

APPRAISAL OF THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS IN PROTECTING THE VICTIMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION IN NIGERIA*

Abstract

This paper appraised of the role of non - governmental organisations (NGOs) towards protecting the victims of human rights violation in Nigeria. Some non – governmental organisations particularly the World Bank had recently approved the loan of \$ 350, 000, 000 (Three Hundred and Fifty Million Dollars) to the Nigerian government to provide accommodation and shelter for the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or victims of armed conflicts and their host communities in northern Nigeria. According to The World Bank, the loan has empowered the Nigerian government in supporting about seven million conflicts driven displaced person across selected Local Governments in Northern Nigeria. There is no any law in Nigeria which expressly allowed the application of foreign loan to social welfare in Nigeria, instead of the Nigerian government to apply its resources in addressing the root cause of the conflicts which resulted in the internal displacement and violation of human rights, it is now using a foreign loan to provide a welfare package for the displaced persons which is undoubtedly a misplacement of priority, and smart way of embezzling public funds. This paper recommended a radical amendment of our extant laws to regulate its application to the welfare of the citizenry while it is not wrong to apply foreign loan in addressing the question of human rights violation in Nigeria, it is imperative note also that such foreign loans should rather be used in addressing the root causes of such violations and their resultant effects. In achieving all these, the paper adopts a doctrinal method of research.

Keywords: Role, Non-Governmental, Organisations, Protecting, Human Rights

1. Introduction

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have, over the past few decades, become indispensable actors in the protection of human rights both within and outside Nigeria. In contexts where state institutions are either unwilling or unable to fully uphold the rights guaranteed under domestic and international law, NGOs often step in to bridge the gap. Their activities range from advocacy, public enlightenment, and documentation of abuses to direct humanitarian assistance such as legal aid, strategic litigation, and valuable services to victims. In Nigeria, the involvement of NGOs in human rights work has deep historical roots, gaining prominence both during the military and democratic regimes when civil liberties were under severe threat. In those years, NGOs appear to be the primary voice of the voiceless thereby playing a critical role in drawing both national and international attention to systemic abuses of human rights or the rights of the victims of armed conflicts in Nigeria. With the return to current civilian rule in 1999, their role expanded, shifting from resistance to active participation in policy formulation, assistance, monitoring, and accountability processes. This paper examined the contributions, challenges, roles and legal response to the activities of NGOs as it particularly relates to humanitarian aid to the victims of human rights violation in Nigeria. The paper gave a brief overview of the activities of selected NGOs particularly the World Bank whose work has been significant in shaping the policies of Nigerian government towards the provisions humanitarian aid to victims of human rights violation in the country. The paper also explored the legal obstacles that hinder the effectiveness of NGOs activities such as restrictive regulatory frameworks, political interference, funding limitations, and public mistrust. By assessing these dynamics, this paper did not only highlight the value of NGOs as partners in the provisions of humanitarian aid to victims of human rights abuse but also underscores the architectural defects in the legal structure of rendering humanitarian aid to victims of human rights violation which must be addressed if their works need to achieve lasting impact. This paper provides a critical context for appreciating the practical realities of human rights and humanitarian advocacy in Nigeria.

2. Overview of the Activities of the World Bank in Protecting the Rights of the Victims of Armed Conflicts in Nigeria

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have played a pivotal role in advancing the cause of human rights and humanitarian aid in Nigeria. In a nation where state institutions are often constrained by political interference or lack of resources, NGOs have risen as vital agents for societal reform and human rights protection. These organizations bridge the gap between the governed and the government by not only advocating for the voiceless but also by rendering financial support to victims of human right violation. The World Bank as a non - governmental organisation had in the recent past, played a vital role in supporting the effort of Nigerian government by providing loan for capital project and economic stabilisation in the country¹. On another development, The World Bank approved the loan of \$ 300, 000, 000, (Three Hundred Million Dollars) to the Nigerian government sometimes in the month of August 2025;² this approval raised a serious concern across the country as the government ought to concentrate its effort in addressing the root causes of conflicts driven IDPs in northern Nigeria, Particularly taking in to account the fact that there is no any law in Nigeria which expressly permits the government to apply foreign loans in providing welfare services as opposed capital or human development

*By Aliyu ABUBAKAR, LLB, BL, LLM, PhD (in view), Department of Private and Business Law, Faculty of Law Nasarawa State University, Keffi;

