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CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN NIGERIA: THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

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Luka Jacob Jiwul
Department of Sociology,
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Jos, Jos-Nigeria.
simplyjiwul@gmail.com,lukajiwul@yahoo.com +234(0)803 079 6163

Awudu, Angyu Daniel
Department of Political Science,
Federal College of Education, Zaria, Kaduna State
ja4daniels@gmail.com +234(0)8032462365; +234(0)8022993218

ABSTRACT

This work is an attempt at examining Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Nigeria and their impacts on national integration. Since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, several disintegrating factors have been raging and truncating the country's desire for unity, cohesion and stability. Today, insecurity has become the greatest threat to nation building in Nigeria. Within the framework of functionalist theory, the paper examines the functions of CSOs and how they promote national integration. Depending on secondary sources of data, the findings show that a proactive CSO can function effectively to promote national integration through advocacy and capacity building among others. The paper thus recommends that in the present era of modernism and globalization, restriction of CSOs either through media or regulating hurdles should be avoided. This is because, in a heterogeneous society like ours, CSOs are instrumental in safeguarding the state and guaranteeing stability and national cohesiveness.

KEY WORDS:

Civil Society Organization, National Integration, Democracy and Functionalism

Introduction

Most Post-Colonial States made the pursuit of national integration a subject of priority all in the quest of nation building. Countries that adopted this nation building strategy are mostly heterogeneous in nature. While others are integrating, Nigeria's attempt at achieving national integration since independence is still a challenging issue. This is because the integrating crises facing the country are enormous. Notable among them are: religious conflict, youth restiveness, ethnic politics, indigene-settler dialectic, militancy, kidnapping, minority question, resource control, the quest for secession by some regions such as the re-occurring case of Biafra among others. These problems substantiate the fact that amidst the national code of "unity in diversity" today, the social matrix of the country is characterized by inter-community and intra-

community, inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic, inter-religious and intra-religious strife. Most of these socio-political problems threatening the foundations of the Nigerian state have lingered through the ages and some are as old as the history of the Nigerian nation.

Globally, countries and societies are making relentless effort to achieve socio-economic development, promote wider support for democratic values and strengthen collaborative relationships among societies, social institutions and civil society for the purpose of attaining societal cohesiveness. Butine quality and exclusion are not only persisting but expanding thereby, negating the desired goal. In Nigeria, these factors (inequality and exclusion) have escalated into negative social conditions, such as widening disparities, ethnic and tribal crises, leading to the rise of ethnic militias, marginalization of certain groups (Beall and Piron, 2003), and national security dilemma that is affecting the key tenet of national unity and patriotism.

Ojo (2009) contends that "Nigeria has a unique problem which is achieving solidarity in action and purpose in the midst of hundreds of ethnic nationalities each exerting both centrifugal and centripetal forces on the central issue of the nation…" This affirms that divisive elements still abound in the body polity of the country. Emelonye & Buergenthal (2011) in Onifade and David (2013)further observed that, poverty and ineffective governance in Nigeria today have further sharpened divisions leading to misunderstanding between ethnic and religious groups who see themselves as rivals that must be surpassed by any means, thus hampering national integration. Unless efforts are made to checkmate these divisive tendencies towards national integration, the long expected and loudly proclaimed oneness and indivisibility of Nigeria will remain a mirage.

Busatto (2007) further opined that to create a society that represents general interest and reflects the commitments to upholding national unity and the principles of equality and equity is a moral obligation. This society cannot be created by governmental forces alone, but by all institutions both formal and informal. This therefore underscores the imperativeness of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the struggle for civil rule, democratic development and national integration in any society. *They are agents of development in any nation. Civil Society Organizations are agents of socio-political and economic development. The transformation of any society or system, particularly developing societies like Nigeria, to a very large extent depends on the effectiveness and efficiency of civil societies.*

It is against the backdrop of the foregoing that this paper analyses the functions of Civil Society Organizations in the promotion of national integration in Nigeria. No doubt, a country where integrating elements are established and strengthened

is more secure, stable and just and with these, sustainable political and socio-economic development become achievable.

