activism to formal structures, bureaucratic routines, and donor driven agendas, organisations tend to become more structured and reliant on external funding (Doane, 2024). They also tend to prioritize administrative survival, report writing, and project execution over confronting power or mobilizing mass movements (Bolleyer, 2021). In the Nigerian case, this professionalized model resulted in elite capture, where civil society becomes dominated by a small group of educated professionals disconnected from the everyday struggles of the communities they claim to represent (Leo-Nnoli and Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2021).

Amidst the current socio-political structures of Nigeria, civil society engagements have become more symbolic than trans-formative. The socio-political structures and the ensuing events within the groups have reduced their ability of such groups to challenge systemic injustices or hold the state accountable. Over time, these elements have also contributed in undermining the credibility of civil society groups, weakened civic trust, and diluted the radical and participatory ethos that once defined genuine civil society engagement (Ibrahim and Garuba, 2008). A re-conceptualised civil society engagement framework is needed for effectiveness of civil society associations in the Nigerian post-colonial context.

Civil Society Engagement in Post-colonial Nigerian Context

Three prominent philosophical perspectives can offer valuable insights into a conceptualisation of an ideal civil society engagement in the Nigerian context, namely: social contract theory, communitarianism, and deliberative democracy.

Pioneered by thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, and Thomas Hobbes, the idea of **social contract** provides a foundational framework for conceptualising an ideal relationship between citizens and state actors within a particular context (Boucher and Kelly, 1994). At its core, social contract theory posits that individuals surrender certain freedoms to a governing authority in exchange for the protection of their remaining rights and the maintenance of social order: what could be referred in the Igbo cosmology as the “*Oha*” (the collective). The collective interests supersede that of the individual in a particular context (Kanu, 2017; Nkemakola and Amaechi, 2025). This notion of a social contract as the basis for civil society has profound implications for how we understand individual rights and collective responsibilities. Its idea of “general will” not only envisions the possibility of the primacy of

the collective good over individual interests, its also introduces importance of the inviolability of individual rights and the limited role of government in meddling in citizens private affairs (Boucher & Kelly, 1994). These contrasting perspectives shape our understanding of the balance between individual autonomy and societal obligations that should guide civil society engagement in the Nigerian context.

Communitarianism as first championed by thinkers such as Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor, similarly places emphasis on the importance of community values and shared goals (Etzioni, 2019). Communitarians argue that the atomized conception of the self, prevalent in liberal political thought, fails to capture the inherently social nature of human beings and the role of cultural traditions and collective identities in shaping individual flourishing. The perspective also challenges the notion of civil society as a mere aggregation of individual interests and suggests that true civic engagement requires a deeper commitment to the common good and a recognition of our interdependence (Etzioni, 2019). These means that civil society organizations must cultivate a sense of shared purpose, to foster strong bonds of reciprocity and mutual obligation among their members within the context of their existence. The current study also draws from the theory of **deliberative democracy**, first articulated by thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls, and Amy Gutmann. This theory, which offers a procedural framework for collective decision-making within civil society emphasizes the importance of rational discourse, public reasoning, and the ideal of impartial deliberation in shaping the norms and policies that govern our shared lives (Bohman, 2003). In line with deliberative democrats, our position is that civil society organizations should strive to create inclusive forums for open and reasoned debate, where diverse perspectives can be heard and evaluated based on their merit, rather than the power or influence of their proponents (Dryzek, 2000). In a postcolonial African context, such process of deliberation is essential for fostering legitimacy to traditional indigenous views, religious believes and mutual interest of divergent groups. It also accommodates the idea of mutual understanding in making collective decisions that benefits the society.

Infer-ably, the core elements of social contract theory, communitarianism, and deliberative democracy collectively offer a robust conceptual framework for understanding the role of civil society associations in Nigeria's socio-political landscape. The theories provide a framework to accommodate philosophically grounded civic society engagement, whose interests can be shaped by diverse ethnic and post-colonial affiliations of members within civil society groups. It an also provide framework for accommodating the notion of social contract, which reinforces

the idea that governance must reflect the consent and welfare of the governed, by underscoring the legitimacy of civic engagement as a means of holding the state accountable to the people; the idea of collective identity, shared values, and local networks, whereby civil societies are positioned as a key drivers in fostering social cohesion and addressing community-based needs; and the importance of inclusive dialogue, reasoned debate, and participatory decision-making, needed for vibrant civic organisation and engagement. Within this framework, civil society groups could act as platforms for amplifying diverse voices and shaping public policy through informed discourse. As groups, they can also play transformative roles in the diffusion of ethno-religious tensions, promotion of democratic values for social justice issues (such as gender equality, environmental sustainability and government accountable) and development of models for socio-economic problems.

