

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN PROMOTING GOOD GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Civil society has increasingly emerged as a pivotal agent in the quest for good governance and democratic accountability in Nigeria. This study examines the role of civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), professional associations, and grassroots movements in shaping Nigeria's governance landscape. It highlights how civil society promotes transparency, advocates for human rights, strengthens electoral processes, and serves as a watchdog against corruption and authoritarian tendencies. Using a theoretical analysis of literature and case studies, this paper argues that civil society remains a vital force in bridging the gap between the state and its citizens by amplifying the voices of the marginalized and demanding accountability from public officials. However, civil society in Nigeria also faces significant challenges, including state repression, limited funding, political co-optation, and weak internal structures, which sometimes constrain its effectiveness. The paper concludes that for Nigeria to achieve sustainable democratic governance, there must be an enabling environment where civil society can thrive independently, foster citizen participation, and hold leaders accountable. Strengthening partnerships between civil society, state institutions, and international actors is essential for deepening Nigeria's democratic culture.

Keywords: Civil Society, Good Governance, Democratic Accountability, Anti-Corruption, Electoral Integrity, Citizen Participation

Introduction

The role of civil society in promoting good governance and democratic accountability has become a central discourse in the study of political development, particularly within emerging democracies such as Nigeria. Civil society is widely regarded as the sphere of organised social life that is voluntary, self-generating, and largely independent of state control, serving as a crucial link between the state and the citizenry (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Edwards, 2011). It encompasses a wide range of actors, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), professional associations, religious bodies, media institutions, trade unions, community-based organisations, and advocacy groups, that engage in collective action to promote the public good and ensure that political authority remains accountable to the people (Diamond, 1999; Gyimah-Boadi, 1996).

In the Nigerian context, civil society has historically played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of governance and democracy. From the anti-colonial nationalist movements of the mid-20th century to the pro-democracy struggles against military authoritarianism in the 1980s and 1990s, civil society organisations (CSOs) have been instrumental in demanding participatory governance, respect for human rights, and transparency in public affairs (Ikelegbe, 2013; Omotola, 2010). Following the country's transition to democratic rule in

1999, civil society has continued to act as a watchdog, policy advocate, and civic educator, seeking to strengthen democratic institutions and promote citizen participation in governance (Aiyede, 2004; Nwosu, 2017).

The concept of good governance refers to the processes and institutions through which public authority is exercised in a manner that is participatory, transparent, accountable, effective, and equitable (World Bank, 1992; UNDP, 1997). In this regard, civil society plays a multifaceted role in promoting good governance by enhancing public participation, monitoring government performance, and demanding ethical conduct from public officials. Through social mobilization, policy advocacy, and civic education, CSOs contribute to fostering a culture of accountability and transparency (Diamond, 1999; Agbaje, 2011).

In Nigeria, organisations such as the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), CLEEN Foundation, Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC), and BudgIT Foundation have been at the forefront of promoting electoral integrity, budget transparency, and anti-corruption campaigns. These organisations often act as intermediaries between the state and the people, empowering citizens to hold leaders accountable and participate meaningfully in governance processes (Omotola, 2010; Olorunyomi, 2019). Moreover, civil society has been essential in amplifying marginalised voices, particularly in advocating for gender inclusion, youth empowerment, and human rights protection (Gyimah-Boadi, 1996).

Democratic accountability refers to the obligation of political leaders and public institutions to justify their actions to the electorate and other oversight bodies (Schedler, 1999). Civil society ensures this accountability through advocacy, investigative journalism, electoral observation, and public interest litigation. For instance, CSOs have played a key role in exposing corruption scandals, challenging unconstitutional practices, and pressing for reforms in electoral and judicial systems (Aiyede, 2004; Ojo, 2012). These interventions contribute to strengthening the rule of law, ensuring transparency, and enhancing public trust in democratic institutions.

However, the effectiveness of civil society in Nigeria is often constrained by structural and contextual challenges. These include limited funding, state repression, internal fragmentation, lack of coordination among CSOs, and the politicisation of civic activities (Ikelegbe, 2013; Nwosu, 2017). Moreover, the civic space has increasingly come under threat through restrictive laws and intimidation of activists, which undermine civil society's autonomy and ability to influence governance (Omotola, 2010). Despite these challenges, civil society remains one of the most resilient actors in Nigeria's democratic landscape, continuing to push for social justice, institutional reforms, and accountable governance.