Understanding Civil Society Organization and National Integration Civil Society Organization(s)

Civil society as a concept belongs to the "tribe" of contested concepts, which generate disputes over their actual meanings. It has received extensive scholarly attention in recent years especially in the quest for consolidation of the reform agenda of the post-cold war global system that is dominated by socio-economic and political reforms which are essentially of the neo-liberal variant.

In the report of World Economic Forum (2013), the World Bank compiled the view of many leading research centres to define Civil Society. To them, Civil Society can be defined as "the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations". It comprises the fold of organizations such as community groups, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations. From the same report, the African Development Bank further views Civil Society Organizations as "the full range of formal and informal organizations within society." According to the bank's official definition, Civil Society encompasses a collection of human and associational activities operating within the public domain and not controlled by the forces of the market and the state. It is a voluntary expression of the interests and aspirations of citizens organized and united by common interests, goals, values or traditions, and mobilized into collective action either as beneficiaries or stakeholders of the development process. Though Civil Society Organizationsare separate from the market forces and state, they do not contradict them, and they ultimately influence and are influenced by both.

Taking a functional and concrete view of the concept, Osaghae (1997) in Chinyeaka et al (2014), contends that CSO refers to the non-state sector of the public realm which mediates and regulates relations between the individual and the state. The basic features inherent in this understanding of civil society are that they are autonomous of the state and public to the extent that they are involved in setting the normative order for the state especially in pursuit of the common good. This shows that civil society can conflate and cooperate with the state for the purpose of realizing societal goal which may include national integration, improving citizen's well-being, democratization, political stability, good governance, accountability and sustainable development.

Furthermore, Diamond (1999) in Jolade and Rafiu (2014) argues that since civil

society also entails important characteristic like the promotion of pluralism and diversity; it may therefore, exclude narrowly focused, intolerant, ethnic chauvinist groups, hate groups, religious fundamentalist groups, and militia groups that claim, often through violence, that they are the only legitimate representation in society. Although it is commonly assumed that civil society is equivalent to everything that entails non-state activities, it does not consist of groups that deny pluralism and diversity even though they are non-state actors.

The above argument finds solace in the position of Hirata (2002) where he posits that Civil Society Organizations exclude parochial society (i.e., individual and family life and inward-looking activities such as entertainment, recreation, and religious worship) and economic society (i.e. profit-making individual business firms). Both parochial society and economic society are primarily concerned with private ends, not civic life or public ends. But when religious groups are engaged in public ends, such as efforts to fight poverty or crime or to improve educational institutions in the community, they are participating in civil society activities (Jolade and Rafiu, 2014).

In Nigeria there are different categories of Civil Society Organizations representing different interest. The first category is made up of organizations which aim at extending the frontier of liberal democratic practices within the country such as: Civil Liberty Organization (CLO), Campaign for Democracy (CD), Constitutional Right Project (CRP), Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CDHR), Joint Action Committee of Nigeria (JACON), Democratic Alliance (DA), United Action for Democracy (UAD), among others. Next to this category are the interest groups whose activities and actions are not directly focused on the pursuit of democracy but implicitly are affected by its progress. Their major concerns however, centre on monitoring and protecting the "rules that regulate the relations of domination in a particular area" (Aiyede, 2005 in Chinyeakae'tal, 2014). Notable among them are the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Trade Union Congress (TUC), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), **A**cademic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Niger Delta Human and Environmental Rescue Organization (ND-HERO), International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), International Press Centre (IPC), Citizens' Forum for Constitutional Reform (CFCR), African Strategic and Peace Research Group (AFSTRAG), National Council of Women Societies (NCWS), Centre For Constitutional Government & Development (CCGD), Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT), Transition Monitoring Group (TGM), etc.

