

Towards Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria: Role of CSOs and VOPEs

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Abstract: This paper examines the roles of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Voluntary Organizations for Professionals Evaluation (VOPEs) towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria. The paper identified the roles of the CSOs to include: providing support towards improved public transparency and accountability; creating awareness among government agencies and the general public about the SGDs; mobilizing private sector involvement; monitoring of projects under the SGDs; empowering the marginalized populations by giving voice to their concerns; and strengthening the fight against corruption. The paper identified the roles of the VOPEs to include: training, re-training and capacity of staff; creating adequate and credible data management system to aid planning, monitoring and evaluation; monitoring developmental projects to ensure accountability and standardization; organizing workshops for cross learning and experience sharing among practitioners; and supporting monitoring and evaluation ownership and utilization of evaluation results.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; Civil Society Organizations; Voluntary Organizations for Professionals Evaluation; Nigeria.

JEL Codes: O11; O19; N17

INTRODUCTION

The year 2015 marked the end of the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which began in September 2000, when the world mobilized around a common program to overcome poverty by 2015. The need to consolidate and complete the development progress driven by the MDGs and ensure that no one is left behind led world leaders gathered at the UN Headquarters in New York in September 2015 to adopt a new program on sustainable development. This new Development Agenda includes 17 new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will guide the development policy and financing, for the next 15 years (i.e. until year 2030). A review of the MDGs implementation in Nigeria reveals that the country has registered mixed results across the goals, geographic areas and gender groups. Despite progress on some indicators, many of the goals and targets have not been met. Uneze and Adeniran [1] identified Nigeria as one of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa that performed dismally on the MDGs, despite its high domestic revenue. Given that the objectives of the SDGs are more in number compared to those of the MDGs, achieving them requires mechanisms for robust follow-up and review process to track progress. This in turn means that governments will need the broad involvement of other stakeholders, such as Civil Society Organizations

(CSOs) and the Voluntary Organizations for Professionals Evaluation (VOPEs) to achieve effective and efficient monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs. Most CSOs represent the needs of underrepresented communities and regions. This makes them critical partners in ensuring that SDG strategies target the needs of all segments of society and ensuring accountability for SDG implementation. Second, CSOs have extensive experience in delivering services to the poor and can recommend appropriate interventions in different parts of the country. Also, key lessons learned from the MDGs underscore that high-quality, disaggregated data is essential to ensure equitable progress against goals and targets [2]. Experience from the implementation of the MDGs reveals the absence of established baseline data for monitoring and evaluation process for tracking progress despite the fact that the process of managing a successive project requires monitoring and evaluation. In this regard, the VOPEs that usually have great mix of experienced evaluators both locally and abroad including informal network of public, private and academic evaluators have a role to play in developing a national monitoring framework and accompanying set of national indicators. Given the foregoing, the objective of this paper is to explore the roles of CSOs and VOPEs towards achieving the SDGs in Nigeria.

CSOs in Nigeria: An overview

Nigeria's history of struggle and resistance was primarily led by civil society groups. CSOs formation and activities date back to the colonial period when different groups, sometimes locally and internationally based, and at other times transcending clan and 'tribal' boundaries, became part of the nationalist protest against the representative colonial state. In the immediate post-independence period, CSOs engaged in community 'self-help' activities, provided humanitarian assistance at the grassroots level. Between the 1980s and 1990s civil society played three important roles. First, it played a leading role in mobilizing the poor and their organizations against unpopular economic policies within the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) framework. Second, a plethora of civic groups and associations including grassroots, community-based associations, and faith-based associations emerged providing assistance to their members and the poor, in the absence of reliable government 'safety nets' or welfare systems. Third, and most importantly, civil society organizations have played a critical role in the expansion of the political space [3]. This is not to say that the activities of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Nigeria since the 1930s are in doubt. However, their activities were mostly limited to social clubs and organizations as established by various missionary institutions operating in the country. As at then, they were not officially classified as NGOs, but as Nationalist Movements whose activities were the precursors of contemporary Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Nigeria. Indeed, in terms of operational dynamics and ideological definition of sorts, contemporary CSOs borrowed a lot from the Nationalist Movements. These CSOs are seen to champion various courses and in so many instances