In essence, the role of civil society in promoting good governance and democratic accountability in Nigeria is both dynamic and indispensable. Civil society serves as a key mechanism for balancing power between the state and citizens, ensuring that governance is conducted with transparency, responsiveness, and inclusivity. Its contributions to political reform, policy advocacy, and civic engagement underscore its relevance as a cornerstone of democratic consolidation. Yet, for civil society to realise its full potential, it must overcome challenges related to sustainability, autonomy, and institutional coordination. Strengthening civil society's capacity is thus critical for deepening democracy and achieving sustainable governance in Nigeria.

Conceptual Review

Civil Society

The concept of civil society has evolved through different intellectual traditions. Classical thinkers associated civic life with collective participation and the pursuit of the common good, while scholars such as Locke and Rousseau linked civil society to the social contract and the development of organised social relations beyond the state of nature (Locke, 1690/1988; Rousseau, 1762/1968). Hegel (1821/1991) viewed civil society as an intermediate sphere between the family and the state, where social and economic interests are organised and regulated. However, Marx (1843/1978) offered a critical interpretation, arguing that civil society within capitalist societies could reproduce inequality and reinforce dominant class interests. Later perspectives, particularly those of Tocqueville (1835/2000) and Gramsci (1971), expanded the debate by presenting civil society as both a foundation of democratic participation and a contested space where different social forces compete for influence and legitimacy.

In contemporary governance debates, civil society is widely recognised as an important factor in promoting democracy, accountability, and social justice (Diamond, 1999; Fowler, 2000). It contributes to governance by monitoring state actions, advocating policy reforms, promoting citizen participation, and providing services where state capacity is limited. However, scholars have also highlighted the limitations of civil society, including donor dependence, elite capture, unequal representation, and political co-optation, which may reduce its ability to act as an independent force for democratic change (Mercer, 2002; Chazan, 1992).

Within the African context, civil society must be understood through the historical experiences of colonialism, postcolonial state formation, and indigenous systems of social organisation. Colonial rule disrupted many traditional forms of collective organisation, while post-independence states often centralised political authority and restricted civic freedoms (Mamdani, 1996). Despite these challenges, African civil society became an important driver of democratisation from the 1980s onwards, advocating for human rights, accountable governance, and greater citizen participation (Gyimah-Boadi, 1996). Unlike purely Western interpretations, African civil society incorporates both formal organisations and informal networks rooted in community solidarity, religion, kinship, and traditional associations (Ekeh, 1975; Ndegwa, 1996).

From the perspective of this study, civil society is understood as a critical governance actor that connects citizens and the state while creating mechanisms for accountability, participation, and democratic engagement. The study views civil society organisations, NGOs, professional associations, and grassroots movements as important institutions that can influence governance through advocacy, monitoring, civic education, policy engagement, and social mobilisation. In Nigeria, where governance challenges such as corruption, weak institutional accountability, and limited citizen participation remain persistent, civil society provides an important platform through which citizens can demand transparency, challenge abuses of power, and contribute to democratic consolidation.

This study, therefore, conceptualises civil society as both a watchdog and a partner in governance. Its watchdog role involves monitoring public institutions, exposing corruption, and holding political leaders accountable, while its constructive role involves supporting policy innovation, strengthening community participation, and contributing to development processes. However, the study recognises that the effectiveness of civil society depends on the broader political and institutional environment, including legal protections, organisational capacity, financial independence, and the willingness of state institutions to respond to civic demands.

Ultimately, this study argues that civil society is not merely an alternative to the state but an essential component of democratic governance. In Nigeria, its ability to promote good governance and democratic accountability lies in its capacity to bridge the gap between citizens and institutions, encourage inclusive participation, and strengthen mechanisms of transparency and accountability. Understanding civil society therefore requires examining both its contributions and the structural constraints that shape its effectiveness within Nigeria's evolving democratic landscape.

Good Governance

Good governance has become a central concept in contemporary development and political discourse, providing a framework for assessing the effectiveness, legitimacy, and accountability of governance systems. Although the concept gained global prominence through institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the late 1980s and 1990s, its foundations are rooted in longstanding political ideas of justice, responsible leadership, accountability, and the ethical use of power (Leftwich, 1993; Fukuyama, 2013). The World Bank (1992) defines good governance as the way power is exercised in managing a country's economic and social resources for development, emphasising transparency, efficiency, and accountability. Similarly, the UNDP (1997) highlights participation, rule of law, responsiveness, equity, and inclusiveness as essential elements of effective governance.