Framework for Civil Society Engagement in Nigeria in the Digital Age

In postcolonial Nigeria, where the state often oscillates between democratic formalism and authoritarian practice, effective civil society engagement requires the following six pillars: institutional independence, internal democracy, localized civic engagement, deliberative platforms and participatory mechanisms, strategic alliances and network building and intentional policy impact. The six pillars form a pragmatic and context-sensitive framework for strengthening civil society's role in the strategic adaptation to local realities, historical grievances, and structural inequalities.

A. Institutional Independence: A resilient civil society in postcolonial Africa must begin with a firm commitment to institutional independence. These includes but not limited domestic resource mobilization strategies such as community contributions, imposition of membership dues, and local philanthropy etc (Hart, 2024). Given the historical legacy of colonial authoritarianism and centralized state power, which has created a political culture in which civil society organizations are vulnerable to co-optation by ruling elites, political parties, and even foreign donors (Mamdani, 1996) adoption of these strategies are important in the Nigerian context. These strategies ensures that associations can control their own resources, govern themselves democratically and transparently, operate ethically and non-partisanly and embed themselves in the communities they serve. Institutional independence also ensures that civil society groups can maintain autonomy in structure, funding, and strategic direction. With such autonomy, associations can also resist reliance on state grants, as well as avoid political patronage and donor frameworks, which impose externally driven agendas in the group. By

retaining institutional distance from the political elite, Civil society organisations are also better positioned to function as watch-dogs, public educators, and democratic interlocutors. They can also effectively challenge state impunity and represent citizen interests within the Nigerian context.

B. Internal Democratic leadership: Equally central to civil society resilience is the principle of internal democracy, which reinforces credibility and organizational legitimacy. Internal democratic leadership reflect democratic values. It includes fair and open leadership selection, term limits, participatory decision-making processes, and regular consultations with their constituencies. It also requires deliberate efforts to ensure gender, youth, and minority inclusion, thus reflecting the diversity of the society civil organizations claim to represent.

The concept of internal democratic leadership is not completely new to traditional indigenous associations, especially to those from the South-Eastern part of Nigeria, where the idea of *Igwe bu ike* is culturally embedded in the people's worldview (Kanu, 2017). Drawing on this existing worldview, Igbo traditional associations such as age grade and masquerade associations have developed leadership structures that prioritises majority interests and opinions (Nkemakolam and Amaechi, 2025). Using similar structures, the Nigerian civil society engagements can prioritize opinions and interests of the groups over that of individuals. They can also not only prevent authoritarian tendencies of few actors within the group (including those sponsored by state actors), and encourage transparency (GyimahBoadi, 2004; Obadare, 2014), but also enhance internal accountability that bolster public trust and engagement for actors in the group, which is key ingredients for sustained advocacy and mobilization (Fowler, 2000).

C. Localized Civic Engagement

Localized civic engagement refers to community-rooted initiatives that respond directly to the lived experiences and socio-political realities of Nigerians at the grassroots. Unlike top-down interventions that often originate from donor agendas or urban elites, localised engagement centers indigenous knowledge systems, traditional leadership structures, and local languages in its operations. Such localised engagements of community-based organisations as scholars such as Ibrahim and Garuba, (2008) rightly highlights, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, play a vital role in fostering democratic culture through traditional participatory practices. In regions such as the Niger Delta or Northern Nigeria for example, where ethnic and religious dynamics profoundly shape political behavior, they are better positioned to gain

trust, navigate cultural sensitivities, and build bottom-up legitimacy (Otiye-Igbuzor, 2006). When anchored in culturally familiar modes such as town hall meetings or religious forums, they can ensure sustained civic participation beyond episodic protests or election cycles.

