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# SPECIAL REPORT

2301 Constitution Ave., NW • Washington, DC 20037 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

## ABOUT THE REPORT

Focusing on transparency and accountability reforms, this Special Report examines the landscape of Nigerian activism as revealed by interviews with representatives from civil society and a research workshop held in Abuja in December 2017. It examines the scope of the substantial international funding and training support that civil society organizations in Nigeria receive and how this support affects the effectiveness of civil society actors. The report is supported by the United States Institute of Peace. Funding and other assistance were provided by the Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance office at the US Agency for International Development and by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samson Itodo, a researcher and community organizer based in Abuja, Nigeria, is the executive director of YIAGA AFRICA, a civic organization launched in 2007 to promote democratic governance and civic participation across the continent. Davin O'Regan is a senior program officer in the Program on Nonviolent Action at USIP. Miranda Rivers of USIP provided extensive research and editing support; Aminu Gamawa conducted several interviews.

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*Samson Itodo and Davin O'Regan*

# Nigeria's Movement for Transparency and Accountability

## Bringing the Pieces Together

### Summary

- Nigerian activism and collective efforts to combat corruption have risen dramatically in recent years. Combined with a range of new civil society organizations working to push reforms, a movement for transparency and accountability may be emerging.
- Civil society organizations and activists have demonstrated an ability to elevate and sustain transparency reforms on various political and policy agendas. Organizations have also been able to advance innovative solutions and plans, thereby increasing the likelihood of reform adoption.
- Accountability reforms remain elusive and may not be responsive to the same approaches and tactics that have improved transparency.
- Funding from foreign governments, multilateral institutions, and private foundations has been critical for Nigerian civil society organizations that focus on transparency and accountability. Many organizations are still working to tap into a viable domestic resource base.
- Foreign support, in terms of funding and training, has tended to be too inflexible, short term, and focused on organizational management as opposed to mobilizing mass action and movement building.

### Introduction

It is difficult to deny the broad changes that have swept over Nigeria the last two decades. Moving from an infamous military dictatorship in the late 1990s to one of Africa's most robust democracies just twenty years later, the country has made remarkable progress.

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Still, widespread corruption bedevils the country. It is in many respects Nigeria's biggest policy challenge and threat to stability and development. Since the country's transition to democracy in 1999, an array of reforms has been undertaken and institutions created to improve transparency and accountability. They include the establishment of anticorruption agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission as well as policies to improve public procurement, personnel management, due process, and monitoring to reduce waste.

Despite some modest improvements, corruption has barely budged. It remains widespread and persistent in Nigeria, which was ranked 148th out of 180 countries on Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index. (Its composite score of 27 out of 100 makes it one of just a few of Africa's democracies with such a low score.) This situation appears to be changing, however. From the grassroots upward, Nigerians are reinserting themselves with renewed vigor into the gap between recalcitrant corruption and broad-based institutional reforms. They are demanding genuine and sustained improvements at the state and societal levels. A growing constellation of citizen campaigns and organizations now constitute a major force in the effort to combat corruption.

These developments are promising—because it may require a movement to properly reverse the tide of corruption in Nigeria. In fact, social movements and their efforts have demonstrated in dozens of studies remarkable abilities to positively influence a range of policy reforms, including labor regulations, environmental standards, and civil rights.<sup>1</sup> Many leading Nigerians also agree on the need for a movement for transparency and accountability. "In the fight against corruption, citizen involvement and demand side activism are key components," Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari writes in his reflections on the topic.<sup>2</sup>

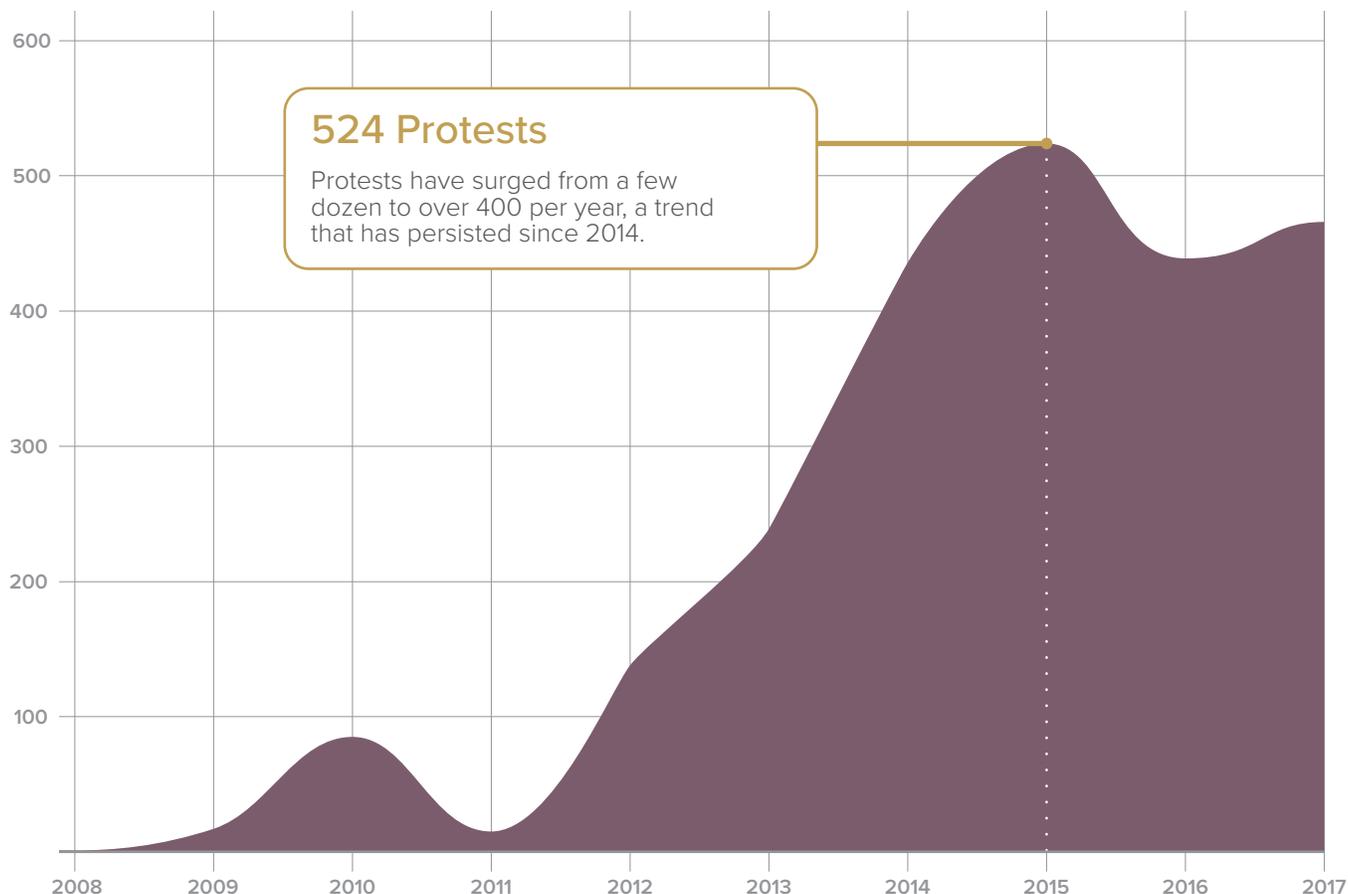
Drawing on a workshop held in Abuja with fourteen Nigerian transparency and accountability activists as well as on subsequent in-depth interviews with more than twenty other civil society leaders and key informants, this report analyzes the less celebrated but unique contributions and comparative advantages of this emerging movement for transparency and accountability in Nigeria. It reviews the landscape of anticorruption activism in Nigeria, from the many successes to the real limits.