Beyond administrative efficiency, good governance reflects the relationship between the state and citizens. It concerns not only how decisions are made but also whether governance processes are transparent, inclusive, and responsive to public needs (Hyden & Court, 2002). Contemporary governance approaches therefore recognise that achieving good governance requires cooperation among state institutions, civil society, and private actors rather than relying solely on government structures (Pierre & Peters, 2000). In this sense, good governance is both a process and an outcome, focusing on accountable decision-making as well as improved social, political, and economic conditions (Kjaer, 2004).

In Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, the pursuit of good governance is shaped by historical and institutional challenges, including corruption, weak state capacity, political patronage, and limited accountability mechanisms (Hyden, 2010; Mkandawire, 2015). Many African states have adopted democratic institutions, yet the effectiveness of these institutions is often weakened by informal networks of power and clientelist practices. Hyden (2010) argues that neo-patrimonial systems frequently undermine institutional autonomy by allowing personal and political interests to influence public decision-making. Similarly, Ekeh's (1975) concept of the "two publics" highlights the tension between civic obligations to the state and loyalty to ethnic or communal networks, which can complicate efforts to promote impartial governance.

The link between good governance and development is widely acknowledged. Effective governance creates conditions for economic growth, equitable service delivery, social

stability, and sustainable development, while poor governance contributes to inequality, institutional decline, and public distrust (World Bank, 1992; Kaufmann et al., 1999). Therefore, good governance should be understood not simply as an administrative ideal but as a transformative process aimed at building accountable institutions and strengthening citizens' participation in public affairs.

From the view of this study, good governance is understood as a shared responsibility between state institutions and society, where accountability, transparency, participation, and responsiveness form the foundation of democratic governance. The study argues that civil society organisations, NGOs, professional associations, and grassroots movements play a critical role in advancing good governance by monitoring government actions, advocating reforms, empowering citizens, and creating platforms for public engagement. In the Nigerian context, where governance challenges remain persistent, civil society serves as an important mechanism for bridging the gap between citizens and the state. Thus, promoting good governance requires not only stronger institutions but also an active and empowered citizenry capable of demanding accountability and contributing to democratic consolidation.

Democratic Accountability

Democratic accountability is a fundamental principle of democratic governance, providing the means through which citizens ensure that public officials and institutions remain responsible for their decisions, actions, and management of public resources. It establishes a relationship between those who exercise political power and the citizens who grant that authority, thereby limiting the abuse of power and strengthening democratic legitimacy (Schedler, 1999; Bovens, 2007). In democratic systems, elected leaders are expected to act in accordance with constitutional principles, the rule of law, and the broader public interest, since political authority is derived from the consent of citizens (Przeworski, Stokes & Manin, 1999; Diamond, 2008).

Schedler (1999) explains that democratic accountability consists of two interconnected dimensions: answerability and enforceability. Answerability requires public officials to provide information, justify their actions, and explain decisions to citizens and oversight institutions. Enforceability refers to the ability of citizens, courts, legislatures, and other accountability institutions to impose consequences when leaders violate legal, ethical, or democratic principles. Therefore, accountability operates both as a democratic value and as a practical mechanism through which transparency, oversight, and institutional checks are maintained (Bovens, 2007; O'Donnell, 1998).

Democratic accountability is closely connected to good governance because it promotes participation, responsiveness, transparency, and fairness in public administration (Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi, 2010). Without effective accountability mechanisms, democracy risks becoming limited to electoral processes without meaningful citizen influence over government decisions. Accountability therefore serves as a safeguard against corruption, misuse of public resources, and ineffective governance by requiring public institutions to justify their actions and respond to societal needs (Johnston, 2005). It also strengthens public trust by ensuring that government authority is exercised responsibly and legitimately (Warren, 2014).

The practice of democratic accountability depends on both formal and informal mechanisms. Formal mechanisms include elections, legislative oversight, judicial review, auditing institutions, and constitutional checks and balances. Informal mechanisms include the activities of civil society organisations, investigative media, advocacy groups, and social movements that monitor government performance and mobilise citizens around accountability issues (Fox, 2007). In developing democracies such as Nigeria, however, these mechanisms are often challenged by weak institutions, political patronage, limited enforcement capacity, and restrictions on civic participation (Gyimah-Boadi, 2004).