* Egbe Ojeh OKARA, LLB, LLM, PhD, Department of Private and Business Law, Faculty of Law Nasarawa State University, Keffi; and

*Musa YAHAYA, LLB, BL, LLM, PhD (in View), Faculty of Law Nasarawa State University, Keffi; Lecturer Department of Public Law, Faculty of Law University of Abuja, Tel: 08067252955

¹ IBRD – IDA / World Bank Group Loan for Economic Stabilization and Economic Transformation \$ 760 Million @ www.worldbank.org on 30th August 2025 at 9: 30 pm

² Semi Tunji, 'World Bank Approves \$ 300 M Loan for IDPs, Host Communities' Punch News 11 August 2025

project.³ It is certain that the intention of The World Bank to assist Nigeria out of its financial challenges in funding capital projects, is well defined to the extent that almost every year The World Bank approves loan for Nigerian project, but unfortunately such loans were after been misapplied and mismanaged.⁴

3. Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP)

The Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), founded in 2004, represents a progressive shift in the focus of human rights activism in Nigeria, emphasizing socio-economic rights, transparency, and good governance. It emerged in response to Nigeria's entrenched culture of corruption and the gross mismanagement of public resources, both of which have significantly hindered the realization of economic and social rights of the citizens SERAP's innovative legal strategy is one of its defining characteristics. It employs litigation both domestically and internationally to hold governments accountable for the misuse of public funds and failure to apply public funds appropriately. For instance, SERAP has petitioned the ECOWAS Court of Justice on several occasions, securing landmark judgments compelling the Nigerian government to fulfil its socio-economic obligations⁵. Notably, in *SERAP v. Federal Republic of Nigeria*, the ECOWAS Court held that the right to education is enforceable under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights⁶. Beyond litigation, SERAP publishes influential reports and conducts campaigns on issues such as budget transparency, access to education, healthcare, and water. It has collaborated with international organizations such as the United Nations, Transparency International, and Human Rights Watch, gaining significant recognition for its contributions to advancing anti-corruption and accountability mechanisms⁷.

4. Human Rights Monitor (HRM)

Human Rights Monitor (HRM) is a Kaduna-based NGO established in 1995 with the primary objective of monitoring and reporting human rights violations in Northern Nigeria. HRM's emergence was largely a response to ethno-religious conflicts, military repression, and socio-economic marginalization that were rampant in the region during the 1990s. HRM's work has been particularly valuable in conflict-affected zones, where the organization has documented abuses by both state and non-state actors. It conducts field investigations, provides legal aid to victims of human rights violations, and engages in community-based advocacy aimed at peacebuilding and inter-religious tolerance⁸. The organization is also known for its collaboration with local and international media in exposing systemic abuse and impunity. Furthermore, HRM has been actively involved in civic education, particularly in promoting awareness of constitutional rights and democratic responsibilities among rural and marginalized populations. Its work during the military era and in the post-1999 democratic period has significantly contributed to the development of a culture of accountability and transparency in Northern Nigeria⁹.

5. Analysis of Legal Framework for Application of Foreign loan in Addressing Questions of Internal Displacement in Nigeria

Section 14 of the Fiscal Responsibility Act¹⁰ provides thus:

Government at all tiers shall only borrow for capital expenditure and human development provided that such borrowing shall be on concessional terms, with low interest rate and with reasonably long amortization period subject to the approval of the appropriate legislative body where necessary

From the above provision of the Fiscal Responsibility Act, it is crystal clear that no government in Nigeria is allowed to borrow money either from outside or within Nigeria for any purpose other than capital expenditure. This poses a germane question of both legality and integrity of the \$ 350, 000, 000 (Three Hundred and Fifty Million Dollars) collected by the Federal Government of Nigeria from the World Bank in 2025. Section 44¹¹ of the said Act clearly prohibits the Nigerian government from borrowing either foreign or domestic loans for the purpose of recurrent expenditure of the government. Furthermore, Finance Act¹² provides that borrowing by any tier of government in Nigeria shall be for capital projects in addition to reforms for critical development;¹³ this law had widened the scope of borrowing in Nigeria to include reforms of critical national development. However, the Finance Act also prohibits all governments at different tiers in Nigeria from borrowing money for recurrent expenditure. The repetition of this prohibition also by the Finance Act, is pointing the fact that application of borrowed money for welfare packages is a financial crime in Nigeria. In addition to Finance Act and Fiscal Responsibility Act, other regulatory frameworks also exist and they do play significant roles in regulating and

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ S. Gberville, 'Accountability for Socio-Economic Rights Violations in Nigeria: The Role of SERAP', *Nigerian Journal of Public Law*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2015), p. 189.