their ideologies and approaches are seen to be very similar while at other times quite conflicting. As such there was the need to harmonize and synergize their roles and approaches. In recent time, CSOs have played notable roles in promoting development programs in Nigeria. For instance, the Lagos State Civil Society Coalition (LACSOP) which is a platform of major civil society networks in Lagos committed to adding value to development efforts in Lagos State. Since its establishment in 2007, LACSOP programmes have been targeted at increasing and sustaining access points for informed citizens-government engagements. They coordinate citizens' demands for pro-poor delivery and promote ownership of governance processes through collaborative interventions with the executive, legislature and the media and by conducting independent assessments of government's performance. Also, the Civil Society Coalition for Poverty Eradication (CISCOPE) came into existence in 2002 in the wake of the nation's effort to prepare its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The coalition was formed principally to engage the PRSP process with a view to promoting pro-poor policies and to ensure that the views and concerns of the citizenry inform the direction and content of public policies. With the termination of the PRSP process in Nigeria, and the introduction of comprehensive framework for socio-economic reform under the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), CISCOPE was committed to deepening consultations among the Nigerian people in general, and bringing the views and perspectives of civil society organizations to bear on the process of developing an inclusive, participatory and transparent strategy for promoting broad based economic growth.

Table-1: Sustainable Development Goals

Goal	Indicator
Goal 1.	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
Goal 2	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
Goal 3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
Goal 4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all
Goal 5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
Goal 6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
Goal 7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all
Goal 8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
Goal 9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
Goal 10	Reduce inequality within and among countries
Goal 11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
Goal 12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
Goal 13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
Goal 14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
Goal 15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
Goal 16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
Goal 17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Source: Sustainable Development Solutions Network

What Role can CSOs play in achieving these SDGs?

CSOs can play a numbers of roles in achieving SDGs. These roles are discussed briefly below:

CSOs in Service Delivery towards Achieving SDGs

UNCDF [4] and Save the Children [5] argue that as national governments hold primary responsibility for delivering services in their country, the private sector, communities and CSOs also play a key role, particularly in situations where governments lack capacity, capability or the will to provide essential services for their citizens. Engaging CSOs in developmental programs is a critical underpinning factor in: building the climate for investment, job opportunities and sustainable growth, and investing in poor people and empowering them to participate in development. This is particularly relevant to promoting the Corporate Advocacy Priorities of public sector governance, empowerment, security, social inclusion, education, and health. This is in view of the fact that CSOs are perceived as important channel for delivery of social services and implementation of other development programs, particularly in areas where either there is no government presence or weak capacity. Thus, there is need for CSOs to advocate for states that have development plan to align their plan with the SDGs and look for area of convergence so they can meet the SDGs as they are implementing their development plan. For states that do not have development plan in place, CSOs can advocate for the need for their yearly budget to align with the SDGs and also ensure states work towards meeting those targets.

CSOs and Accountability

CSOs can support in improving public transparency and accountability of development activities, and thus contributing to the enabling environment for good governance. The increasing international focus and emphasis on better governance and transparency of governments and even CSOs has opened doors for CSOs involved in accountability. In a nutshell, involving CSOs in development and strengthening their “watchdog” role is now widely accepted by the international community as an essential component of promoting good governance and attracting more donors funding. Most of the NGOs receive a lot funding in the name of the poor. The only danger lies in intermediary CSOs that may be preoccupied with “upward” accountability to donors at the expense of “downward” accountability to the very poor people and local constituencies they represent. Moreover, constant pressures of fundraising, weak management skills and difficulties in scaling up operations can pose limit is to CSOs’ effectiveness and accountability