From the standpoint of this study, democratic accountability is understood as a continuous process through which citizens, institutions, and civic actors ensure that political power is exercised responsibly and in the public interest. The study views civil society organisations, NGOs, professional associations, and grassroots movements as essential contributors to this process because they complement formal accountability institutions by monitoring government actions, exposing misconduct, advocating reforms, and creating platforms for citizen participation. In Nigeria, where institutional weaknesses continue to affect governance outcomes, civil society provides an important link between citizens and the state by demanding transparency and responsiveness.

This study, therefore, argues that democratic accountability cannot be achieved through government institutions alone. It requires an active partnership between state institutions and society, supported by strong legal frameworks, independent oversight bodies, free media, and an empowered citizenry. Ultimately, the strength of Nigeria's democracy depends not only on the existence of democratic institutions but also on the extent to which those institutions remain open, responsive, and accountable to the people they serve.

Theoretical Perspective

Liberal Democratic Theory provides an important framework for understanding the relationship between civil society, state power, and democratic accountability. The theory is based on the principle that democracy is strengthened when political authority is limited, power is distributed among different institutions, and citizens have the freedom to organize and participate in public affairs. Classical liberal democratic thinkers such as Tocqueville (1835) and later scholars such as Dahl (1971) emphasise that democratic governance depends not only on elections but also on the existence of independent associations that can monitor government actions, protect citizens' interests, and prevent the concentration of power.

From the liberal democratic perspective, civil society occupies a crucial position as an intermediary sphere between the state and citizens. It consists of voluntary associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), professional bodies, advocacy groups, and social movements that enable citizens to collectively express their interests and influence public decision-making. These organisations serve as a counterbalance to state authority by questioning government actions, demanding transparency, and promoting accountability. Diamond (1999) argues that a vibrant civil society is essential for democratic consolidation because it constrains the arbitrary exercise of power and strengthens institutions that protect democratic values.

Applied to Nigeria, Liberal Democratic Theory highlights the significant role played by civil society organisations in promoting good governance and democratic accountability. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, Nigerian CSOs and NGOs have contributed to election monitoring, anti-corruption campaigns, human rights advocacy, and policy reforms. Organisations involved in electoral observation, transparency initiatives, and public-interest advocacy have helped expose governance failures, increase citizens' awareness, and pressure

public institutions to become more responsive. The advocacy that contributed to the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act (2011) illustrates how civil society can influence institutional reforms by mobilizing citizens and engaging policymakers.

The theory further suggests that good governance depends on active citizen participation and effective checks and balances. Civil society strengthens these democratic mechanisms by providing information, monitoring government performance, and creating platforms through which citizens can hold political leaders accountable. Through investigative research, public campaigns, strategic litigation, and engagement with the media, civil society organisations contribute to transparency and encourage responsible use of public resources.

However, the Nigerian context also reveals some limitations of Liberal Democratic Theory. While the theory assumes that independent civic organisations can effectively check state power, the reality of developing democracies is often shaped by political interference, weak institutions, patron-client relationships, and unequal access to political influence. Some civil society organisations face funding challenges, government restrictions, or elite capture, which may affect their independence and effectiveness as accountability actors. Therefore, the ability of civil society to perform its democratic role depends not only on its existence but also on the broader political environment and institutional commitment to democratic principles.

From the perspective of this study, Liberal Democratic Theory provides a valuable lens for examining civil society as a democratic safeguard and an essential partner in promoting good governance in Nigeria. The theory supports the argument that civil society organisations, NGOs, professional associations, and grassroots movements contribute to democratic accountability by limiting government excesses, amplifying citizens' voices, and strengthening transparency mechanisms. However, this study also recognises that the effectiveness of civil society is shaped by Nigeria's political realities, including institutional weaknesses, restricted civic space, and governance challenges.