National Integration

The term national integration can be used interchangeably with national cohesion, national unity or nation building (Bandyopadhyay& Green, 2009; Ojo, 2009). According to Duverger in Ojo (2009), "national integration is the process of

unifying a society which tends to make it a harmonious city, based upon an order its members regard as equitably harmonious". Jacob &Tenue in Ojo (2009) further describe it as a relationship of community among people within the same political entity, a state of mind or disposition to be cohesive and united, to act together, and to be committed to mutual programmes. Defining national integration as a process, Morrison et al (1972) in Ojo (2009) argues that it is a process by which members of a social system (citizens for our purpose) develop linkages and location so that the boundaries of the system persist over time and the boundaries of sub-systems become less consequential in affecting behaviour. In this process, members of the social system develop an escalating sequence of contact, cooperation, consensus and community (Ojo, 2009, Onifade and David, 2013).It is further defined by Morrison et al (1972:385) in Ojo (2009:385-386) as:

> *a process that produces an omnibus of initiatives put in place by a state, its representatives or institutions guided by respect for the unique traditions and cultural backgrounds of ethnicities sharing the same polity with the goal of harmonizing all interests through a form of dialogue and representation and addressing differences that may be divisive and conflictual using the instruments of fairness, justice and equity in the sharing of resources, benefits, opportunities and responsibilities in order to guarantee stability, longevity and prosperity of the polity as long as the inhabitants decide to remain within the polity.*

It therefore means that national integration is a comprehensive process which includes cultural as well as political integration. Political integration is maintained by safeguarding administrative unity, universal legal system, protection of state territory, etc. Cultural integration is achieved through reconciliation and mutual consensus of diverse groupings, religions, values, etc. Thus, national integration is the structure where segments of people develop a feeling of togetherness, a sense of unity and sense of belongings constituting a broad socio-political entity, the state that overpowers all other sectarian, regional and communal affiliations and considerations.

This paper harmonizes the above broad perspectives by concluding that national integration includes nation-building, which is doing away with the boundaries which divide the society on tribal, communal, racial, religious, linguistic or regional lines on the one hand and territorial integrity which implies the absence of secessionist and separatist forces on the other.

Theoretical Framework The Functionalist Approach

This study is based on the theory of functionalism by Talcott Parsons (1902 – 1979)and Robert Merton (1910-2003) in Ritzer (1996 & 2011), Alubo (2012),

Giddens (1997), Haralambos & Holborn (2000) and Schaefer & Lamm (1995). The theory sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability(Macionis, 2010). This approach looks at both social structure and social functions. It is based on the assumption that human lives are guided by social structures, which are relatively stable patterns of social behaviour. Social structures give shape to our lives - in families, the community, religious organizations and a host of others. Each social structure has social functions or consequences for the operation of society as a whole. Functionalism therefore addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements such as norms, customs, traditions and institutions.

Projecting the argument of Emile Durkheim, Macionis (2011) opined that complex societies are held together by *organic* solidarity, i.e. "social bonds based on specialization and interdependence that are strong among members of industrial societies". The central concern of functionalism is the apparent stability and internal cohesion needed by societies to endure over time. Societies are therefore seen as coherent, bounded and fundamentally relational constructs that function like organisms, with their social institutions working together toward achieving an overall social equilibrium (which suggests there is an inherent drive within human societies to *cohere* or stick together.). Societies strive toward equilibrium, not through dictatorial mandate by the leaders of society but rather because the social structure of societies encourages equilibrium (Durk, 2007).

Since no theory can be void of criticism, functionalism has as well suffered from series of them. According to the symbolic inter actionist theory, functionalism is criticized for failing to conceptualize adequately the complex nature of actors and the process of interaction. It emphasizes more on the institutions than the actors and their pattern of interactions. Functionalist theory also has been criticized for its disregard of the historical process and for its presupposition that societies are in a state of equilibrium (Goldschmidt, 1996). Holmwood (2005), further argued that functionalist' theory missed the concept of system contradiction. The theory did not account for those parts of the system that might have tendencies to mal-integration.