Creating Awareness

Many government agencies and parastatals including private sector are not aware of the SDGs and even when they are aware they either lack

understanding of what SDGs stand for or have apathy towards the SDGs. DFID has been supporting in creating awareness there is also equal need for CSOs to use their broad networks to engage in awareness campaign and sensitization of the general public. To achieve this, CSOs can partners with media organization. As an addition to the above role, CSOs can also strengthen and leverage on the impact of development programs by providing local knowledge, identifying potential risks, targeting assistance, and expanding reach, particularly at the community level;

Mobilizing Private Sector Involvement

CSOs need to understand SDGs and align their activities with the SDGs so they can engage the government and look for issues that have traction so other players like private sector can engage in because one of the shortcomings of the MDGs is the minimal involvement of the private sector in the process. In addition, CSOs can promote public consensus and local ownership for reforms and for national poverty reduction and development strategies by creating knowledge-sharing networks, building common ground for understanding, encouraging public-private cooperation, and sometimes even diffusing tensions.

Empowerment Role

The goal number one of SDG is to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, CSOs actions are needed to strengthen the political role of the poor and to make state institutions more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the poor. Processes of accountability and legal institutions defending the rights of the poor and vulnerable members of the society must be strengthened. Social barriers to poverty reduction, such as discrimination against women in the job marketplace, need to be removed. Civil Society Groups need to engage policy and decision makers to make this a reality in Nigeria. CSOs can give voice to the concerns of primary and secondary stakeholders, particularly poor and marginalized populations, and help ensure that their views are factored into policy and program decisions;

Monitoring role

There is need for proper monitoring of projects under the SDG. Project monitoring means the assessment of the performance of a project to ascertain its conformity with stated objectives or goals. Monitoring is very relevant and vital process for ensuring continuity, feedback for planning future projects and achieving sustainable development generally. Effective Monitoring process properly instituted or incorporated into the design or planning of an infrastructure project will create feedback and learning culture from the project inception to completion by all stakeholders thereby promoting the benefit of continuous learning, better communication, planning and coordination on government policies and programs. CSOs can play monitoring and evaluation

role by ensure the implementation of the SDGs on yearly basis. Arowolo [6] argues that CSOs have the important role of directly monitoring the local implementation of the SDGs. According to Motala *et al.* [7], CSOs can produce shadow reports, particularly when it believes that a country report is inadequate and does not highlight the plight of the poorest and most marginalized citizens. One clear instance of this was a case of LACSOP which technically analyzed the Lagos State 2014 budget and documented report of findings with key recommendations representing people's charter. This report informed the content of Lagos State House of Assembly 2015 Appropriation Bill as well as the budget submitted by the Executive through the Ministry of economic Planning and Budget.

Fighting Corruption

Historically, corruption has been blamed for all that is wrong with Nigeria. For instance, the persistent and continuing decay in social overhead, rising unemployment and poverty levels, rising wave of insecurity, and the unacceptably high level of hardship in Nigeria are said to be products of corruption. As the voice of the voiceless and defender of the defenseless, the CSOs are better positioned to engage public sector institutions, especially those directly involved in the fight against corruption. Such engagements will help in strengthening state institutions against the socio-political and economic monster called corruption. This paper stresses that until corruption is defeated in Nigeria, other efforts geared towards achieving the SDGs, however described, will be futile.

Role of VOPEs towards Achieving SDGS

Training, re-training and capacity building of staff

Voluntary Organizations Professional Evaluators (VOPEs) is a professional body that has great mix of experienced evaluators both locally and abroad including informal network of public, private and academic evaluators. According to UNICEF [8], VOPEs are established by evaluation practitioners, that is, people who make their living by doing or commissioning evaluations, who self-organize to discuss and share professional experiences and challenges and to jointly advance the profession and develop professional standards. VOPE do organize events like conferences, workshops and seminars, and publications which provide a platform for professional exchange. This exchange according to UNICEF [8] advances the professional capacity of more experienced evaluators and the learning of those who are new to the profession. VOPEs can serves as training platform by supporting appropriate training and capacity building programmes need of delivery staff and other stakeholders in order to enhance their productivity and efficiency in implementing SDGs programmes and projects.