Therefore, the study adopts Liberal Democratic Theory to explain that sustainable democratic accountability requires more than the existence of elected institutions; it requires an active and independent civil society capable of engaging the state, protecting citizens' interests, and ensuring that political power is exercised responsibly and in accordance with democratic values.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using a descriptive case study design to examine the role of civil society in promoting good governance and democratic accountability in Nigeria. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth understanding of the roles, contributions, and challenges of civil society organisations within Nigeria's democratic governance framework. The study was guided by the interpretivist research philosophy, which facilitated an understanding of governance issues through the perspectives and interpretations presented in existing literature and institutional documents. Data were collected from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government publications, policy documents, and reports from reputable organisations such as the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), BudgIT, SERAP, Transparency International, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Documentary analysis was used to examine these sources, while thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret recurring themes relating to civil society's contributions to transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and governance reforms in Nigeria. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, information was

triangulated across multiple credible sources, and all materials were properly acknowledged and cited in accordance with accepted academic ethical standards.

Role of Civil Society Organisations, NGOs, Professional Associations, and Grassroots Movements in Shaping Governance in Nigeria

Nigeria's civil society comprises a diverse network of civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), professional associations, faith-based organisations, community groups, and grassroots movements that collectively influence governance processes and democratic development. These actors serve as important intermediaries between citizens and the state by promoting transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and policy reform (Ikelegbe, 2013; Gyimah-Boadi, 2017). Their contributions extend beyond advocacy to include service delivery, electoral monitoring, civic education, legal mobilization, and policy engagement, making civil society a significant component of Nigeria's democratic governance framework (Omotola, 2010; Lewis, 2019).

One of the major contributions of Nigerian civil society has been its role in advancing legislative and institutional reforms. A notable example is the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act of 2011, which emerged after years of sustained advocacy by organisations such as the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC), Media Rights Agenda (MRA), and other rights-based groups. Through coalition building, public awareness campaigns, and engagement with policymakers, these organisations contributed significantly to the promotion of transparency and citizens' access to public information (Agbaje, 2011; Ezeani, 2015). Although the FoI Act represents an important democratic achievement, empirical studies show that bureaucratic resistance, limited awareness, and weak enforcement mechanisms continue to restrict its full implementation (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2019).

Civil society has also played a vital role in strengthening electoral accountability and democratic participation. Organisations such as the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) and YIAGA Africa have contributed to electoral credibility through voter education, domestic election observation, and evidence-based monitoring of electoral processes (TMG, 2003; NDI, 2019). Their activities have helped expose electoral irregularities, increase public awareness, and encourage reforms within Nigeria's electoral system. However, research indicates that election monitoring alone cannot guarantee democratic outcomes without independent electoral institutions, effective judicial processes, and political commitment to implementing reform recommendations (USIP, 2021).

Beyond accountability and advocacy, NGOs have contributed significantly to social development by providing services in areas such as healthcare, education, and community development. These interventions have often supported communities where state capacity remains limited and have strengthened local participation in development processes (Akinyele, 2018). Nevertheless, concerns regarding donor dependence, sustainability, and internal accountability within some NGOs raise questions about their long-term independence and effectiveness as governance actors (Lewis & Kanji, 2009).

Professional associations also represent an important dimension of civil society in Nigeria. Organisations such as the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) and the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) have influenced governance through policy advocacy, public engagement, litigation, and professional expertise. Their professional credibility enables them to engage state institutions while promoting broader societal interests.

The emergence of grassroots and digitally driven movements has further transformed civil society participation in Nigeria. The #EndSARS movement of 2020 demonstrated the growing influence of youth-led digital mobilization in demanding police reform, human

rights protection, and government accountability (IDS Bulletin, 2021; Centre for Democracy and Development, 2021). Although the movement achieved short-term institutional responses, its long-term impact was limited by state repression, digital surveillance, and the absence of formal organisational structures (Amnesty International, 2021). Nevertheless, it highlighted the changing nature of civic engagement and the increasing role of technology in democratic participation.

From the perspective of this study, civil society is understood not merely as a watchdog that criticizes government actions but as a strategic partner in strengthening democratic governance. CSOs, NGOs, professional associations, and grassroots movements serve as bridges between citizens and the state by promoting transparency, influencing policy reforms, encouraging participation, and demanding accountability. However, their effectiveness is shaped by broader political and institutional conditions, including civic space, funding independence, government responsiveness, and the strength of democratic institutions.