⁶ *SERAP v. Federal Republic of Nigeria* (2010) ECW/CCJ/APP/08/09, ECOWAS Community Court of Justice.

⁷ Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project, *Anti-Corruption and Access to Justice in Nigeria*, Lagos: SERAP Publications, 2018, p. 6.

⁸ Human Rights Monitor, *Religious Conflicts and the Rule of Law in Northern Nigeria*, Kaduna: HRM Reports, 2003, p. 18.

⁹ A. Bala, 'NGOs and Human Rights in Northern Nigeria', *Kaduna Law Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2014), p. 78.

¹⁰ Fiscal Responsibility Act 2007, Cap. F 19 L F N 2020

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Finance Act 2021,

¹³ Section 40 *Ibid*

application of both domestic and foreign loans in Nigeria. They include but not limited to Debt Managements Act, Foreign Exchange Act and Economic and Financial Crimes ct.¹⁴

6. The General Role of Non - Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Promotion and Protection of Human Rights

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have increasingly become indispensable actors in the protection and promotion of human rights in Nigeria. In a socio-political environment marked by systemic human rights abuses, weak state institutions, and limited civic awareness, NGOs serve as both watchdogs and advocates for vulnerable populations. They help fill the vacuum left by state institutions through a range of activities, including public interest litigation, civic education, media advocacy, legal aid services and financial assistance. The role of NGOs is not merely complementary, but essential in ensuring that the state is held accountable to its national and international human rights obligations. The role of Non - Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are as thus; human rights are not static, but dynamic. Their scope and content expand according to the dictates of human experience. So also, areas of emphasis shift to accommodate the exigencies of political, economic and socio-cultural environments. It is possible to conceptualize human rights in this manner without compromising naturalist positions about the universality and inheritance of human rights. An example will suffice: fifty years ago, it would have been impossible or difficult to conceptualize a 'right to a livable environment' but today, the conditions are different. Large scale global warming result in the depletion of the Ozone layer (the 'greenhouse effect'), population explosions and desert encroachments have led to the emergence of 'the right to a livable environment' as an important third generation right. But man has always had inherent in him a right to a livable environment. The only reason why this right has not been articulated in earlier conceptualizations of human rights is because the conditions than simply did not call for it.

Human rights therefore, must both in conceptualization and implementation, address issues that are relevant within political, economic and socio-political contexts. The first major task of all human rights NGOs is not only to ensure that human rights are not laid down, but also that the scope of their substantive contents are adjusted or extended in international and domestic jurisprudence to accommodate changes in human needs and experiences. I must say there that in this regard, human rights NGOs in developing countries face a major challenge; their operational strategies must be directed towards elevating social and economic rights beyond the fanciful rhetoric of charters and conventions. For it is these rights that are to all intents and purposes more meaningful to their undernourished and illiterate populace rather than class of civil and political rights which make little sense to the man whose lot is starvation or who lives under the bridge for want of a better accommodation or the university graduate who has become disillusioned and frustrated by the fruitlessness of his search for subsistence. The CLO is now pushing a campaign for development rights. This means that the government has a responsibility to use public revenue for public development. Government has a duty to provide basic amenities (water, electricity etc). But it cannot do this if public funds end up in private accounts. We have started a campaign to link overseas development assistance to the willingness of our government to repatriate ill-gotten wealth stashed in the vaults of foreign banks. If public officers realize that there is no safe haven in any part of the world, the process of democratization will be substantially enhanced.