D. Deliberative Platforms and Participatory Mechanisms

To deepen democratic culture in a postcolonial setting marked by exclusionary governance, civil society initiatives must promote **deliberative democracy**, a model that emphasizes dialogue, reason-giving, and collective decision-making (Dryzek, 2000). This could be, but limited to platforms such as citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting forums, and stakeholder round tables, which allows diverse actors to engage in meaningful, structured dialogue with the state and each other. In Nigeria's pluralistic society, where ethnic and regional divides have historically undermined national cohesion, such mechanisms can foster inclusive governance and social trust (Agbaje, 2000). Such platform can also not only enhance legitimacy but also create spaces where marginalised groups—women, youth, ethnic minorities can voice their interests.

E. Strategic Alliances and Network Building

In a context where the Nigerian political elite often deploy divide-and-rule tactics against reform movements, coalition-building outlook among similar carefully selected initiatives can be an indispensable asset and strategy for resilience and effectiveness. Alliances provide mutual protection, resource sharing, and amplification of collective voice of civil society actors (Obadare, 2014). The model can also enhance credibility and prevents state actors from isolating or co-opting individual organizations. Moreover, cross-sector partnerships with the media, academia, and even segments of the private sector strengthen civil society's reach and legitimacy.

F. Intentional Policy Impact

For civil engagement to be resilient and transformative, it must focus on intentional and strategic policy influence rather than episodic activism. Intentionality in civil engagement requires aligning grassroots mobilization with coherent legislative advocacy, administrative lobbying, and, where necessary, international pressure. Intentional policy impact ensures that the civil society initiatives remain focused and consistent to their goals. Realising the importance, it can make civil society associations engage in evidence-based advocacy, budget

tracking, strategic litigation, and direct engagement with state lawmakers (Uzochukwu et al., 2020). By maintaining a sustained focus on policy outcomes—such as legislative reform, executive action, or judicial precedents, such initiatives can transform activism into systemic change.

Together, these six constitute a grounded, adaptive, and forward-looking framework for civil society engagement in Nigeria. In post-colonial context, where the colonial legacy of centralized authoritarianism continues to distort political culture, they reflect not only a shift from reactive mobilisation to embedded, strategic, and dialogic forms of democratic practice, but also the pathways for civil society to move from mere resistance to substantive reconstruction of democratic life.

Possible Challenges of Civil Engagement

Operating in the midst of political opportunities in the 21st century, civil society associations are likely to face many significant challenges. The most significant challenges include, (a) digital technology and social media, (b) funding and financial sustainability, (c) government hostility and repression and security

Digital Technology and Social Media: With the advent of digital technologies and the proliferation of social media, civic society engagement and participation in socio-political collective action in a post-colonial Nigeria has become even complex and complicated. It now entails operating in a context of available digital tools, with easy access to transfer of information from one sector to another, access to international and savvy network of followers that makes it easier to reach wider audience, and availability of readily available young actors that yearns for a new and better Nigeria (Amaechi and Oguji, 2024). Yet, the availability of these resources have provoked state actors to adopt increasingly sophisticated forms of surveillance, censorship, and digital repression of civil engagement (Iwilade, 2013; Adegoke, 2017). In 2020 for example, where Nigerian civil society actors were able to mobilise supporters for a huge protest (#ENDSARS), the adoption of social media was used as justification for the Nigeria state to deploy tactics such as internet shutdowns, social media regulations (e.g., the controversial Twitter ban in Nigeria in 2021), and the criminalization of online dissent under cybercrime laws, to shrink the digital civic space (Amnesty International, 2021; Uwalaka, 2024).

Moreover, the spread of misinformation and state-sponsored disinformation campaigns in social media platforms undermines the credibility of genuine civil society efforts, creating

public confusion and distrust (Amaechi, 2024). In addition, the algorithmic nature of social media platforms, which often amplifies divisive or sensational content over nuanced deliberation, making sustained policy engagement with actors within the social media mobilisation is often very difficult, as such actors are hardly interested for a deeper engagement within the social media platform.

These challenges illustrate that while digital tools offer new opportunities for civil engagement, they simultaneously introduce vulnerabilities that must be carefully navigated to protect civic autonomy and foster meaningful dialogue with the state.