Therefore, while civil society has made significant contributions to good governance and democratic accountability in Nigeria, its impact remains both substantial and constrained. Strengthening its role requires supportive legal frameworks, stronger institutional collaboration, sustainable funding mechanisms, and inclusive participation that extends beyond urban and elite networks. Understanding these contributions and limitations is essential for assessing how civil society can continue to support Nigeria's democratic consolidation.

Challenges of Civil Society in Promoting Good Governance and Democratic Accountability in Nigeria: An Empirical Review

Although civil society has made significant contributions to promoting good governance and democratic accountability in Nigeria, empirical evidence indicates that its ability to sustain long-term governance reforms remains constrained by a combination of legal, political, institutional, financial, and technological challenges. Civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), professional associations, and grassroots movements have successfully influenced policy reforms, improved electoral transparency, and amplified citizens' voices. However, the effectiveness and sustainability of these contributions are largely shaped by the broader political and governance environment within which they operate.

One of the most persistent challenges facing civil society is the shrinking civic space created by restrictive legal and regulatory frameworks. Attempts to introduce stricter NGO regulatory measures, coupled with complex registration processes and increased administrative monitoring, have generated uncertainty among many civil society organisations. Although such measures are often presented as efforts to promote transparency, accountability, and national security, they may also restrict freedom of association and limit the independence required for effective advocacy. Civil society coalitions have therefore expressed concerns that excessive regulatory control can weaken their ability to challenge government actions and hold public institutions accountable (International Service for Human Rights, 2020).

Beyond legal constraints, state repression remains a significant obstacle to civic engagement. Evidence from the #EndSARS protests and other public demonstrations demonstrates that activists, journalists, and civic organisers have faced intimidation, arrests, excessive use of force, and other forms of rights violations (Amnesty International, 2020). Such experiences increase the risks associated with public participation and discourage sustained mobilisation around governance issues. Consequently, some accountability campaigns struggle to move beyond immediate public attention and achieve long-term institutional reforms.

Financial sustainability is another major challenge affecting civil society effectiveness. Many Nigerian CSOs depend significantly on external donor funding, which often comes with specific priorities, limited project timelines, and predetermined objectives. While donor support has enabled important interventions in governance, human rights, and development, excessive dependence on external resources can affect organizational autonomy and encourage short-term project approaches rather than sustained engagement with structural governance challenges (Ojo et al., 2018). In addition, fluctuations in donor funding create competition among organisations, limiting cooperation and weakening long-term strategic planning.

Internal governance challenges within some civil society organisations also affect their credibility and legitimacy. Research highlights concerns relating to elite capture, weak accountability structures, limited transparency, and political connections that may compromise the independence of certain organisations (Ojo et al., 2018). When civil society actors fail to demonstrate the accountability standards they demand from government institutions, public confidence in their role as watchdogs may decline. Strengthening internal governance, therefore, remains essential for maintaining legitimacy and effectiveness.

Another challenge concerns the fragmented nature of Nigeria's civil society landscape. While coalitions such as the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) and the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) have achieved significant policy outcomes, many organisations continue to operate independently with limited coordination. Furthermore, civil society activities are often concentrated in urban areas, creating difficulties in reaching rural and marginalised communities. This urban bias reduces inclusiveness, weakens collective bargaining power, and limits the ability of civil society to sustain broad-based national advocacy campaigns (West Africa Civil Society Institute, 2020).

The gap between policy achievements and actual implementation further constrains civil society's impact. Although advocacy efforts contributed to important reforms such as the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act of 2011, challenges including bureaucratic resistance, poor record management, limited awareness, and weak enforcement mechanisms continue to restrict its effectiveness (Ojo, 2015). This demonstrates that legislative success alone cannot guarantee accountability unless supported by strong institutions capable of enforcing compliance and ensuring meaningful implementation.

Similarly, the effectiveness of civil society depends on the strength of supporting accountability institutions. Agencies responsible for combating corruption, protecting rights, and enforcing laws require independence and adequate capacity to act on evidence provided by civic organisations. However, political interference, insufficient resources, and institutional weaknesses often limit their ability to transform public revelations into concrete reforms (UNCAC Coalition, 2019). As a result, many accountability campaigns achieve public awareness but fail to produce lasting institutional change.

Technological advancement has created new opportunities for civic participation while also introducing emerging risks. Digital platforms have expanded the ability of citizens and organisations to mobilize, share information, and advocate for reforms. However, online surveillance, misinformation, cyber harassment, and digital restrictions increasingly threaten civic freedoms and undermine digital activism (Ojo et al., 2018). These challenges demonstrate that technological innovation alone cannot guarantee stronger accountability without protections for digital rights and freedom of expression.