## Transparency and Accountability Activism

Nigeria has a long history of activism. In the 1990s, organizations such as the Civil Liberties Organization and United Action for Democracy led the movement against military rule, mobilizing citizens to take a stand and organizing demonstrations in the streets. Efforts by Media Rights Agenda and others were critical to expanding civic space and protecting freedom of expression. Labor unions have also been at the forefront of major changes, including on various economic and social policies such as government subsidies and labor regulations. Nigerian civil society has been actively pushing for democratic change and other reforms for generations.<sup>3</sup>

A new emerging wave of activism has been making its mark, however. Activism can take many forms, from boycotts and stay-aways to letter-writing campaigns, but protest is a tactical mainstay and its most visible form. In Nigeria, annual counts of protests have surged from at most a few dozen from 2000 through 2012 to well over four hundred between 2013 and 2017 (see figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Much of this coincides with the emergence of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, a citizens' campaign borne out of the tragic kidnapping of nearly three hundred teenage girls from the northeastern town of Chibok by Boko Haram militants in April 2014. The campaign garnered significant domestic and international attention and transnational support. Yet only about sixty of the protests captured in figure 1 reference the Chibok girls. New demands are being advanced by Nigeria's grass roots on a wide range

**Figure 1. Number of Protest Events in Nigeria, 2008–17**



Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com).

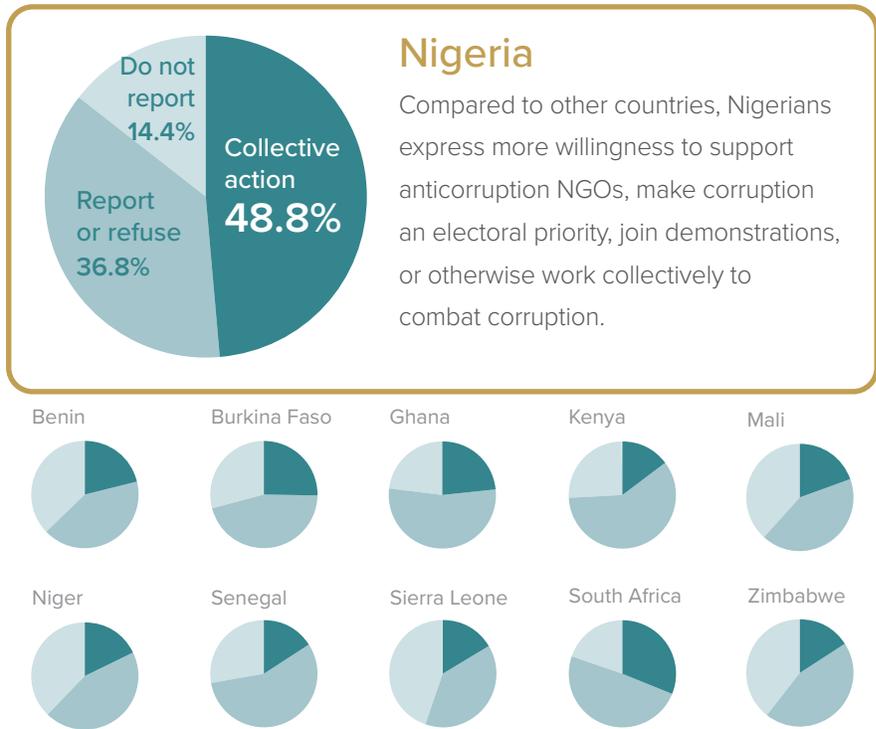
of political, security, economic, and social matters. Despite the diversity of triggers and demands behind these various demonstrations, Nigerians are engaging and persisting in collective action on a scale not seen since the mobilizations against military rule in the 1990s.

Parallel to this, Nigerians have demonstrated a strong preference for collective action efforts to confront the challenge of corruption. When asked to choose the most effective way to combat corruption, they indicate that they are far more inclined to support advocacy organizations, protests, political candidates who prioritize anticorruption, educational campaigns, or other forms of collective action over reporting corruption to state institutions or simply tolerating it. In fact, the tendency toward collective responses to corruption in Nigeria is stronger than in many other African states (see figure 2). This is not to imply that every protest in Nigeria is triggered by a corruption scandal or demands for transparency and accountability. However, taken together, this broad proclivity toward collective action to combat corruption, along with a recent surge in protest activity in Nigeria, suggests that the foundation for a broader transparency and accountability movement may be emerging.