7. Establishment and Accessibility of Legal Procedures

Another major task of all human rights NGOs is to ensure that facilities and procedures exist for the enforcement of human rights within domestic and international legal frameworks and that these are readily accessible to all victims of human rights violations. Again, in this regard, the question of economic and social rights poses a major challenge to human rights NGOs in developing countries. Many of these countries operate constitutional systems which distinguish between civil and political rights which are justiciable (capable of legal enforcement) and economic rights which are non-justiciable (incapable of legal enforcement). The rationale usually given for this dichotomy is that civil and political rights do not compel affirmative action on the part of government authorities, but merely put the authorities under an obligation not to interfere while economic rights require affirmative action that may well be dependent on the availability of resources. The fallacy in this analysis becomes obvious when it is realized that the right to freely receive and impact information (a civil right) is entirely devoid of practical content in a society plagued by illiteracy because the right to education (a social right) is not adequately implemented. As the NOVIB paper¹⁵ points out:

The approach in which the different categories or rights are seen as contrasting hierarchies is out of date. It has made way for the notion in which the rights of the categories are seen as interdependent and indissolubly linked. This approach in which equivalent rights are seen as a universal system of cohesive equivalent rights, are seen as a universal system of cohesive equivalent rights has gradually gained common ground in the world of human rights NGOs, governments, and within the UN organizations.

Human rights NGOs must therefore address their attention to the absence of specific legal machineries and procedures for the enforcement of economic, social and cultural rights. But even within civil and political rights for which there exist specific procedures for legal enforcement, human rights NGOs still face tremendous challenges to make these procedures accessible to victims of human rights violations. The factors which inhibit accessibility of legal procedures in a country like Nigeria, for instance, include: i) Restrictive doctrine of standing to sue (*locus standi*), and ii) Statutes ousting the jurisdiction of courts in respect of matters which are otherwise justiciable. These are questions which all human rights NGOs must

¹⁴ Abdjullahi Shehu (2006) 'Economic and Financial Crimes in Nigeria; Policy Issues and Options' Lagos National Open University of Nigeria, ISBN

¹⁵ Ibid at Page 9.

address if existing legal procedures for the enforcement of human rights are to be made readily accessible to victims of human rights violations. But is a task that cannot be accomplished without the collaboration of a dynamic judiciary. How has Nigerian Judges fared so far? It cannot too be seriously stressed, or credibly be doubted that Judges are the bastions of fundamental rights and freedoms. And in the hierarchy of Judges and the judiciary, the Supreme Court has an onerous duty to set the pace of development of human right jurisprudence. Unfortunately, the restrictive doctrine on standing to sue which presently prevails in Nigerian constitutional law to the effect that a general interest common to all members or some section of the community is not a litigable interest is held on the authority of a decision of the Supreme Court of Nigeria: *Adesanya v. the President*.¹⁶ This stands in sharp contrast to the more dynamic position taken in some other jurisdictions, like India,¹⁷ Canada¹⁸ and the United States of America, in India, the Supreme Court has democratized access to the court by watering down the rigours of locus standi through the medium of Public Interest Litigation (P.I.L). Giving expression to this development in the case of *Peoples Union for Democratic Rights v. Minister of Home Affairs*, Dayal J. said:¹⁹

Following English and American decisions, our Supreme Court has of late admitted exceptions from the strict rules relating to locus standi and the like in the case of a class of litigations which have acquired classification known as 'public interest litigation, that is where the public in general are interested in the enforcement of fundamental rights and other statutory rights.... Today it is perhaps common place to observe that as a result of a series of judicial attitude since 1950, there has been a dramatic, radical change in the scope of judicial record. The change has been described as...an upsurge of judicial activism.

Elucidating further on the nature of Public Interest Litigation' in the same case, Judge Bhagwati of Indian Supreme Court explains that:²⁰

Public Interest Litigation, as we conceive it, is essentially a cooperative and collaborative effort on the part of the petitioner, the state or public authority and the court to secure observance of the constitutional or legal rights, benefits and privileges conferred upon the vulnerable sections of the community and to reach social justice to them...The state or public authority which is arranged as a respondent in public interest litigation should in fact, welcome it as it would give it an opportunity to right a wrong or redress an injustice done to the poor and the weaker sections of the community whose welfare is and must be the concern of the state or the public authority. There is a misconception in the minds of some lawyers, journalists and men in public life that public interest litigations is unnecessarily cluttering up the files of the court and adding to the already staggering arrears of cases which are pending for long years and it should not therefore be encouraged by the court. This is to our mind, a totally perverse view smacking of elitist and status quo approach.