Conversely, the integration of digital technologies into the fabric of Nigerian civil society can also raise philosophical questions and debates regarding the nature of civic participation, the authenticity of online activism, and the potential for these platforms to be co-opted or manipulated by vested interests (Obadare, 2022). Some critics have expressed concerns about the potential for online echo chambers, the spread of misinformation, and the erosion of substantive engagement in favor of superficial "clicktivism" (Amaechi, 2024). Furthermore, the rise of digital surveillance and censorship by state authorities has posed new challenges for Nigerian civil society organizations, forcing them to grapple with philosophical questions surrounding privacy rights, freedom of expression, and the boundaries of legitimate political dissent in the digital age (Uwalaka, 2024). The proliferation of government-sponsored disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks targeting civil society actors have underscored the urgent need for robust digital security practices and a renewed philosophical commitment to protecting the integrity of online civic spaces.

Beyond these technical and security considerations, the integration of digital technologies into Nigerian civil society generates broader philosophical debates about the nature of community, belonging, and collective identity of individuals in the digital age. As virtual spaces become increasingly intertwined with physical spaces, civil society actors must confront questions of digital citizenship, online representation, and the potential for digital divides to exacerbate existing societal inequalities (Krawczyk 2022). They must draw on a unified philosophical framework of social contract, communitarianism and deliberative democracy to effectively navigate the complex challenges facing the country. Without such critical reflections, civil society efforts could remain disjointed, duplicative, or even counterproductive; failing to address the root causes of societal problems and perpetuation of cycles of conflict and underdevelopment.

Funding and financial sustainability: Another significant challenge that can confront civil engagement in postcolonial Nigeria stable and sustainable funding. A significant number of civil society organisations depend heavily on international donors, raising concerns about the external shaping of their agendas and the long-term sustainability of their activities (Aiyede, 2017). Not only does such dependency encourage external dependency and institutionalisation (Obadare, 2014), it also in the era of USA's unwillingness to continue international aid (following Donald Trump's Presidency in 2025) and the global decline in foreign aid, which has severely impacted the Nigerian civil society sector, remains sustainable. In the Nigerian contexts, where this will be compounded by weak culture of local philanthropy and minimal governmental financial support (Dibie & Okere, 2015), many organizations will either be forced to downsize their operations or shut down entirely due to insufficient funds. Without substantial efforts to cultivate local funding sources or secure government backing, civil society engagements will struggle to fulfill their missions.

Government Hostility and Repression: Given the colonial legacies that has encouraged state sponsored violence and oppression, the Nigerian civil society engagement, particularly those involved in advocacy and human rights will often find themselves at odds with government actors. This antagonistic relationship can manifest in various forms, ranging from public denunciation and delegitimization to more severe actions such as raids on offices, arrests of key figures, and enforced closures (Obadare, 2014). Such repression can discourage participation and contribute to the shrinking of the civic space for civil society actors to hold the government accountable. It can also stifle critical voices and limits the capacity of civil society to promote meaningful reforms.

Conclusions

This article has set out to reflect on the best possible model of civil society activism in post-colonial Nigeria. Its main contention, based on a discussion of the socio-political background of civic society engagement in Nigeria is that the civil society in post-colonial Nigeria stands at a crossroads. This is largely a result of the colonial legacies, which continued to entrench patterns of centralised authority, ethnic division, and limited civic space within the Nigerian socio-political space. Its imposed top-down governance system that marginalized indigenous institutions and suppressed grassroots participation also continues to create a political culture that often views civil society with suspicion or as oppositional. Hence, leading to weak state

civil society relations, where engagement is frequently hindered by restrictive laws, and political intimidation.

As part of the solution to the above problem, the article reconceptualises civic society engagement that is based on the ideals of social contract, communitarian and deliberative democracy. Within this context, civil society association operates from a position of (a) institutional independence; (b) internal democratic leadership; (c) localized civic engagement; (d) deliberative platforms and participatory mechanisms; (e) deliberative platforms and participatory mechanisms; and (f) monitoring, advocacy, and policy influence. These frameworks can help civil society associations to build good leadership structures and transparent internal group mechanisms, so as to resist elite influence and safeguards against co-optation of civil organisation actors. They can also help them identify local collaborations, which help them maintain relevance and legitimacy, build collective strength, and effect systemic change.

By drawing on the normative ideals of social contract theory, communitarianism, and deliberative democracy, this paper hopes to reclaim civil society's autonomy and revitalizes its democratic function within the African post-colonial literature. This framework is not a panacea, but a road-map to emphasise moral legitimacy, localized engagement, and participatory resilience as bulwarks against the erosion of civic space in post-colonial Africa.

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