Much of this emerging activism is being channeled through and by a constellation of professional Nigerian civil society organizations (CSOs) and ongoing citizen campaigns, many of which were launched only in the last decade.<sup>5</sup> These groups and mobilizations include but are not limited to the Say No Campaign (which comprises Partners for Electoral Reforms, YIAGA AFRICA, Civil Society and Legislative Advocacy Centre, and the Protest to Power movement), Follow the Money, Civil Society Network Against Corruption, Social

**Figure 2. Nigerians' Preference for Collective Action to Combat Corruption**

## What is the most effective way for ordinary individuals to combat corruption?



Source: Afrobarometer Data, All Countries, Round 6, 2016, [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).

Note: Only select countries shown. Answers to question 71B are collapsed into three response options.

Economic Rights Project, Enough Is Enough, BudgIT, Movement Against Corruption, and Buharimeter. This is only a snapshot of the many independent Nigerian organizations active on transparency and accountability. Most of these groups and initiatives emerged following specific policy shortcomings or critical incidents. For example, the Say No Campaign was a direct response to the government's decision in 2013 to grant a presidential pardon to Nigeria's notoriously corrupt governor and fugitive, the late Diepreye Alamieyeseigha. Enough Is Enough was borne out of citizens' anger over the secrecy and manipulation of President Umaru Yar'Adua's medical condition prior to his death in 2010. Follow the Money was launched in 2012 following a lead poisoning outbreak related to gold ore processing in Zamfara state that killed more than one hundred children.

These organizations and campaigns use a variety of activities and tactics to advance transparency and accountability reforms (see table 1). They can be grouped into three logics: persuasion, cost reduction, and pressure.<sup>6</sup> Persuasive tactics are the most common, present the fewest complications or challenges, and are an obvious starting point for any reform effort. Across interviews with a range of representatives from Nigerian CSOs, engagement, outreach, and awareness raising were consistently referenced as core activities. These are typically achieved by creating radio jingles, developing online social media campaigns, and holding town hall events, which broaden popular support for certain reform demands. "The background of our program is media and information.... Information awareness is key" to getting people to act and getting government to respond, one civil society leader explained.

**Table 1. Activist Tactics in Nigeria**

Strategy	Definition	Example(s)
<b>Agenda setting</b>	Influencing the prioritization of issues on the public agenda	Efforts by CSOs keep transparency and accountability issues related to the petroleum industry on legislators’ agenda, leading to passage of the Petroleum Industry Governance Bill
<b>Strategic support to state institutions</b>	Consulting government officials on initiatives that will benefit citizens	Right2Know partners with federal agencies to install freedom of information portals on government websites to ease the process for public information requests and increase transparency
<b>Nonviolent collective action</b>	Organizing and recruiting to build resistance against corruption	Enough Is Enough organizes rallies attended by more than five hundred Nigerians in Abuja and Lagos to protest the National Assembly’s failure to pass an annual budget, the extended stay of the president in the United Kingdom, and unresolved kidnapping of the Chibok girls
<b>Policy scrutiny and analysis</b>	Analyzing policies to determine fitness and monitoring the implementation process	CSOs review a bill regulating NGOs alleged to give government sweeping oversight over their activities and push back against implementation
<b>Tracking government expenditure</b>	Identifying fiscal irregularities and the mismanagement of funds	BudgIT uses technology to educate citizens on matters of public spending and empower them to use government budget data to demand improved service delivery
<b>Whistleblowing</b>	Publicly reporting acts of official misconduct	African Centre for Media and Information Literacy launches a project allowing people to anonymously report corruption
<b>Public interest litigation</b>	Using the law to advance issues of human rights and equality or raise issues of broad concern	SERAP files lawsuit against Nigeria’s Minister of Power, Works, and Housing over privatization of electric power company

This may appear elemental and obvious but, as one activist remarked, “every change first requires a demand.” Activists and civil society will also engage in persuasive efforts directly with government, including advocacy and lobbying, which includes meetings with civil servants, legislators, or government ministry staff to convince them of the utility of certain reforms or to allay any fears about the risks or threats they perceive.

A demand for change is rarely enough, however. If a decision maker or government official cannot be persuaded to adopt a policy reform on its merits or on the breadth of its popular support, civil society organizations in Nigeria attempt to reduce the cost of implementation. This involves developing the content of complicated legislative bills, authoring national action plans, building monitoring platforms, or providing human capital for implementation. By providing ready-made solutions, they increase the likelihood of reform take-up. “Our interventions are shaped to help government achieve” transparency and accountability reforms, one CSO leader remarked while explaining how her organization developed mobile applications and action plans to track the implementation of various new legal reforms passed in recent years. A former head of a government agency concurred that this was the most effective way that civil society can advance transparency and accountability reforms:

Where I’ve seen movements make progress have been where they have worked in partnership with the government.... Tell me what I need to do and I’ll do [it]. We call it a partnership where [CSOs] trained our staff and told us what was required, which was actually beyond what we were required to do [by law].

When neither cost reduction nor persuasion are enough to advance transparency and accountability reform, Nigerian activists and civil society organizations sometimes turn to more assertive efforts to twist the arms of recalcitrant decision makers. “We have noticed how the government does seem to hate embarrassment,” an activist who often organizes public demonstrations explained.

It wants to keep the perception for local and international audiences that they are in touch and doing everything possible. So when we noticed that was an ego thing, we knew that the frequency of our protest marches had to be increased. And particularly when there is an international visitor coming, or our president is going for an international event, then we can mobilize our fellow advocates in those regions to do the protests.

Other organizations, such as Follow the Money and BudgIT, have used investigative or exposé-style research into budgets, spending, and other state policies that “shock [people] with what the facts are.” Likewise, activists and civil society organizations can use lawsuits and litigation to further turn the screws on state institutions to accommodate reforms or reform implementation. Some may sequence various tactics as they find that one activity begins to lose its influence. In fact, one interviewee revealed, Bring Back Our Girls has begun to use lawsuits against the government to highlight the plight of communities and kidnapping victims in northeast Nigeria as the influence of their protest marches has begun to wane.