Issue of inadequate and unreliable data system:

Ajiye [9] argues that Nigeria does not have adequate data or systems to collect and analyze data and

this makes planning and implementing measures to meet the MDG targets particularly difficult. Phillips [10] argues that the disappearance of disciplined collection and analysis of data for national planning and development hinders the efforts to plan and track progress towards the MDG targets because the available is not reliable or consistent. This problem was attributed to the fact that the capacity of institutions to gather data is very weak, and as a result the data available are not very reliable or consistent. For instance, assessment of progress towards achieving the MDGs since 2006 and the recent assessment of the Conditional Grants Scheme (CGS) consistently reflects the inadequacy of data [10]. This underscores the critical need for quality data both for planning programmes and projects, and for monitoring. Furthermore, Easterly [11], Sanga [12] and Sachs [13] state that insufficient use of data and differences in indicator values between national and international sources hampered the MDG process. VOPEs can support data collection just as the "traditional" forms of large-scale data collection take a number of years to complete and analyse, which ultimately delays action for those in need as reported by Sustainable Development Solutions Network [2], the new improved information technology, such as the innovative use of mobile technology in collecting data, if the associated challenges can be managed adequately can be adopted by VOPEs as adaptable tools for data collection, monitoring and evaluation of processes related to the implementation of the SDGs. UN [8] argues that the use of mobile technology to collect data can create an opportunity to enhance statistics for accountability and decision-making purposes and to create new forms of participatory monitoring.

Monitoring and Evaluation Role

To achieve the SDGs, successful execution of projects that have direct and indirect link to the SDGs is necessary. The SDGs are ends, and the projects are the necessary means to these ends. Thus, the processes of managing projects require monitoring and evaluation. These exercises are integral parts of project cycles and are important for ensuring that due process, standardization and adherence to project specifications are followed. Monitoring data help track progress, but evaluation is needed to explain results and support change. Monitoring systems are a key aspect of tracking policy and programme implementation, and rely on observable indicators. World Bank [14] define monitoring as a continuous function that uses systematic collection of data on specified indicators to provide management and the main stakeholders of an ongoing development intervention with indications of the extent of progress and achievement of objectives and progress in the use of allocated funds. In other words, monitoring refers to collecting information on a project regularly and analyzing it to find out how it is progressing. To this end, VOPEs can support in monitoring different developmental projects for accountability and to ensure that standardization and

project specifications are adhere to. Again, achievement of SDGs involves context-specific challenges. Countries need context-sensitive measures that track efforts to attain goals, and evaluation methods that help determine what is working, for whom, under what circumstances, how and why. This is where evaluation comes in. Evaluation is define as episodic (not continuous as the case with monitoring usually midterm and at end of the project) assessment of an ongoing or completed project to determine its actual impact against the planned impact (strategic goal or objectives for which it was implemented) efficiency, sustainability, effectiveness [15]. UNDP [16] summarized the purposes of evaluation as: to improve performance and achieve results, measure and assess performance in order to effectively manage the outcomes and outputs of development results, to focus on assessing the contribution of various factors to a given development outcome with such factors including outputs, partnerships, policy advice and dialogue, advocacy and brokering/ coordination and to determine whether the effects of the project are intended or unintended and whether the results are positive or negative to the target. The importance of evaluation is to assess the relative success of program in meeting the stated objectives and also to identify what can be improved upon in the plan or program. Evaluation helps one to understand change, both anticipated and unanticipated, and plan for what happens next. It does this by establishing why the level of performance is being achieved, what difference is being made, what has been learned, and what to do next in the implementation of a policy or programme [17]. Malaolu [18] argues that one major challenge in impact evaluation which cut across developing countries including Nigeria is paucity of skilled evaluators. Hardlife and Zhou [19] state that monitoring and evaluation is a technical field, which demands much of skilled personnel. It is critically important that those engaged in evaluations have the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to support effective practice, which is evaluation capacity. Thus, VOPEs being group of skilled evaluators can support in evaluation of projects that are linked to the SDGs. VOPEs using adaptive management can help governments to explore emerging and alternative ways to meet objectives and targets, using knowledge from monitoring and evaluation to develop new understanding and appropriate ways of acting and also maintaining stakeholder involvement in follow-up and review processes that will help national governments select the most relevant indicators, take informed decisions and foster widespread ownership of the development agenda.

