Accountability Brief

*A Policy Brief from the **Civil Society Situation Room and Nigeria's 2019 Elections: Issues and Pathways***

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Civil Society Situation Room and Nigeria's 2019 Elections: Issues and Pathways

Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the emergence of civil society situation rooms with specific reference to elections in Nigeria. It highlights some of the key drawbacks associated with the multiplicity of situation rooms in the country, at a time that the collective voices of civil society is required in the struggle towards deepening electoral democracy in the Country.

Introduction

The idea of a situation room emanated from the United States. Since its establishment in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy, the situation room became very necessary and prominent against backdrop of the lack of real time intelligence and information for monitoring and dealing with crisis in a more coordinated manner. This reality defined the basis and logic for making it the nerve-centre for the collection, processing and analysis of information[1].

Over time, the need to set up a situation room became a standard practice for both governmental and non-governmental entities, in the light of the value they bring to bear in decision-making processes. With specific reference to Nigeria and civil society in particular, the Civil Society Situation Room was established in the run up to the 2011 elections as a platform for ensuring and enhancing a coordinated effort for civil society groups working on election and election-related issues before, during and in the aftermath of the elections. In fact, the idea was to have a unified platform to discuss issues of concern and come up with joint responses[1].

In the words of a respondent:

> *Situation rooms are platforms that provide an opportunity for civil society to come together based on a common vision. Through such platforms, the big and small organisations are able to articulate a common action plan. Though, if not managed well, they create huge challenges in terms of the type of data and information they collate, the methodology they adopt, as what they really do with the data and information, they generate[1].*

In the context of the elections, one of the most important aspects of a situation room is that it gives legitimacy and credibility to the electoral process. Though, the biggest challenge has to do with the inability of the civil society to harmonize their efforts in ways that builds synergy, coupled with the fact that the concentration of the situation rooms in Abuja, with little linkage to civil society groups at the state levels has been a major problematic[1].

It is in the light of the foregoing that this policy brief examines the emergence of civil society situation rooms with specific reference to elections in Nigeria. It highlights some of the key drawbacks associated with the multiplicity of situation rooms in the country, at a time that the collective voice of civil society is required in the struggle towards deepening electoral democracy in the country.

Overview of Some Civil Society Situation Rooms[2]:

In the run up to the 2019 elections, there was a proliferation of situation rooms within government, political parties and civil societies[3]:

Organisations / Institutions	Nature of Activity	Tasks Undertaken
Transition Monitoring Group	Receiving and analysing field reports from election observers.	Collated field reports through elections observed deployed to the focal states.
CLEEN Foundation	Receiving and processing security related reports from the field within the framework of the Security Threat Assessment (STA).	Relied on information from observers in the field as well as media reports.
Yar'Adua Centre / Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA)	Tracking incidences related to violence in the field.	Tracked incidences of violence through field personnel, security

YIAGA Africa	Collation and analysis of data using the Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) methodology	agencies and the media. Collated data from observers in the field across all states of the federation using statistical methodology.
Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room (NCSR)	Receiving and processing of data and reports from the field on all aspects of the elections.	Received information through other civil society partners in the field, as well as media reports that were tracked.

Key Findings and Challenges to the Operations of Situation Rooms

Though situation rooms have been critical in the provision of real time information, data and intelligence in Nigeria, there are key challenges that have made it difficult to harness their positive values. This has to do with:

Unevenness in Experience and Capacity

One common feature of the situation room lies in the unevenness in terms of their experiences and capacities. Organisations such as the NCSR, CLEEN Foundation have been active since 2011 with respect to the establishment and operation of situation rooms[4]. Prior to the 2019 elections many of the organisations that established situation rooms in 2019 were part of the NSRC. There were concerns to the effect that they had to set up their own situation room due to what was termed inadequacies in the way and manner the NSRC was managed. Notwithstanding this concerns, the NSRC has enjoyed the benefits of having the experience and expertise of its members, which made it a very strong voice in both 2015 and 2019 respectively[5].