Civil society organizations and social movement organizations also use various tactics to catalyze and shape the conversation among Nigerians about transparency and accountability, to change not just policy but also broader perceptions of corruption. Because many Nigerians are active users of social media, hashtag campaigns and online engagement can connect and mobilize individuals from across geographic and social divides. Social media is particularly powerful because it allows individual users to broadcast their personal experiences and link them with a wider and more encompassing narrative about the need to improve transparency and accountability and resist bribery, an interviewee explained. In other words, it increases solidarity and self-identification with a broader effort. For instance, in 2017 the Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth, and Advancement launched the #BounceCorruption initiative. Part of the effort involved a debate competition about corruption, transparency, and accountability at universities across the country, thereby shaping the conversation about corruption among the youth and creating a broader network that bridged geographic divides.

Do these organizations, initiatives, and tactics suggest that a social movement for transparency and accountability exists in Nigeria? “I believe there is a demand for transparency and accountability,” one interviewee said. “[But] I don’t know if I would go so far as to call it a movement.” Echoing this sentiment, few of those interviewed agreed that an active movement currently exists. In fact, in a questionnaire administered to the fourteen activists who participated in the Abuja research workshop, eleven described their organizations as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); only two described them as social movement organizations; one did not specify.

Some of the activities described in interviews do reflect common notions of what a movement is. Classic conceptions characterize them as engaged in contention often, but not exclusively, with a government.<sup>7</sup> Their methods are varied but typically involve protests, demonstrations, strikes, or other forms of assertive collective action. The terms NGO and CSO, by contrast, often conjure more collaborative and less contentious efforts to advance reform and change. Their tactics more often are institutional, seeking to ensure that governments and elites abide by existing rules and regulations or to alter and expand these rules through institutional procedures.

Many of the organizations and campaigns mentioned in this report straddle the divide between these conceptions of civil society organization and social movement. First, most primarily work through existing institutions, whether they are the courts, public hearings, or formal channels for filing requests or complaints with government agencies. Some work directly with government on legislative implementation, such as the recently passed Administration of Criminal Justice Act and the Freedom of Information Act, among others.

These same groups, however, will also adopt more disruptive tactics and engage in demonstrations and protests. For instance, some CSOs participated in the Occupy Nigeria

protests that swept the country in January 2012 and involved strong demands for more government transparency and accountability.<sup>8</sup> Other times, leaders of these groups will participate in protests as individuals rather than as representatives of their respective CSOs. Still, they will use their civil society contacts to mobilize for such events. These mobilizations are like “special purpose vehicles” that draw on but are distinct from the more institutionally oriented work of their CSO, one interviewee explained.

The nature of transparency and accountability issues further complicates cleanly categorizing different actors and activities as more oriented toward CSOs or social movement organizations. On the one hand, transparency and accountability issues are by definition tied to institutional procedures: to hold an individual or institution accountable presupposes the existence of some set of standards or rules against which they are judged. On the other hand, increasing transparency and accountability in Nigeria would very much threaten the interests of many, particularly those who have benefited from the disappearance of billions of dollars from national and state budgets. In this regard, working to advance transparency and accountability in a country characterized by high levels of corruption may itself be a contentious social movement activity.

In the end, the concepts of CSOs and social movement organizations may be difficult to disentangle. Civil society may in fact subsume all types of voluntary organizations, whether social movements, NGOs, or lobbying and advocacy organizations. Social movement organizations, then, are one type of CSO, defined by their tendency to engage primarily in extrainstitutional activities such as protests.

Many of the components for an invigorated push for transparency and accountability appear to be in place in Nigeria. First is an elevated level of activism and strong citizen desire to collectively confront corruption. As seen in recent social media campaigns, public interest litigation action, and protests and demonstrations, a growing number of CSOs have developed sophisticated and diverse capabilities to channel this grassroots energy. Together, they may constitute a genuine social movement, but many of the organizations that stand at the forefront of this effort prefer to characterize their work in different terms.

***Many of the components for an invigorated push for transparency and accountability appear to be in place in Nigeria, an elevated level of activism and strong citizen desire to collectively confront corruption.***

## Successes and Challenges

What impact have these efforts had? The results have been mixed. On the whole, transparency in Nigeria has improved markedly. More information about government performance and spending is now accessible to the public. Concomitant gains in accountability, however, have lagged. This is most notable in the tendency for corruption allegations against prominent individuals to result in few consequences. Additionally, many challenges and shortcomings in the work of civil society organizations, including weak coalition dynamics and a separation of efforts across generational and geographic divides, have also become apparent.

Over the last decade, a number of legislative bills and reforms that directly improve transparency have advanced in Nigeria’s National Assembly or have been signed into law. These changes benefited considerably from CSO momentum. The Senate, for instance, passed the Petroleum Industry Governance Bill in May 2017, altering the lines of authority in issuing petroleum licenses. BudgIT’s Fix Our Oil campaign coincided with the bill’s hearings. Along with various “tweet meets” and social media engagements, the organization produced a series of infographics about the bill’s benefits and limitations and the budget of the Nigerian National Petroleum Company.<sup>9</sup> In July 2017, the Senate also passed the Whistleblower Protection Bill, which clarifies the protections for persons who make disclosures about corrupt and other injurious practices in government and private companies. CSOs such as HEDA Resource Centre were critical in maintaining momentum behind the bill, including by holding a

***The contributions of civil society organizations and activists to transparency advances in Nigeria highlight their ability to set an agenda and sustain it in public debate, sometimes for several years.***

two-day summit between lawmakers and activists to discuss the bill's needs and implications.<sup>10</sup>

In 2016, Enough Is Enough, Media Rights Agenda, and Paradigm Initiative Nigeria filed a lawsuit to challenge the Frivolous Petitions Bill, which would have made it a crime to make any allegation online, in print, or on the radio without a supporting court affidavit. The bill was eventually withdrawn in the Senate following outrage channeled through the #NoToSocialMediaBill campaign. CSOs, including the Paradigm Initiative Nigeria, then crafted a new Digital Rights and Freedom Bill, which passed Nigeria's House of Representatives in December 2017.<sup>11</sup>

The contributions of civil society organizations and activists to transparency advances in Nigeria highlight their ability to set an agenda and sustain it in public debate, sometimes for several years. However, the advances also highlight that real reforms often depend on having amenable persons in government. Two examples reflect the impact that civil society organizations and activists have on transparency reforms, how they do it, and the limitations they face.