This is the spirit that has enabled the Indian Judiciary to brew a uniquely Indian jurisprudence completely weaned of the alien inhibitions of the common law tradition and in which, today it is possible for a court in India exercising what has been described as the 'Epistolean Jurisdiction' to act on latter or press report and treat it as a Writ petition. It is possible that the jurisprudence of the Nigerian Supreme Court on the issue of locus standi has, of recent; come under the influence of these positive developments in other jurisdictions. There are noticeable attempts by the Nigerian Supreme Court to relax the conditions for approaching the courts. In the case of *Fawehinmi v. Akilu & Anor* 14 the Supreme Court²¹ widened the concept of locus standi within the context of criminal law, when it held that a private legal practitioner could institute legal action to compel the Director of Public Prosecutions to either prosecute an alleged murder or permit a private prosecution thereof. The Supreme Court based its decision on the premise that, within the context of criminal law, 'every Nigerian is his brother's keeper'. Recent pronouncements made by some Justices of the Nigerian Supreme Court at intellectual fora suggest a change of attitude. Another case filed by the Legal Resources Directorate of the CLO is *Mike Ozehome and other v. President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and Anor*.²² In this case, Justice Christopher Segun of the Lagos High Court was called upon to pronounce on the extent of the legislative powers of the Federal Military Government in the context of the exercise of power of preventive detention under Decree No. 2 of 1984. The State objected to the competence of the action, brandishing, as its authority, the ouster clause contained in Decree No. 2. Rejecting this objection, the learned trial judge held that:

The right of the citizen under the rule of law should be respected and the judiciary is a necessary agency of the Rule of Law and the courts stand between the citizen and the government alert to see that the state or government is bound by the law and respect it....A government in which the citizen is entitled to repose confidence and trust is not expected to act in breach of the faith which it owes to the citizens and it does so act, the courts will intervene.

Another problem which may be added is that of delays in the prosecution of human rights suits, quite against the spirit of the Fundamental Rights (Enforcement Procedure) Rules which lay specific time standards to ensure speedy hearing and determination of human rights suits. The issue has been discussed extensively by the Hon. Justice Niki Tobi of the Court of Appeal in his learned work: Fundamental Rights: Enforcement and Procedure Rules and Speedy Trials. This is not the

¹⁶ (1981) 1 All NLR 9 (pt 1) 1.

¹⁷ *Peoples Union for Democratic Rights vs. Minister of Home Affairs* (1986) LRC (cont).

¹⁸ *Thorson vs. A-G, Canada* (1975) ISCR 138; *Nova Scotia Board of Censors vs. McNeil* (1976) ISCR 265.

¹⁹ *Supra*.

²⁰ *Supra*, at pages 1477-1478.

²¹ (1982) 2 NWLR (Part 67) 122.

²² *Supra*.

forum for elaborating on these issues, but I must emphasize that they are issues on which all human rights NGOs must focus the attention of their legal resource personnel, if legal procedures are to be made accessible to victims of human rights violations.

8. Exposure of Human Rights Violation

This is a core function of all human rights NGOs in which all available resources, viz campaign, research, litigation, documentation, etc are involved. I will illustrate this activity by drawing upon two major achievements of the CLO's prison project, documented in its 262-page report 'Behind the Wall.' Based on a survey of fifty-six prisons and lock-ups scattered around the country and on other materials gathered over the course of three years of human rights work in prisons, Behind the Wall throws a harsh light on the conditions of prisons in Nigeria, and makes harrowing revelations about them. The report reveals, for instance, that the average Nigerian prison is congested by about twice its rated capacity which forces inmates to sleep in batches, with each batch sleeping for three or four hours a night while others line up against the walls, awaiting their time. I can easily say that the CLO prison project successfully made prison conditions an important issue on the national agenda. Evidence of this exists not only in the amount of press attention which this issue has attracted since the publication of the report, but also in the attitude of the government itself: where hitherto it hardly discussed the question, today it expresses serious interest in improving prison conditions, and even organized a national seminar on prison reform in June, 1990. The second achievement worth mentioning concerns the 12 persons sentenced to death for their alleged role in the unsuccessful coup of April, 1990. They were not given a fair trial. The military trial was constituted in a manner that did not guarantee fair hearing. Choice of counsel was denied and the proceedings were conducted in secret. The CLO alerted the public that the 12 were to face a firing squad. International pressure followed. Amnesty International issued urgent action appeals. Happily, the government commuted the death penalty to life terms. Once more word on this, the CLO's campaign efforts have also been employed in the process of strengthening the democratization process. CLO run an empowerment programme for the state houses of parliament. The technique is simple. The CLOs call attention to human rights concerns and urges that legislative action be taken in form of committee hearings and in some cases votes of censure against executive misconduct. We have place before legislator's diverse issues: police extra-judicial killings, the 12 kids on death row, the plight of slum dwellers, and so on.