Weak Synergy

Though, each of the situation rooms talked about collaboration and synergy building, there has not been any concrete framework or mechanism for such inter-face, beyond the mere attendance of press conferences. A clear instance of such lack of synergy was the way and manner civil society responded to the postponement of the February 16th presidential and national assembly

5. There is a sense in which since funding to the respective organisations came from different donors, the issue of having a common situation room was not on the agenda of these organisations.
6. Apart from the civil society groups, the Nigerian Army established its own situation room with the goal of providing real-time support to other security agencies during the elections within the framework of
(Operation Safe Conduct). This is line with its statutory responsibility of supporting the police as the lead agency on election security, within the framework of Military Aid to Civil Authority (MACA).

elections. There was no joint action in terms of meeting or press statement by the situation rooms[6], despite the fact that they all claimed to be working towards a 'common goal' – free, fair, credible and peaceful elections.

Absence of a Communication Strategy

One of the biggest challenges faced by the situation rooms was the absence of a coordinated communication strategy both within the civil society as well as in their engagements with INEC, security agencies, media and the citizens among others. For instance, there were

instances of conflicting timings for press conferences. Also, in the face of the postponement of the 16th February presidential and national assembly elections by INEC, civil society there was an absence of a coordinated response. Each situation room crafted its own message without necessarily exploring the possibility of a joint

statement.

Duplicity and Competition

Though the NCSR had a membership of over civil society groups as members, many of the civil societies established parallel platforms as situation rooms, undertaking tasks with similar goals just as the NCSR. A respondent was of the view that "*such an approach by civil societies that are members of the NCSR and yet went ahead to set up another platform, amounted to reinventing the wheel. Except if they are undertaking something very different from the NCSR*"[7]. In the light of the foregoing, the reality of the situation is that rather than cooperating, they compete.

The Rise of Lone Voices as against Collective Voices
Civil society have had a history of speaking with one voice, particularly during the struggle against military rule and the early years of democratization (1999 –2003), through platforms such as the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), Citizens Forum for Constitutional Reform (CFCR) and Electoral Reform Network (ERN). Unfortunately these platforms and voices waned, largely due to the multiplicity of platforms that were more concerned about speaking as independent voices.

Concerns on Follow-Ups

Though most of the organisations that set up situation rooms were able to convene press conferences and press releases, the biggest concerns has to do with the issue of follow-ups. Such follow-ups are supposed to set the agenda for post-election engagements and reforms in the

light of the findings arising from the conduct of the 2019 elections.

Pathways Towards More Effective Civil Society Situation Room(s)

In the light of the challenges highlighted above, the following recommendations are meant to help harness and improve the value associated with the role of civil society rooms as critical platforms for all civil societies contribute to the Nigeria's electoral process. These include:

Though situation rooms have been critical in the provision of real time information, data and intelligence in Nigeria, there are key challenges that have made it difficult to harness their positive values.

Stronger Synergy between and among Civil Society

Over time, synergy has been an important aspect of civil society work in Nigeria. By harnessing the values associated with synergy in terms of reducing costs, improving productivity, as well as improving their collaborative advantages respectively. This is an area that requires more strategic conversation within the civil society[8].

Robust Communication Strategy

Civil society should develop a robust communication strategy in ways that provide clarity on the nature, goal and timing of activities they are undertaking. Through such an approach, it makes it easy for the civil society organisations to better coordinate themselves and take decisions in a prompt and collective manner. Associated with this, is the fact that burden sharing is an important aspect of information and communication sharing in view of the fact that it allows for each organisation to be part of a conversation, thereby contributing to the decision-making processes.

Instill the Culture of Cooperation

The culture of cooperation is central to the success of civil society to the extent that they are able to collaborate and see themselves as partners in progress. By cooperating, civil society will be better positioned to work together towards achieving mutual benefits, as against competing against each other or one another.

7. [1]Interview with a civil society activist in Abuja 18th April 2019.
8. Interview with a member of the NCSR in Abuja 18th April 2019.
9. [1] Interview with a civil society activist in Abuja, 17th April 2019.
10. Interview with a respondent 2nd March 2019.
11. Interview with a civil society activist in Abuja 21st April 2

Amplify Collective Voices

If civil society organisations are able to speak with one voice, they are in a better position to convey the message to their targeted audience. Hence, the need for them to harmonise their efforts since their desires and goals in relation to the electoral process are presumably the same – credible and peaceful elections.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that situation rooms are important platforms for aggregating and articulating the agendas of civil societies in Nigeria. Notwithstanding the value it adds to their work, the benefits can only be harnessed and utilized when the organisations concerned work together and harmoniously. Yes, civil society represents an important voice in the Nigeria's public space. The situation rooms serve as critical vehicle for them to articulating such voices for the common good of Nigerians.