



TFDC Policy Briefing

In partnership with the DRC on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability

Nigeria: In Search of Citizens?

Around the world a growing crisis of legitimacy characterises the relationship between citizens and the institutions that affect their lives. The project of defining, indeed of understanding citizenship in Nigeria is an engagement in a journey of disconnects between a primal conception of an indigenous sense of being and the notion of an entity beyond that confine of autochthonousness. In response to this gap between citizens and their institutions, people are struggling to find new forms of citizenship, participation and accountability.



Nigeria's transition to civilian rule in 1999 brought new opportunities for democratisation, citizens' voice and rights. With democratisation came potential for harnessing the nation's vast assets - rich natural and human resources, ethnic and religious diversity for social and economic development. Yet, after four years of civilian rule, Nigeria is still struggling to realise this potential.

Working with communities across Nigeria, the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA) and its research centre, Theatre for Development Centre (TFDC) at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria have sought to understand why a nation with such assets remains a nation with millions of people suffering political exclusion, voicelessness and poverty. This research is part of an international Development Research Centre on *Citizenship, Participation and Accountability*, involving academic and civil society institutions in Nigeria, Mexico, Bangladesh, India, Brazil, South Africa and the UK. Through comparative and participatory research, it seeks to explore new forms of citizenship that help make rights real for poor people.

As Awolowo said back in 1947, 'Nigeria is a mere geographical expression'. This assertion

was borne out in the research TFDC/NPTA carried out in communities across Nigeria. People feel very little sense of identification with 'being Nigerian'. Moreover, being a 'Nigerian citizen' in the contemporary context does not secure the rights and entitlements that should be provided by government. Instead, people are pushed to seek their social and personal security within their more immediate social networks ethnicity, kinship and community thereby strengthening the group identifications that so often result in violent conflicts in the face of exacerbating poverty.

Tackling the problem of citizenship in Nigeria requires dramatic change in the practices and policies of government. The peoples of Nigeria are calling for their rights to good governance, democracy, participation and accountability. It is their right that the government listens and responds to their demands, and it is the responsibility of the government to be accountable to their needs and to make citizenship and rights real for all Nigerian people.

CITIZENSHIP, IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Most people in Nigeria associate more with their ethnic and religious group, and their community

Key Issues

- The indigeneity-based definition of state citizenship within the Constitution is at the heart of the denial of citizenship rights for many people.
- Nigerian citizens have unequal access to rights. Indeed, access to rights are so linked to ethnicity, religion, wealth, status and connections to those in political office that they are widely conceived as 'privileges'.
- Enabling citizens to *claim* their rights to participate requires that the government implement appropriate and accessible mechanisms for citizen engagement
- Good governance rests on accountability at all levels of government. Access and rights to information are the basis of accountability.
- There are constitutional provisions that put certain social and economic responsibilities on government. However, the rights are not justiciable. There should therefore be legal and constitutional means of protecting and enforcing these rights for Nigerians to have a meaningful sense of citizenship.
- Socio-cultural norms deny the majority of Nigerian women their rights to participate in governance, to demand government resources or to contest for political office.



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and clan, than with Nigeria as a nation. People cannot point to what being a Nigerian has done for them and so feel little sense of belonging to the nation.

Citizenship and Ethnicity is a central identity for most people in Nigeria. Community members explained that their ethnic groups are their primary *locus* of belonging. This is related not only to language, ancestry and traditions, but also to the reality that it is in the ethnic group and clan that their trust, social security and rights to land and other productive resources lie.

Indigeneity: The Constitution itself defines citizenship in terms of place of ancestral origin. Being born in a State and living and working there all your life does not grant a person indigene status of that State. In Nigeria, so long as it is not your state of ancestral origin, you remain a 'foreigner': a non-indigene who is not entitled to the rights and benefits enjoyed by those perceived to be 'bona fide' owners of the state. This perpetuates the strength of people's ethnic identification and, as seen in the Warri crisis, the dangers of the fragile relationship between citizenship, indigeneity and residency rights. People who now work and reside in States to which they can't claim ancestral roots face the harsh realities that:

- Their children cannot access school scholarships;
- Even if a 'non-indigene' has a government job, it is given on a contract basis

Ethnic minorities, even within their State of ancestral origin, have little access to political representation and suffer social and economic exclusion and powerlessness at the hands of political patronage and group-based politics.

Ethnicity and local citizenship: In rural and peri-urban areas, people explained that a 'newcomer' gaining the status of 'local citizen' is dependent on their being accepted by the local community. A prerequisite of this acceptance is assimilation to the dominant local religion and traditions and, in some communities would only be possible if actually initiated into the ethnic group.