First, perhaps the most notable transparency reform in Nigeria—and the one repeatedly identified by interviewees—is the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which was signed into law by President Goodluck Jonathan in May 2011. “Transparency and accountability is so scarce in this very climate that we are talking about,” one activist explained. “It is so scarce. I think one of the [positive] measures ... was the passing of the FOIA.” The bill's contents were first drafted in 1993 and 1994 during workshops organized by Media Rights Agenda, the Civil Liberties Organization, and the Nigeria Union of Journalists. A large advocacy effort in support of the bill was launched by the Freedom of Information Coalition, a collaborative effort of more than 150 civil society organizations, soon after the legislation was introduced in the National Assembly in 1999.<sup>12</sup> Numerous town halls and workshops were held throughout the 2000s to explain the need for the bill to Nigerian lawmakers and ordinary citizens.

For a decade, the bill wended its way through and between the National Assembly and the Nigerian presidency. A turning point emerged in early 2011. Several lawmakers in Nigeria's House of Representatives had tried repeatedly to bring the bill to a vote, only to be stridently rebuffed by vocal opponents, including in January 2010 and again the following December.<sup>13</sup> In the summer of 2010, Edetaen Ojo lamented that with national elections slated for the spring of 2011, “the prospects for a Freedom of Information Act under the present government in Nigeria look grim.”<sup>14</sup> The bill seemed destined to remain in parliamentary limbo.

However, in a dramatic turnaround, the bill emerged without opposition in a vote in the House of Representatives in February 2011, only three months after its latest defeat. It was soon adopted in the Senate and signed by President Jonathan later that spring. Several factors appeared critical in generating support. Legislators feared that the FOIA bill would open their personal lives to scrutiny, and that the Nigerian press would “abuse” freedom of information to intensely and excessively harass government officials. No doubt some were fearful that past corrupt deeds would be easier to surface. Journalist and newspaper publisher associations repeatedly met with Nigerian legislators to assure them that the FOIA could not be used to scrutinize their personal information, only official state business.<sup>15</sup> This helped smooth the way for adoption. Advocates in civil society also benefited from having several vocal supporters of the bill in government, including Representatives Abike Dabiri-Erewa, who sponsored the bill, and Ita Engang, who repeatedly attempted motions to reintroduce the bill for consideration. Additionally, Speaker of the House Dimeji Bankole's decision to support the bill in early 2011 proved critical to finally bringing it to a vote.<sup>16</sup> Goodluck Jonathan, newly elevated from the vice presidency in 2010 following the midterm death of then President Yar'Adua, staked his leadership claim on several reforms, including passage of the FOIA. Together, these individuals were essential to moving the FOIA over the goal line after various CSOs together developed the bill and fostered support through their advocacy efforts.

Another recent transparency success was the push to have the National Assembly create and release a budget of its expenditures. In 2017, it did so for the first time in seven years

and in greater detail than in the past. The change was the culmination of the #OpenNass campaign, launched in 2013 by Enough Is Enough with support from BudgIT and other CSOs. It was a multipronged effort that combined hotlines, through which citizen petitions for more transparency were collected and sent to the National Assembly, and specific representatives, town halls with citizens, and several public rallies to demonstrate broad support for greater transparency. The campaign continues and encompasses other demands, including more transparency about lawmaker voting and attendance records and an audit of the National Assembly's spending over the last decade.

Like the FOIA, #OpenNass appeared to benefit from having supportive and influential interlocutors in government, specifically the president of the Senate, Bukola Saraki. Saraki was a relatively prolific user of the #OpenNass hashtag, having appended it to his tweets more than forty times beginning in the spring of 2015, shortly after national elections put him in position to be president of the Senate. He appeared to be responding directly to the campaign launched by Enough Is Enough and echoed by other groups, such as BudgIT. He also promised several times to release the National Assembly budget in 2015 and in 2016, but nothing was released until 2017.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the campaign was able to not only raise #OpenNass on the National Assembly agenda but also keep it there for several years as delays, whether purposeful or technical, prevented release of the budget. Without the campaign, it is possible that the issue of budgetary transparency might have been delayed or dropped altogether.

Still, Senator Saraki's role should not be dismissed. He did not display any deep opposition to releasing the National Assembly budget, and he has shepherded several other important pieces of legislation through the Senate.<sup>18</sup> One activist identified Saraki when asked what element of the effort to push for budget transparency at the National Assembly had the most impact. This is not to say that Saraki is a transparency and accountability champion. He has in fact been investigated and charged for several allegations of false declaration of assets and customs evasion.<sup>19</sup> Still, although the #OpenNass effort helped elevate the release of the National Assembly budget as well as sustain its prioritization, without a receptive political leader such as Saraki, it is easy to imagine that the effort might not have been as successful as it was.

Together, the passage of the FOIA bill and the #OpenNass effort illustrate the contributions and limitations of civil society activism to advancing transparency in Nigeria. Through town halls, direct advocacy, infographics, and public rallies, organizations such as Enough Is Enough, BudgIT, Media Rights Agenda, and others were critical in putting these items on the political agenda and keeping them there. In the case of the FOIA, civil society also crafted the bill itself, producing a ready-made document for the National Assembly to take up. However, the ultimate success in these two cases seemed contingent on having key allies in government. The FOIA bill lingered in the National Assembly for a decade before being signed into law, suggesting that it was those who emerged to lead it through the National Assembly in 2010 and 2011 who were pivotal to its adoption. Likewise, Saraki's role appeared critical to the reopening of the National Assembly budget in 2017.