But drawing from its strength, if all social structure contributes to the operation of society (Imhonopi &Urim, 2012a), then national integration can be attained when the various institutions in the society function effectively. The argument here is that Civil Society Organizations are part of societal social structures and their functions can internalize harmony, common identity and above all national consciousness. A viable Civil Society Organization can promote and guarantee national integration in a complex state like Nigeria. The lack of tolerance, consensus, unity and deep-seated sentimental interest identified as challenges to national integration in Nigeria can be overpowered by the activities of well

organized, proactive, strong independent and functional Civil Society Organizations.

Challenges of National Integration in Nigeria

Knowing that Nigeria is the amalgamation of different regional identities, and ethnic consciousness, starting from the colonial era to the present day democratic society, several programmes have been initiated to promote national integration in the country. Citing the scholarly works of Ojo (2009), Bulama (n.d.), Akpan (1990) and Ugoh & Ukpere (2012) as contained in the work of Onifade and David (2013) some of these programmes include: the introduction of Federal System of Government as an integrative mechanism by the Colonial Masters and later enforced by the Elites. The purpose was to preserve the integration and stability in the country. This was followed by the creation of States in order to strengthen the country's unity and curtail the domineering tendencies of the major ethnic groups as well as secure some measure of autonomy for the scattered and disunited minority groups. Later on, the National Youth Service Corps emerged as another policy that could help integrate the country. Created by Decree No. 24 of May 22, 1973, the National Youth Service Corps sought to enhance the interaction among the emerging educated elite by providing them with the opportunity of living and serving in some states other than their places of origin. This will help them to better understand multiple cultures, and perhaps, the language and general lifestyle of their host communities.

Another nation-building strategy was the Federal Character Principle initiated by the government. The aim of the strategy was to achieve fair and effective representation of the various components of the federation in the country's position of power, status and influence (Ugoh & Ukpere, 2012). Other integrating efforts are the introduction of the revenue sharing formula, the establishment of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Amnesty Programme to enhance sustainable development for the Niger-Delta region and to address the violence taking place in the oil rich area and to quell the agitation for resource control.

However after 57 years of political independence and a centennial of marriage as a country,"Nigeria still continues to grind under the weight of an impossible amalgamation that has done nothing to erase the diversities within the ethnic nationalities that make up the federation but rather has succeeded in bringing these differences in clear relief (Onifade and David, 2013)". The integrating quest is rather getting weakened on daily basis as a result of different challenges which include:

i. Selfish and greedy political gladiators who exploit ethnicity for personal advantages: As they compete for power, prestige and associated benefits, the political elites in a bid to secure the support of members of their own

ethnic groups, accentuate ethnic differences and condemns or "bad labeled " members of other ethnic groups.

ii. Internalization of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, unemployment, marginalization, infrastructural decay, homelessness and lack of access to quality health as a result of corruption.

iii. Ethnic centred leadership with separatist and particularistic political outlook

iv. Lack of fairness, justice and equity in the country with regard to resource allocation and distribution, power sharing, enjoyment of fundamental human rights and punishment of criminals who hide under political umbrellas or bunkers created by the ruling classes.

v. Existence of weak institutions of the state which have not been able to achieve the national goals of democratic governance and sustainable development

vi. The rise of religious fundamentalism and intolerance in the country (Onifade and David, 2013).

Role of Civil Society Organizations in the Promotion of National Integration

According to Haynes (2001), civil society organizations are seen as veritable tool that can enable third world countries to embrace neo-market reforms and political liberalization which can result to multi-party democracy. The relevance of CSOs as part of the social institutions stems out of the ineluctable functions they are performing which cut across all aspects of human life, ranging from economic to political, health, social, environmental and educational developments. A logical deduction from the foregoing is that without the active involvement of CSOs, we would live in a world ridden with an overwhelming recourse to crime, violence, human rights abuses and disintegrating elements. The concomitant effect of which is social injustice and less sensitivity to the divisive elements confronting nation states today.