The status of local citizenship brings forth locally-inscribed rights to contest for local government, and strengthens access to both the resources and decision-making of local government. In communities where ethnic minorities at the national level are the local majority, such policing of local citizenship appears to be in part a reaction to their political and economic exclusion from the nation-state:

"We cannot be citizens in their area, we have no rights there, why should we give them citizenship here in our place?"

Citizenship and Religion: The 1980s saw a large rise in religious fundamentalism in Nigeria. Since this time we have witnessed the increasingly ardent use of religion as a political tool by successive military and civilian governments. Using emotive labels and symbols to fan religious sentiments, Nigeria's leaders mobilise and support religious groupings for their own political gains. Yet, it is the poor who are the victims of this religious violence, and it is their social relations, properties, livelihoods and lives that are being destroyed.

Religious-legal pluralism & national disunity: The recent upscaling of *Shari'a* law and customary courts in many of the northern states has created a new layer of complexity for citizenship and governance in Nigeria. Catalysing violence and destruction, this turn to religious legal-pluralism in a supposedly secular state is exacerbating Nigeria's disunity at the local, regional and national levels.

Religious bias in resource allocations: Religion plays a pivotal role in providing security and access to power, resources and services. People who find themselves to be religious minorities in their

Ethnic diversity, religious pluralism- A flashpoint for civil and religious unrest.

Ethnic strifes, resource control battles.



community, state or region struggle in vain for their rightful share of national resources. This is particularly evident where the religion of traditional and political leaders interlock to create a powerful system of exclusion.

Citizenship and Gender: Gender plays a central role in determining the rights and entitlements of citizenship in the contemporary Nigerian context.

Gender and local citizenship: At the local level, cultural-religious ideas about women's roles in society often prohibit women's participation in community decision-making, access to rights and control over resources. Such ideas and practices are also visible in the workings of local governments. Women across Nigeria spoke of their failed struggles to gain access to local government resources, their frustrating experiences of councillors being 'deaf' to their voices, and their resulting exclusion from the rights of citizenship.

Many Muslim women spoke of their citizenship being determined through their husband or father: Her citizenship of a community is gained through marriage, and lost and reverted to her father's community on divorce. In many Christian communities too, full-citizenship of the local community is a male privilege: determined by initiation into the clan. In effect, women are second-class citizens in Nigeria: citizens only through virtue of their ties to men. Women spoke of the pressure they feel to vote for the candidate of their husband's choice. Particularly in Muslim communities, local norms sometimes preclude women from voting altogether.

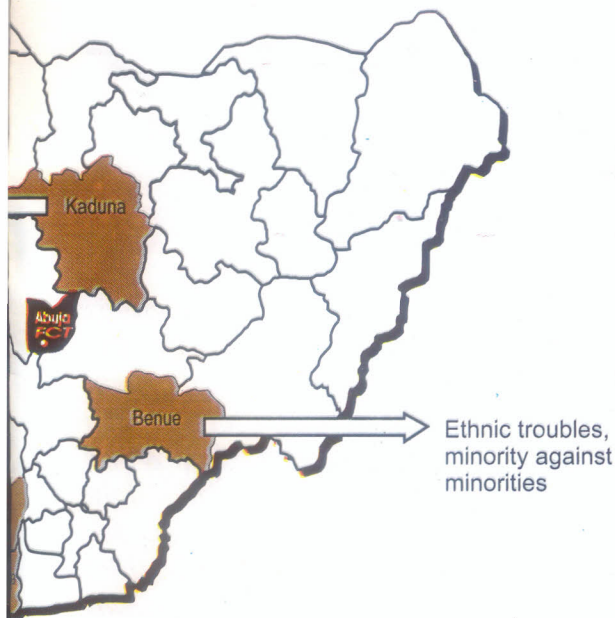
Gender bias in government: Women are sorely under-represented in government positions in Nigeria. This is not only a clear indication of the gender bias in the Nigerian society and in governance; it exacerbates women's sense and reality of exclusion from the rights and entitlements of citizenship, and belonging to the nation. The government's proclaimed intention to implement a quota for female representation in government and the public service in order to increase women's access and rights to political representation has largely remained at the level of rhetoric.

CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS

Inclusive citizenship implies that all citizens have equal access to equal rights and entitlements, *regardless* of their sex, religion, ethnic or other affiliations. The Nigerian Constitution states that:

'Every citizen shall have equality of rights, obligations & opportunities before the law'

Yet, the reality in Nigeria is that citizenship is shaped by exclusions, discriminations and class divisions. Most Nigerian people are denied their rights to expression, to information, to demand basic services, and to participate in the decision-making processes of government. Indeed, many Nigerian people, especially in rural areas, are *unaware* of their rights and entitlements as citizens.



Rights and privileges: Given the bias and corruption at all levels of government in Nigeria, it is hardly surprising that many Nigerian people conceive of rights as 'privileges'. Privileges are tied to whom you know, your position in society, wealth and education. Indigeneity confers the strongest sense of the rights to have rights. Once a person crosses cultural, political or ethnic boundaries, they lose their power to demand rights. Thus, it is the poorest, least educated, and those living away from their kin, ironically those most in need, that suffer most through their powerlessness to demand their rights.

Rights and belonging: Many people explained that it is access to citizenship rights that would give them a sense of belonging to the nation. Sadly, youth who feel that their 'privileges' of expression and rights are being denied are taking to alcoholism, drug abuse and thuggery. Others spoke of their fears of demanding their rights:

'I would rather live peacefully with my family in poverty than be harassed, or even killed for trying to assert my rights'.

As a result of the state failing to provide the enabling environment in which citizens can demand their rights and to demand security for their property and person, Nigerian the people of are finding that their only option is to retreat from the state. Disenfranchised groups are creating parallel social, cultural, political and economic structures: mediated through self-government, their own judicial systems, vigilante groups, black-market networks and fundamentalist religious and self-help groups.

CITIZENSHIP PARTICIPATION

For the majority of Nigerian people, there are few avenues and opportunities to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. Many speak of *never* having been consulted on any aspect of local government policy or spending. It is only ethnic and religious patronage, status, education, wealth and connections to those in political office that grant a level of access to participate in governance. Those lacking such 'privileged' positionalities find themselves voiceless and powerless.

Even elections are more a play of power and financial persuasion than a demonstration of commitment to democracy. People spoke of being used by candidates for political office:

'We are co-opted to participate in the elections. Once the elections are over, we are abandoned. The leaders ignore us until another election comes knocking'.

Since government appointments are gained not through popular support but rather god-fatherism, ethnic leaning and political connections, those who find themselves in power pay allegiances to their benefactors.

Traditional leaders & participation: In many areas, the practices of local government are inextricably linked to traditional ruling structures. Whilst people have no knowledge of the financial

allocations of local government, what many *do* know is that a good relationship with the traditional authority may bring a well, clinic or culvert. It is in the courts of traditional leaders that the civil authorities seek blessing and endorsement for what to do, and what happens in the government is designed, dictated and implemented. While people feel a strong belonging and citizenship within their local community and ethnic group, they feel highly estranged from the civil government and from the current 'democratic' dispensation. Since ordinary voices hold no weight, people place their rights of expression and participation in the hands of the elite.

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

An accountable government is at the centre of democracy and inclusive citizenship. All citizens have the right that government is accountable and responsive to their needs and demands, and the right of access to effective systems of redress in cases of mismanagement, bias or corruption. The reality in Nigeria is that the political system, at all levels of governance, is swathed in corruption, bias and a lack of accountability.

Accountability, information & education: Information is the basis of participation and accountability. In Nigeria information is the preserve of those in political office. Many Nigerians speak of having no knowledge of what resources are harnessed at the local government, or how these resources are spent. What they do know is that they pay taxes, and that many government officials appear to be benefiting from these taxes and Federal transfers; they also know that such benefits are very often for personal use. A lack of rights to information about government processes and finances enables corruption and the mismanagement of resources. And even with rights to information, education is crucial to enable people to use such rights to hold government accountable, and to make other rights claims.

Accountability, justice & redress: Nigerian people sense little recourse to justice, and fear and lack of

trust in the state preclude their calling on government to be accountable and responsive to their needs and demands. People speak of how difficult it is to control the elected once they are in power. The procedures for redress are difficult, too cumbersome and not designed to succeed. If the process were simple, the elected would feel pressure to perform for fear of redress and recall. At the heart of the ability and will to demand accountability therefore lies a number of predicate factors.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT & ALLOCATIONS

Control and management of natural resources are at the heart of the crises and conflicts that plague contemporary Nigeria. At the centre of this problematic are struggles of groups to receive their due share of resource allocations.