Neither the FOIA campaign nor the #OpenNass effort adopted more assertive methods of pressure to advance reforms.<sup>20</sup> The use of such tactics comes with risks. Doing so may alienate key decision makers, and if civil society is unable to muster enough leverage or power to truly compel their desired behavior, the result may be a net negative in reform efforts. According to one view, as in the case of FOIA, it may be unnecessary. These campaigns never "got to the level of protests. [The efforts of civil society] were more targeted and subtle," a former Nigerian government official said. (Several public rallies and protests have included references to #OpenNass.) More generally, he added, "because we live in a society where government is still exceedingly powerful, it tends not to work when civil societies are adversarial or accusatory." Of course, campaigns like Bring Back Our Girls and Occupy Nigeria

have featured more assertive and disruptive protest tactics, and other organizations have used litigation and investigative research to either directly challenge government policies or to undermine the legitimacy of specific individuals and policies. Significant advances in Nigeria such as FOIA and #OpenNass featured minimal contentious action.

Nigeria has passed several positive transparency reforms, but the movement for greater accountability has garnered fewer successes. Poor performance and corrupt practices, even when uncovered, often go unpunished. For example, since 2000, only ten of 177 high-profile corruption investigations have resulted in convictions, and only three of those ten included significant sentences.<sup>21</sup> Most of the cases are politically motivated, charges emerging after elections have swept new leaders into power. This is a major challenge for anticorruption efforts because if consequences are not applied impartially, future abuses will not be deterred.

However, this situation does pinpoint a limitation of transparency and accountability activism. CSOs and independent activists can call on the state for increased openness and transparency or to institute more stringent standards for the performance of officials. Holding individuals accountable, however, often requires the direct action by state institutions to investigate and prosecute. At most, CSOs and activists can demonstrate to protect vulnerable prosecutors or judicial officials or agitate for the removal of certain individuals.<sup>22</sup> The agitation tactic has been used to some positive effect in the past. For example, in October 2017, Babachir Lawal was removed from his position as a senior political appointee in the Buhari administration after recurring demands and protests from civil society over the apparent diversion of funds for government contracts to secure displacement camps from flooding in the northeast of the country.<sup>23</sup> Yet CSOs and movement actors are limited in their ability to hold officials and state agencies accountable for their performance.

Other limitations have also become apparent. First, activism tends to be highly centered in Lagos and Abuja. To some degree this is not unexpected, given the significance of these two cities in Nigeria's economy and politics. Yet significant transparency and accountability deficits at the state level warrant stronger citizen mobilization. Although it is not that no mobilization takes place outside of Lagos and Abuja, the connections between Nigeria's professional civil society organizations that focus on national-level issues and those that operate at the state level or in rural areas are fairly weak. Groups such as Follow the Money and others prioritize grassroots outreach, but potential for greater synergy is being missed.

Linkages across generational divides in Nigeria's anticorruption activism were also identified as a shortcoming during the Abuja workshop in December 2017. Despite the emergence of many new organizations and younger Nigerian activists over the last five to ten years, they have yet to fully draw on the experiences of the nation's older generation of campaigners. Activism and nonviolent action are demanding and unpredictable. They require discipline and specific skills, resources that may be gained from connections with older activists.<sup>24</sup> Partnerships with traditional civil society entities, such as labor organizations, are also strained and marked by suspicion.<sup>25</sup> Real advances in mobilization and pressure on government may be missed as a result.

***CSOs and independent activists can call for more stringent standards for the performance of officials. Holding them accountable, however, often requires the direct action by state institutions to investigate and prosecute.***

## **The Role of External Support**

Funding from foreign donors, whether governments or private sources, has been essential to Nigeria's emerging transparency and accountability movement. The most capable CSOs that focus on anticorruption rely to a large extent on foreign financial support. The impact of these funds, however, can vary depending on their source and type. Other forms of support that offer potential impact, such as training in movement building, have been in shorter supply.

It is difficult to pinpoint a precise figure for the funding provided to civil society for transparency and accountability for several reasons. Some funds may be dual use in that they support a CSO's effort on an unrelated issue area, such as voter registration, but strengthen its overall capabilities, competencies, and profile, which translates into improved work on issues associated with anticorruption. Many donor projects are also categorized in datasets under expansive catchalls such as "strengthening civil society," regardless of whether a project entails civic education efforts or more transparency and accountability-oriented programming.