9. Reaction of the International Community Towards Cases of Human Rights Violation In Nigeria

It is not a fact in dispute that various non – governmental organisations often participate in a wide range of campaign against human rights violation in different parts of Nigeria. the most recent one was the declaration of the president of the United States of America, where he declared Nigeria as a 'Country of Particular Concern' where Christians were being killed by some radical Islamic terrorist groups in the northern Nigeria.²³ Pursuant to the above declaration, the President of the United States declared military action against Nigeria for being in active in protecting the rights of Nigerian Christians. In as much as this paper did not support military action against Nigeria, it is also important to condemn the action of Nigerian government in clear terms particularly in the display of its lackadaisical attitude of being indifferent about wide range of mass killings of people of different faiths in nor than Nigeria. Thus, justifying the America's threat of military action against Nigeria.

The America's military proposed three (3) war action plans against Nigeria in protection human rights violation, i. e. heavy, medium and light plans. It is the candid position of this paper. That the United States should display high skills and professionalism in observing the international humanitarian principles of selection, distinction and proportionality.²⁴

10. Humanitarian Assistance to Victims of Human Rights Violations

Humanitarian assistance to victims of human rights violations comes in many forms, the most familiar of which is legal aid. The CLO's Legal Resources Directorate generates an extensive legal aid scheme which provides legal services to indigent victims of human rights violations at absolutely no cost. Under the auspices of this scheme, a large number of long standing detainees have secured their release from unlawful custody. It is important to state that CLO's legal aid programme is available for all categories of human rights violations, and is not restricted to personal liberty alone. The state itself is under a constitutional obligation to provide humanitarian assistance in the form of legal aid to victims of human rights violations. Section 42(4)(b) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) stipulates that the Armed Forces Ruling Council shall make provisions for the rendering of financial assistance to any indigent citizen of Nigeria where his rights under Chapter 4 have been infringed or with a view to enabling him to engage the services of a legal practitioner to prosecute his claim. The CLO has made significant achievements in the area of providing humanitarian assistance to victims of human rights violations. But there are grounds yet to be adequately covered. These include:

- a. Creating legal awareness by means of education and dissemination of information;
- b. Training 'paralegals' (i.e. people from the regions to stimulate legal education and organization forming at the local 'grassroots' levels;
- c. Establishing 'social action' groups to put certain collective issues before the courts, all of which have been identified as activities essential for providing humanitarian aid to victims.

²³ Donatus Annechukwueze, 'US Military Draws Up Air Strikes Plan for Nigeria After Trump Declaration' Channels Television New Headlines November 6 2025 at Channels WhatsApp link. 8 November 2025 112:30 pm

²⁴ Cohen, Amichai Zlotogorski, David, *Proportionality in International Law; Consequences, Precautions and Procedures*, Oxford University Press 2021 p. 5

11. Challenges Confronting NGOs in the Promotion And Protecting of Human Rights Violation

Despite the pivotal role that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play in the promotion and protection of human rights in Nigeria, their operations remain fraught with numerous obstacles. These challenges are multifaceted—ranging from political interference and legal constraints to financial insecurity and societal misconceptions. NGOs function within a space that is both politically sensitive and socially volatile, and their commitment to truth and accountability often pits them against powerful state and non-state actors. This section explores four of the most significant and enduring challenges confronting NGOs in their human rights work in Nigeria: (1) Restrictive Legal and Regulatory Environment; (2) Inadequate Funding and Financial Sustainability; (3) Political Hostility and Government Harassment; and (4) Public Mistrust and Societal Misconceptions. Each of these factors is elaborated upon in detail below.