The media, an important partner in accountability processes, also faces challenges that affect civil society advocacy. Economic pressures, ownership interests, declining investigative journalism, and restrictions on media freedom have weakened its ability to amplify governance concerns. Limited public awareness of citizens' rights and available accountability mechanisms further reduces the ability of civil society to mobilize communities effectively, particularly in underserved areas (WACSI, 2020).

Furthermore, many civil society organisations experience capacity limitations, including weak monitoring and evaluation systems, limited research capacity, inadequate policy analysis, and insufficient strategic communication. These weaknesses affect their ability to produce credible evidence and influence policy decisions effectively. Strengthening organisational capacity and investing in evidence-based advocacy are therefore necessary for improving the quality and impact of civil society interventions (Ojo et al., 2018).

At the broader level, Nigeria's political economy continues to shape the challenges faced by civil society. Patronage networks, elite dominance, and competition over public resources create incentives for political actors to resist accountability reforms, co-opt civic organisations, or weaken oversight institutions. In such an environment, exposing governance failures is often insufficient unless accompanied by institutional reforms and changes in political incentives (United States Institute of Peace, 2020).

From the perspective of this study, these challenges do not suggest that civil society has failed in promoting good governance and democratic accountability. Rather, they demonstrate that its effectiveness is closely connected to the wider political, legal, and institutional environment. Civil society organisations have made important contributions to policy reform, electoral accountability, anti-corruption advocacy, and citizen participation, but sustaining these achievements requires an enabling civic environment, strong democratic institutions, organizational independence, and constructive engagement between state and non-state actors. This study therefore argues that strengthening civil society requires not only improving the capacity of civic organisations but also creating governance systems that protect civic freedoms, uphold the rule of law, and respond effectively to citizens' demands. Under such conditions, civil society can fully realize its potential as a transformative force for good governance and democratic accountability in Nigeria.

Re-Centering the Role of Civil Society in Promoting Good Governance and Democratic Accountability in Nigeria

Civil society has long been recognized as an important link between the state and citizens, serving as a watchdog, advocate for social justice, and development partner (Diamond, 1999; Salamon, 2002). In Nigeria, its role has evolved alongside democratic development, reflecting both the opportunities created by democratic governance and the challenges associated with weak institutions, political interference, and limited state capacity. Recent scholarship therefore argues for the re-centering of civil society as a strategic governance actor rather than viewing it merely as an external critic of government (Ojo, 2018; WACSI, 2020).

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, civil society organisations (CSOs), NGOs, professional associations, and grassroots movements have contributed significantly to promoting transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. Their involvement in election monitoring, anti-corruption advocacy, human rights campaigns, and the promotion of the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act, 2011 demonstrates their capacity to influence governance reforms (Ojo, 2015). However, challenges such as weak implementation of reforms, shrinking civic space, and state restrictions have limited the sustainability of these

achievements, highlighting the need for civil society to become more institutionalized and integrated into governance processes (USIP, 2020).

Re-centering civil society requires recognizing it as an essential component of Nigeria's governance system. This involves strengthening organizational capacity, research skills, monitoring and evaluation systems, and strategic communication to support evidence-based advocacy (Ojo et al., 2018). It also requires expanding civic participation beyond urban-based organisations to include rural communities, women, youth, and marginalized groups, thereby improving legitimacy and inclusiveness (WACSI, 2020).

Recent developments demonstrate this transformation. The #EndSARS movement of 2020 showed the influence of digitally driven youth mobilization in raising concerns about police accountability and human rights (Zaina, 2024). Similarly, organisations such as the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) and the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) illustrate how collaboration and coalition-building can strengthen advocacy, electoral monitoring, and policy engagement (Carter Centre, 2019; NDI, 2018).

From the perspective of this study, re-centering civil society involves repositioning it as a strategic governance partner that contributes to policy reform, institutional accountability, and democratic consolidation. Civil society organisations, NGOs, professional associations, and grassroots movements complement state institutions by monitoring government actions, promoting transparency, and empowering citizens. However, their effectiveness depends on an enabling environment characterised by civic freedom, institutional cooperation, sustainable funding, and strong democratic institutions. Therefore, sustainable governance in Nigeria requires a collaborative relationship between the state and civil society to deepen accountability, strengthen democracy, and promote inclusive development.