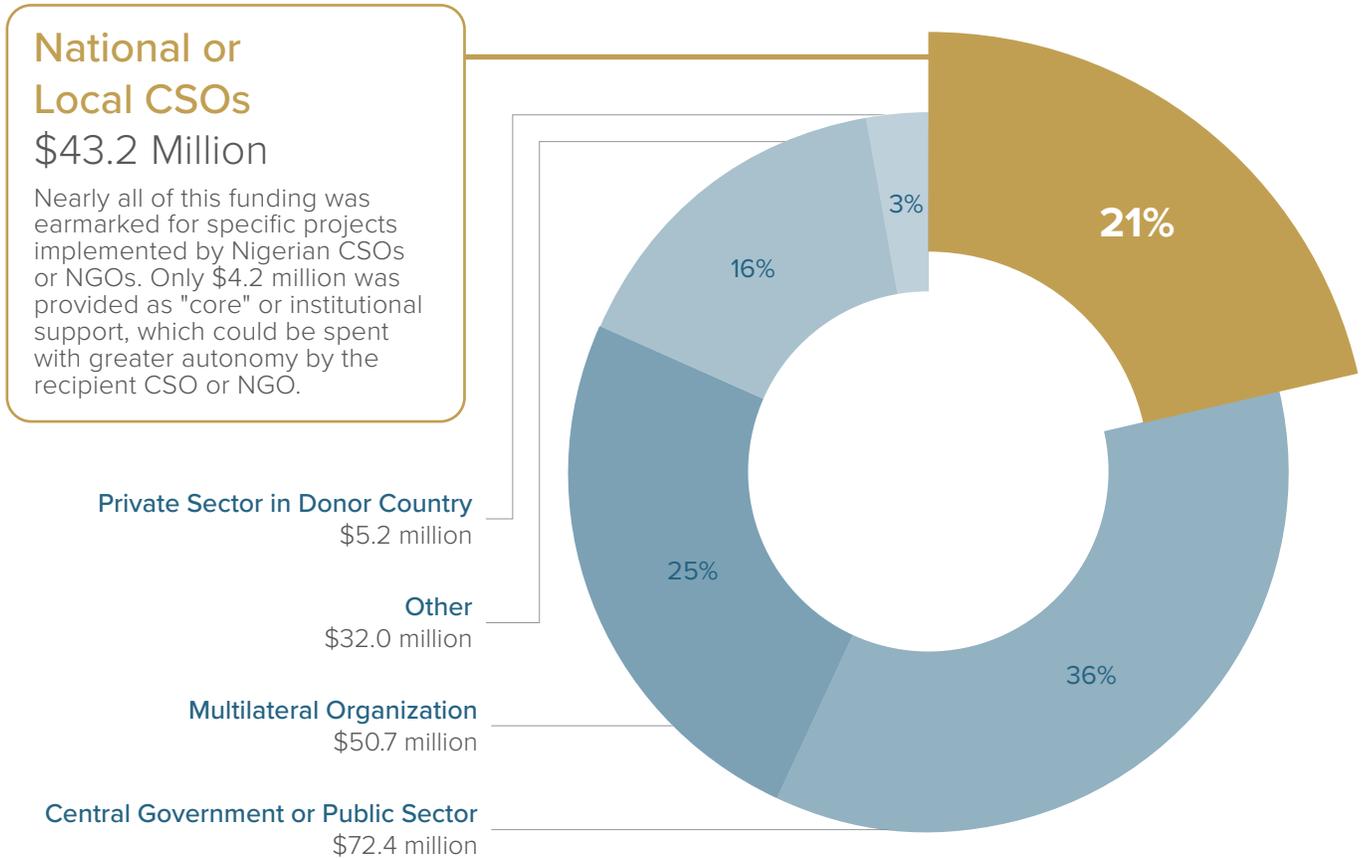
That said, a review of bilateral and multilateral donor projects to strengthen civil society or advance anticorruption in Nigeria from 2007 through 2016 reveals that external foreign donors committed \$43.2 million in support directly to Nigerian CSOs and NGOs (see figure 3).<sup>26</sup> This amounts to only 20 percent of all donor funds spent on strengthening civil society and anticorruption over the same period, the balance being implemented by Nigerian state institutions or other donor partners. Nonetheless, the amount of funding is substantial, and likely an underestimate of total foreign support because it excludes funding provided by private individuals. Private foundations such as Ford and MacArthur provided an additional \$7.7 million in grants to Nigerian CSOs working on accountability initiatives during this period.<sup>27</sup> The extent and abilities of civil society and anticorruption activism in Nigeria would be dramatically different—likely far smaller—without such financial support.

What would civil society look like, how would it function, and what would its impact on transparency and accountability be without foreign financial support? We struggled to address this counterfactual given that it was very difficult to find CSOs and established activist organizations that do not receive funding from international donors. Various campaigns have eschewed donor support, such as Bring Back Our Girls and OurMumuDonDo. Organizations such as Follow the Money operated out of pocket for several months before a private foundation found their work online and proactively extended an offer of financial support. Obviously, classic social movement organizations such as labor and trade unions are self-funded. However, in outreach to more than two dozen civil society organizations in Nigeria and in-country donor representatives, all found it difficult to identify peers or registered CSOs that relied mostly on domestic resources and funding. Nor did any names emerge during the Abuja workshop in December 2017. Many Nigerian CSOs are still working to tap into a viable domestic resource base.

At least two conclusions are possible. First, if CSOs have been able to advance transparency and accountability reforms, then foreign financial support has been fundamental to such achievements. Second, without foreign funding, independent civil society efforts to advance transparency and accountability would drop sharply. In interviews, many activists noted that they would face severe difficulties maintaining their work without external funding support. As one interviewee asserted, "definitely [our work] won't be anything close to what you can achieve if we didn't have these resources." Participants in the Abuja workshop concurred. Some activists, however, insist that their commitment and passion would sustain their work, and if "we don't get [donor support], we will still do the work that we do." Activists saw few alternatives to foreign donors. Accepting money from government sources would compromise their integrity; further, as one interviewee related, "our board will not allow us to take [funds] from any Nigerian philanthropic organization, except [if] he's open to answer how he got his money, his wealth."

Foreign funding generally allows civil society organizations to expand the work that they are doing, but it does not lead to the adoption of new tactics or strategies. Funding will help cover overhead costs, such as office space, electricity, and staff. "One significant change is that [with foreign funding] we've been able to scale up.... So that's what the grants can do: more campaigns, not to influence how we do it," one anticorruption activist explained. Another concurred, noting that "for me and what we are doing, in terms of scope

**Figure 3. Recipients of Foreign Assistance for Civil Society and Anticorruption Initiatives in Nigeria, 2007–16**



Source: OECD, Development Assistance Committee.

and coverage, it's enabled us to increase our coverage." The conditions that are attached to foreign funding also have some benefits. Although several interviewees decried the opportunity costs and time lost creating financial and programmatic reports, many also saw some benefits. "Any time we are able to get grants, I think that actually helps our activities and is now left for us to make sure we keep good accountability records, and good level of transparency that allows bigger things and bigger opportunities," an environmental activist in the Niger Delta said. In other words, grant requirements can be burdensome, but they also improve internal management that can increase productivity and sharpen planning.

A commonly cited concern with foreign funding is that it will generate legitimacy and credibility challenges for recipients, that recipient CSOs will be perceived merely as foreign agents. This has certainly been one professed reason behind a trend in regulatory reforms in Nigeria and elsewhere that require NGOs to declare or even cap the amount of funding they can accept from foreign sources. According to activists, the argument is that funding could be interpreted as an attempt "to control the domestic agenda" through civil society organizations. Another activist stated that "at times [foreign money] can give one a reputational risk amongst colleagues in the country, among beneficiaries or partners, government partners." But these were not an unmanageable problem. The same activist explained that "you learn to manage properly, and you determine who to work with and who you take support from." Others noted that "foreign funding is only detrimental if you allow it to alter your principles.... The capacity of the organization

determines its independence vis-à-vis donors.” One activist acknowledged that government officials might claim “we’re pushing an agenda from an international community because our grants come from an international community” but that

if we go to [a local] community, some of them who have that bit of knowledge and education, when we talk on radio, we mention the names of people giving us money and how much they’ve given us and what is the money supposed to achieve and how we spend the money. So it does not affect our legitimacy as a group.