Restrictive Legal and Regulatory Frameworks: One of the most formidable obstacles confronting NGOs in Nigeria is the legal and regulatory framework that governs civil society operations. Although Section 40 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees the freedom of association, the reality is that NGOs must navigate a complex labyrinth of registration procedures, compliance obligations, and regulatory oversight that are often weaponized against them. The Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC), which is responsible for registering NGOs under Part C of the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) 2020, frequently imposes excessive bureaucratic demands and compliance costs. For instance, NGOs are required to submit annual financial reports and statements of affairs, irrespective of whether they have received donor funding during the year. Non-compliance often leads to threats of deregistration or administrative penalties²⁵. In addition to existing statutory burdens, the Nigerian government has repeatedly attempted to introduce legislation aimed at stifling NGO activity. The most controversial of such attempts is the NGO Regulation and Coordination Bill, first introduced in 2016 and later reintroduced in 2021. The bill seeks to establish a government-controlled regulatory body with wide discretionary powers to approve, monitor, and even dissolve NGOs deemed ‘politically subversive’ or ‘against national interest.’ The proposed law would also mandate NGOs to seek approval before receiving foreign funding or conducting certain forms of advocacy. While the bill has not been passed into law, its periodic resurgence has created a climate of uncertainty and apprehension within civil society²⁶. Moreover, in conflict-prone areas such as the North-East, NGOs are often required to register with security agencies and local authorities before conducting humanitarian or advocacy work. These duplicative and non-transparent approval processes delay intervention efforts and subject NGOs to arbitrary surveillance and control. In extreme cases, organizations have been accused of aiding insurgents and were either banned from operating or subjected to military scrutiny, such as in the 2019 suspension of Action Against Hunger by the Nigerian Army.²⁷ These legal constraints undermine the operational autonomy of NGOs and erode the constitutional freedoms that should underpin a vibrant civil society.

Inadequate Funding and Financial Sustainability: Another critical challenge NGOs in Nigeria face is the scarcity of stable and sustainable funding. While a few high-profile organizations have access to international donor funding, the vast majority of local NGOs operate on shoestring budgets, surviving on irregular grants, personal contributions, and modest fundraising efforts. This financial instability restricts their ability to maintain permanent staff, invest in infrastructure, or expand their programming. For example, many rural-based human rights NGOs struggle to maintain legal aid clinics, community outreach, or documentation projects due to lack of consistent funding²⁸. As a result, their interventions are often ad hoc, lacking continuity or measurable long-term impact. The over-reliance on foreign donors also presents its own set of complications. Many international funding agencies prioritize thematic areas such as sexual and reproductive rights, democratic governance, or anti-corruption, while neglecting other pressing concerns like disability rights, prisoners’ welfare, or indigenous land rights. This forces many NGOs to align their activities with donor preferences rather than local needs, thereby compromising the authenticity and effectiveness of their advocacy. Furthermore, fluctuations in foreign exchange rates and rising inflation especially in recent years have further devalued the capacity of grants denominated in foreign currencies. NGOs that rely on such funding often find themselves scaling down operations mid-project, resulting in broken promises to communities and donor dissatisfaction. Importantly, the lack of a philanthropic culture within Nigeria also contributes to this problem. Local philanthropy, where it exists, tends to be informal and rarely supports rights-based advocacy. Corporations prefer to fund service delivery or public relations-oriented projects, steering clear of contentious human rights issues. In this context, sustainability becomes a perpetual concern for most rights-focused NGOs²⁹.

Political Hostility and Government Harassment: Perhaps no challenge is more direct or more pernicious than state-sponsored hostility toward NGOs that dare to challenge official wrongdoing. Human rights defenders in Nigeria routinely face intimidation, arbitrary arrest, judicial harassment, and smear campaigns. The government’s increasingly autocratic stance on dissent has seen NGOs labeled as ‘foreign agents,’ ‘opposition tools,’ or ‘security threats.’ The EndSARS protests of 2020 offer a vivid illustration of this hostility. Following the protests, several NGOs and individual activists were subjected to travel bans, freezing of bank accounts, and unwarranted police investigations. Organizations such as Feminist Coalition and Budget were accused of sponsoring insurrection for merely supporting protest logistics or documenting police

²⁵ Corporate Affairs Commission, *Companies and Allied Matters Act 2020*, Abuja: CAC Publications, 2020, ss. 839–842.

²⁶ National Assembly of Nigeria, *NGO Regulation and Coordination Bill*, Bill No. HB 585 (2016), Legislative Digest.