Discussion of Findings

Empirical literature consistently identifies civil society organisations (CSOs) as important actors in promoting good governance and democratic accountability in Nigeria. Through advocacy, election monitoring, policy engagement, anti-corruption campaigns, and human rights activities, civil society serves as a bridge between citizens and the state by creating opportunities for public participation and demanding government responsiveness (Chukwudi & Ojo, 2023; Civil Society Situation Room Nigeria). Existing studies demonstrate that civil society has strengthened democratic processes, although its influence varies depending on political conditions, institutional support, and organizational capacity.

A major contribution of civil society has been its role in improving electoral transparency and accountability. During Nigeria's 2015 and 2019 general elections, platforms such as the Civil Society Situation Room coordinated election observation, voter education, and real-time monitoring involving several organisations. These initiatives enhanced public confidence, increased transparency, and strengthened engagement with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (Sule et al., 2021). Beyond election observation, civil society organisations have documented irregularities, advocated electoral reforms, and encouraged citizen participation, thereby contributing to the credibility of democratic processes.

Empirical studies also highlight the role of civil society in promoting transparency and combating corruption. Organisations such as the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) and Transparency International Nigeria have used litigation, advocacy, and public campaigns to demand accountability in public finance and governance. Their activities have increased awareness of corruption issues and pressured institutions to improve transparency and responsiveness.

However, research also identifies significant challenges limiting civil society effectiveness. Political interference, donor dependence, restrictions on civic space, intimidation of activists, and the rise of politically aligned organisations have weakened the independence of some CSOs. These challenges reduce their ability to consistently influence governance reforms and hold powerful actors accountable.

From the perspective of this study, civil society should be understood not only as a watchdog but also as a strategic partner in democratic governance. While CSOs have contributed significantly to electoral accountability, policy reform, and citizen participation, their long-term impact depends on institutional collaboration, organizational independence, sustainable resources, and a supportive democratic environment. Strengthening these conditions is essential for enabling civil society to fully contribute to good governance and democratic accountability in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Civil society in Nigeria plays a critical and multifaceted role in promoting good governance and democratic accountability. Empirical and theoretical studies converge on the view that non-state actors, including civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), professional associations, and grassroots movements, serve as watchdogs, policy advocates, service providers, and mobilizers of citizen engagement. Through sustained advocacy for transparency laws, election monitoring, policy piloting, and digital mobilization, civil society has demonstrably influenced legal reforms, strengthened electoral integrity, and fostered civic consciousness across the country.

However, the literature also emphasises that civil society's capacity to deliver durable governance outcomes is conditioned by structural, institutional, and operational constraints. Challenges such as restrictive legislation, state repression, donor dependence, elite capture, institutional weaknesses, and digital vulnerabilities limit the scope and sustainability of civic interventions. Consequently, the effectiveness of civil society hinges on its ability to maintain organizational autonomy, build strategic coalitions, leverage technical expertise, and engage both citizens and state institutions constructively.

In all, civil society remains indispensable to Nigeria's democratic consolidation. Its continued engagement is essential not only for exposing governance deficits but also for shaping policy, ensuring accountability, and deepening citizen participation. For civil society to maximise its impact, strategic investment in organizational capacity, coalition-building, secure digital infrastructure, and institutional partnerships is crucial. Ultimately, the re-centering of civil society as a core actor in governance processes can strengthen transparency, responsiveness, and the overall quality of democracy in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made to add more value to the role of Civil Society in Promoting Good Governance and democratic accountability in Nigeria.

- i. Invest in governance structures, monitoring and evaluation systems, legal support, and strategic communications within CSOs to enhance credibility, effectiveness, and sustainability.
- ii. Advocate for legal safeguards and oppose restrictive regulations to ensure that civil society can operate independently, engage citizens, and hold public institutions accountable without fear of repression.
- iii. Encourage collaboration among CSOs, professional associations, grassroots movements, and international partners to enhance collective bargaining power, nationwide reach, and coordinated advocacy campaigns.
- iv. Utilise digital platforms and independent media for mobilization, awareness-raising, and transparency initiatives while mitigating risks from online surveillance, disinformation, and media capture.

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