Although concerns about legitimacy and credibility risks do accompany foreign funding, overall most activists described these as manageable challenges.

Perceptions of the providers of foreign funding differed across interviewees. Support from private foundations such as MacArthur, Ford, or the Open Society Initiative for West Africa is generally preferred over funding from bilateral development agencies. “I prefer private [foundations] because they allow you the leeway to help shape [the programming],” explained one civil society representative. Overall, private foundations were viewed as more open to adaptive management approaches, required more relevant outputs and deliverables, and were easier to work with in terms of authorizations, periods of performance, and the transfer of funds. Adaptive approaches to activism echo the observation that developing a movement often requires long-term, flexible investments rather than short-term and project-based grants.<sup>28</sup> Interviewees also explained that the legitimacy and credibility risks accompanying grants from bilateral donors were higher than those from private foundations.

Other shortcomings sometimes result from bilateral funding streams. Extensive monitoring and evaluation often requires significant in-country oversight by the bilateral development agency or their implementing partner, which in turn creates staffing demands that can compete directly with civil society organizations. As a result, some CSOs feel that their staff are sometimes drawn away from important mobilization, advocacy, and movement activities toward implementing agencies or subcontracted partners of a bilateral development agency. Given the substantial salary differentials between CSOs and contractors, it is difficult for CSOs to retain talent. Some have compared this redirection of CSO staff toward development contractors as the “Uber method,” referring to the San Francisco-based ridesharing company that has caused job displacement and income losses in the taxi sector in many cities around the world.

Some bilateral donors have been adopting different funding approaches. Certainly, independent but government-funded donors such as the National Endowment for Democracy and the European Endowment for Democracy do provide support with fewer strings attached and fewer extensive reporting requirements. The UK Department for International Development’s State Accountability and Voice Initiative and the US Agency for International Development’s Strengthening Advocacy and Civic Engagement program in Nigeria also use innovative approaches that link up with newer CSOs and foster partnerships between more established CSOs and newer grassroots efforts. Such approaches are similar to the strategy of private funders like the MacArthur Foundation that hand out grants to “cohorts” of civil society groups so as to fund complementary initiatives in the hope that collaboration might organically emerge.

Funds are not the only form of support that external actors can provide to activists and civil society. Training and other kinds of capacity building can also have a significant impact.<sup>29</sup> Leadership training, marketing and framing workshops, and role playing can generate discipline and unity as well as attract new supporters.<sup>30</sup> However, apart from some movement-building initiatives by the Ford Foundation, in Nigeria such training has tended to focus on organizational management and strategy development. This has not been entirely unwelcome. “Inasmuch as I’m an activist, I’m also an entrepreneur because I manage an organization,” explained one CSO head. Such management, he noted, requires

training in budgeting, accounting, and planning:

Before that [management] training, we were at a point of skill where we don't know how to scale. So we were struggling and it was burning us out.... So when we went for further training, we came back, we just knew what methodology to use, which helped to inform us the work process to use and then helped us scale and [we] were then able to put more talent, which helped us decentralize and now we have chapters.

When asked what kinds of training activists sought, interviewees identified public relations and communications, including on-air and on-camera interviewing, human resources recruitment policies, accounting and financial management, law and legal procedures, data mining, and research methods. Such skills are critical to implementing sustained advocacy work and the efficient employment of resources, but surprisingly emphasis was lighter on skills associated with mobilizing citizens, launching campaigns, and movement building. Training on such skills has been less forthcoming and has left civil society groups in Nigeria with a capabilities gap in their efforts to confront corruption using mass-action tactics.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Signs of an emerging movement to advance transparency and accountability are prominent in Nigeria. Protest activity has risen steadily, and surveys suggest that Nigerians are eager to engage in more collective action to confront corruption. A range of new civil society groups and campaigns may serve as the organizational infrastructure for this emerging movement—a positive development given the potential for genuine policy reforms when demands emerge from the grass roots upward.

These positive trends can be reinforced in the following ways.

First, changes to how funding is provided to civil society organizations may allow them to scale up and expand their transparency and accountability work. Only a small portion of the funding meant to improve anticorruption efforts in Nigeria is channeled through NGOs and CSOs. Directing more of this support toward civil society and activists will increase their ability to mobilize citizens into a broader anticorruption effort, reinforcing ongoing attempts to improve prosecutors, investigators, procurement processes, and other state institutions. Such support should also be more flexible. Rather than establishing rigid timelines with specific deliverables, support should be seen as a long-term investment in movement building that will foster the broad base of solidary networks that can rebalance power dynamics in a country where corruption and patronage often stymie reform. Reporting requirements should be minimal, with the initial vetting of recipients performing the main oversight function.<sup>31</sup>

Funding is not the only way to support Nigeria's emerging transparency and accountability movement. At the moment, most activists and organizations in Nigeria receive little training related to movement building. More engagements that impart skills related to framing and crafting culturally relevant symbols that strengthen solidarity would allow CSOs to mobilize support more efficiently. This would be distinct from developing the organizational management skills that are frequently more common in training and technical assistance. That said, organizations still welcome such training and skills.

Support should also be extended not to single organizations but to cohorts of organizations with complementary specializations and competencies. Some of this has already begun in Nigeria through the MacArthur Foundation and USAID's Strengthening Advocacy and Civic Engagement initiative. This cohort approach should also emphasize the inclusion of organizations from outside Lagos, Abuja, and other major cities. Doing so will extend the scope of movement development across the country and open opportunities for addressing corruption challenges in many of Nigeria's state and municipal

administrative units. One challenge of the cohort approach is to avoid fostering competition among recipient organizations. Funding for organizations should not be tied to coalitional work or the productivity of other cohort members.

Given an increasingly activist citizenry and an emerging organizational base of support, the pieces are in place for a new movement to challenge corruption in Nigeria. With these and other innovative forms of support, such opportunities can potentially coalesce and deliver the genuine policy reforms and societal changes to make meaningful gains in the fight for transparency and accountability.

## Notes

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