²⁷ Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Military Raids, Suspends Action Against Hunger and Mercy Corps*, London: AI Reports, 2019, p. 3.

²⁸ CLEEN Foundation, *Funding Gaps and Legal Aid Delivery in Nigeria*, Lagos: CLEEN Foundation, 2018, p. 21.

²⁹ Abiodun Adeniran, ‘The Crisis of Local Philanthropy and NGO Sustainability in Nigeria,’ *Nigerian Journal of Third Sector Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2021), p. 59.

abuses³⁰. Beyond moments of national crisis, NGOs working on electoral accountability, media freedom, LGBTQ+ rights, and state corruption are particularly vulnerable. The Security Services (DSS) and other state agencies have frequently been accused of monitoring, infiltrating, or disrupting NGO meetings, especially when these involve international observers or sensitive political topics. Furthermore, NGOs that expose rights abuses by security forces particularly in conflict zones are branded ‘anti-government,’ with staff often facing surveillance, threats, or even physical harm. This climate of fear discourages many from engaging in robust advocacy, thereby shrinking the civic space necessary for democratic consolidation. The consequence of such repression is not only the weakening of NGOs but also the erosion of public confidence in democratic accountability and constitutional safeguards.

Public Mistrust and Societal Misconceptions: The fourth challenge, though more subtle, is equally damaging: the widespread public mistrust and misunderstanding of NGOs. Many Nigerians perceive NGOs especially those involved in human rights as self-serving, foreign-influenced, or politically motivated entities that exploit donor funds for personal gain. This negative perception is partly due to the proliferation of unregistered or inactive NGOs, often dubbed ‘briefcase NGOs,’ which has no real operational capacity but exist only to attract grants or seek recognition. These fraudulent entities tarnish the reputation of the sector, feeding into government narratives that discredit civil society as a whole. Religious and cultural conservatism also shapes public attitudes toward certain types of advocacies. NGOs that work on gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive health, or secular education often find themselves accused of promoting ‘Western values’ that are incompatible with African culture. As a result, community leaders, traditional rulers, and even religious clerics actively resist or undermine NGO efforts³¹.

Furthermore, the low level of legal literacy among many Nigerians means that concepts such as ‘human rights,’ ‘rule of law,’ and ‘constitutionalism’ are poorly understood or perceived as elitist concerns disconnected from daily struggles. This misunderstanding limits grassroots participation in NGO programs and weakens the effectiveness of awareness campaigns. Overcoming this challenge requires not only strategic communication but also sustained efforts at community engagement, capacity building, and public education. Until the public comes to see NGOs as partners in social development rather than foreign agents or political proxies, the full potential of civil society in Nigeria will remain unrealized.

12. Findings/Observations

The following are the observations of this research work

- a) There is wide range human right violation in Nigeria which the government of Nigeria has been neglecting over time.
- b) The negligence of Nigerian government in protecting human rights in the country has been exposed by the activities of nongovernmental organisations.
- c) The World Bank is not helping Nigeria when it helped the government officials to apply the foreign loan contrary to the law.

13. Recommendations

- a. The Nigerian Government should act decisively to quickly checkmate the wide range of human rights violations in Nigeria.
- b. The activities of non - governmental organisations should be promoted to enhance more human rights protection.
- c. The World Bank should have more regards to domestic laws of Nigeria in approving any loan for the country.

14. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the multifaceted role played by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the promotion and protection of human rights in Nigeria. It is evident that NGOs such as the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC), and Human Rights Monitor (HRM) have made substantial contributions in areas such as legal advocacy, public enlightenment, policy reform, and humanitarian assistance. The mechanisms and strategies adopted by these organizations ranging from litigation and media engagement to community-based awareness and partnership with international bodies demonstrate their commitment to advancing the human rights agenda in Nigeria. However, despite these significant efforts, NGOs continue to face considerable challenges, including legal and regulatory constraints, financial insecurity, political repression, and public mistrust. These obstacles not only threaten the sustainability and effectiveness of their operations but also impede the broader realization of human rights within the Nigerian socio-political context.

³⁰ SERAP, *Civic Space and Post-EndSARS Repression in Nigeria*, Lagos: SERAP Publications, 2021, p. 7.

³¹ WARDC, *Culture and Rights: Navigating Community Resistance in Gender Justice Work*, Lagos: WARDC Reports, 2019, p. 12.