Organize Workshop for Cross Learning and Experience Sharing among Practitioners

One of the benefits of conducting evaluation is having knowledge of what worked and what went wrong which serves as lessons to be learned from both success and failure perspectives, and also looks for best practices which can be applied elsewhere. Therefore,

VOPEs can serve as a hub where evaluators on different programmes/projects and other relevant bodies converge to share experiences which can serve as feedbacks and lessons for improvement of programmes evaluation and subsequent strengthening of evaluation practice in Nigeria. This validates the submission of Kariuki [20] that evaluators should seek to improve their competencies in order to provide the highest level of performance in their evaluation through workshops, self-studies, evaluation of one's own practice and working with other evaluators to learn from their skills and experience. Development of such capacities is to assist lesson learning from ongoing or past projects and programs and, through these lessons, to adjust these projects and programs in such a manner that they can achieve their planned objectives and/or improve the quality of the design of future projects. In addition, VOPEs can foster interaction and collaboration between evaluation experts, practitioners and other development stakeholders

Supporting M&E ownership and Utilization of Evaluation Results

It has widely been demonstrated that there is probability of using evaluation results if decision-makers have a strong sense of "ownership" or belonging. One of the essential elements of successful evaluation is ownership of the M&E process by all the stakeholders such as sectors, implementing entities, governments and donor agencies. This is lacking in Nigeria even though there appears to be gesture regarding governments in Nigeria developing stronger endogenous demand for evidence generated from M&E systems. There is need for active involvement of key stakeholders such as project managers, policy makers, community members, and program participants in order to increase the usefulness of evaluation results. The role VOPEs can play in this regard is to embark on awareness campaign and lobby at federal and state levels of government in order to stimulate the interest of the policy makers and to dilute their illusion regarding seeing evaluation business as donor agencies business there by ensuring universal application of evaluation results for decision- making in program implementation and budgeting. VOPEs can also assist in disseminating M&E results to all stakeholders. Policy makers can then apply the information to pursue evidence-based decision-making.

CONCLUSION

CSOs and VOPES have important roles to play in the achievement of SDGs in Nigeria. The roles CSOs can play are summarized as follows. CSOs can use their broad networks to engage in awareness campaign and sensitization of the general public on SDGs. CSOs can also strengthen and leverage impact of development programs by providing local knowledge, identifying potential risks, targeting assistance, and expanding reach, particularly at the community level. CSOs can promote public consensus and local ownership for

reforms and for national poverty reduction and development strategies by creating knowledge-sharing networks, building common ground for understanding, encouraging public-private cooperation, and sometimes even diffusing tensions. More so, CSOs can give voice to the concerns of primary and secondary stakeholders, particularly poor and marginalized populations, and help ensure that their views are factored into policy and program decisions. Lastly, CSOs can play monitoring and evaluation role by ensuring the implementation of the SDGs on yearly basis, and strengthening the fight against corruption. However, for CSOs to be able to play the roles identified above; there is need for a detailed CSO capacity needs assessment for institutional strengthening to be carried out and training conducted to match these needs before more funds are put in for SDG specific efforts. This is to ensure transparency and efficiency in the utilization of donor funds and downward and upward accountability of CSOs active in the implementation of SDG specific projects and/or programmes. Also, it is important for CSOs to meet from time to time to share resources, experiences, exchange information and strategize together on how best they can bolster each other's work which is largely complimentary. Series of sensitization need to be carried out to debunk the competition mentality that is part and parcel of CSOs in the Nigeria. Besides, VOPEs can serve as training platform by supporting appropriate training and capacity building programmes need to delivery staff and other stakeholders in order to enhance their productivity and efficiency in implementing SDGs programmes and projects. VOPEs can support data collection and also play Monitoring and Evaluation Roles.

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