Oil and resource allocations: Control over oil resources, the largest source of Nigeria's income, has long been a source of tension. The contemporary framework for revenue sharing de-emphasises the principle of derivation which recognises the source of incomes and the rights of the local people to a preferential share of it. Thus, the people of the oil producing areas benefit less from oil revenues than the majority ethnicities who enjoy state power. Yet, they are the people whose lands and rivers are being polluted due to its extraction. This and other factors underlie their clamour for the rights to participate in the processes which affect and shape their lives and livelihoods.

Control and ownership of land: Control and ownership of land is also a central cause of friction among ethnic groups. As the term 'sons of the soil' implies, land is pivotal to senses of belonging and indigeneity, and thus to the power to claim rights on the basis of their citizenship status at the local level. It is the failure of the state to provide citizens with their rights and entitlements that heightens the centrality of land, of indigeneity, to the power to claim rights. And it is the lack of state protection over property and person that leads people to fight for control over their lands.



Required Changes In Government Policy

Constitutional redefinition of citizenship:

The indigeneity-based definition of state citizenship within the Constitution is at the heart of the denial of citizenship rights for many people. It is vital that the definition of state citizenship within the Constitution is changed to one that grants equal rights to all Nigerian citizens who reside in the state, *regardless* of ancestral links to land, or other sources of status and power.

Equal access to rights: Nigerian citizens have unequal access to rights. Indeed, access to rights are so linked to ethnicity, religion, wealth, status and connections to those in political office that they are widely conceived as 'privileges'. Inclusive citizenship requires that the government implement policies and procedures to combat unequal access to citizenship rights:

- Awareness raising programmes for government officials and citizens that make clear that all citizens have equal rights;
- Constitutionally inscribed citizen rights to call for redress in the case of the denial of rights based on ethnicity, religion, gender or other sources of bias.

Rights to participate in governance: Participatory democracy hinges on Constitutional rights to participate in governance. Enabling citizens to claim their rights to participate requires that the government implement appropriate and accessible mechanisms for citizen engagement:

- Constitutional requirements that local government make decisions with communities;
- Institutionalised systems for participatory budgeting at local government level;
- Broad-based citizen consultations around State and Federal government policy-making.

Accountability & systems for redress: Good governance rests on accountability at all levels of government. Access and rights to information are the basis of accountability. In terms of fiscal accountability, this requires:

- Compulsory public declaration of government accounts.
- Constitutionally inscribed citizenship rights to question and challenge officials on the use of public funds
- Simplified procedures through which citizens can hold government to account, and call for redress and recall in cases of mismanagement and corruption.

Rights to information & justice: Information about government budgets, policies and

decision-making processes is the basis of democracy, participation and accountability. Nigerian citizens require secure rights to such information, and rights to use this information to call the government to account. The *Whistle Blowers Bill* presented to the Senate would protect people who speak out against corruption and mismanagement, thus enabling citizens to use their rights to information effectively and without fear.

Quality education for all citizens: Access to good quality education is a fundamental social right of all citizens. Education is the basis of consciousness and enables citizens to participate in governance, make effective use of their rights and entitlements, and to hold government to account. Specific actions on the part of government include:

- Increased Federal transfers to education as a first step to enable quality education for all;
- In order that education can be meaningful, it is necessary that rights to quality education be linked to rights to employment.
- Whereas one recognises that the bill on UBE is targeted at increasing educational attainment in the country, it places responsibilities on parents without any obligations on government to meet its own responsibilities failing which it could be held accountable.

Socio-economic rights: There are constitutional provisions that put certain social and economic responsibilities on government. However, the rights are not justiciable. There should therefore be legal and constitutional means of protecting and enforcing these rights for Nigerians to have a meaningful sense of citizenship.

Good governance: Corruption, bias and mismanagement at all levels of government deny Nigerian citizens their rights to good governance. Promoting good governance requires:

- Institutionalised anti-corruption mechanisms;
- Constitutional requirements that government be responsive to citizen's needs and demands

Promotion of women's citizenship: Socio-cultural norms deny the majority of Nigerian women their rights to participate in governance, to demand government resources or to contest for political office. For many women, their citizenship of a local area, and even their vote, is in practice determined through their male-kin. Granting women their rights to full-citizenship requires:

- Female quotas for government appointments;
- Programmes to raise awareness among citizens and government of women's rights to participate in public affairs, and to enhance women's confidence and sense of their capabilities to do so effectively.

TFDC Policy Briefings are published by the Theatre for Development Centre (Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance), to highlight key policy issues for debate and possibly, action. This briefing was produced in conjunction with the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability. For further information go to <http://www.npta-cda.org>

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