To buttress this point, Samuel (2005), recognizes the basic role of Civil Society Groups as Development and Operation of Infrastructure; Supporting Innovation, Demonstration and Pilot Projects; Facilitating Communication; Technical Assistance and Training; Research, Monitoring and Evaluation; and Advocacy for and with the Poor. Other scholars like Almond &Verba (1963) in Jolade and Rafiu (2014) pointed out that CSOs serve as watch dogs to check the excesses of government, expose and curtail violations of human rights, abuse of the constitution and thereby exercising control over democratic political institutions with the overall aim of facilitating nation-building. For when a society is in the state of conflict, the well-being of the people is affected negatively (Wika & Rufus, 2015).

As part of the "social basis for democracy", civil society represents a fundamental

part of the democratic system and highlights issues of importance. It has the ability to express controversial views; represent those without a voice; mobilize citizens into movements; build support across stakeholders; and bring credibility to the political system by promoting transparency and accountability. In terms of policy formulation, civil society is a valuable partner in providing deep subject-matter expertise based on first-hand experience, trialing and scaling up innovations in social services and facilitating citizen engagement. Representatives of Civil Society Organizations often act in the public interest as whistle-blowers, holding institutions and individuals to account. Similarly, activities of CSOs, both alone and in public-private partnerships, often complement (and frequently supplement) government assistance in providing a wide range of services to the population. Finally, as discussed above, CSOs can act as enabler of and catalyst for cross-sector change, creating for governments the political and policy "space" to make difficult or otherwise unpopular decisions (World Economic Forum, 2013).

Civil Society Organizations are further seen as important agents for promoting good governance like transparency, effectiveness, openness, responsiveness and accountability. They can improve good governance, first, by policy analysis and advocacy; second, by regulation and monitoring of state performance and the action and behavior of public officials; third, by building social capital and enabling citizens to identify and articulate their values, beliefs, civic norms and democratic practices; fourth, by mobilizing particular constituencies, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized sections of masses, to participate more fully in politics and public affairs; and fifth, by development work to improve the well-being of their own and other communities. The role of Civil Society Organizations in promoting national integration can therefore be summarized as follows:

a. Mediating Ethnic Conflicts and Civil Unrest: Civil society today is recognized as a diverse and ever-wider ecosystem of individuals, communities and organizations. The country today is enmeshed in different forms of conflict and insecurity which are deepening disintegration. Ethno-Religious consciousness dominates the body polity of the country today. A proactive CSO can therefore serve as unbiased mediator to reconcile and settle disputing communities. This can be done by studying the prevailing conflicting situations (which are divisive elements) with a view to championing the course of reconciliation. The recent cases of Biafra's struggle for secession and the rising threat in the Niger Delta, the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Niger Delta Human and Environmental Rescue Organization (ND-HERO), International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), International Press Centre (IPC), Citizens' Forum for Constitutional Reform (CFCR), National Council of Women Societies (NCWS), Centre For Constitutional Government & Development (CCGD), and other CSOs can join forces to resolve

conflicts and ensure national cohesiveness.

b. Preventing Human Rights Violations: Violations of human rights by government agencies and individuals at different levels of the society have long way of causing insecurity and pulling integrating communities apart. Especially under the democratic dispensation, the CSOs can promote national cohesion by insisting on constitutionality and protection of human rights. During military regime several CSOs had been performing this function. Strengthening this especially now that the body polity of the country is strongly overheated can consolidate our democracy and guarantee nationalist consciousness amongst Nigerians. Undertaking campaign against government over cases of human rights violation and instituting legal actions against individuals or communities that abuse human rights would go a long way in enhancing stability and unity in the country.

c. Influencing Government Policies: One of the means government addresses societal problems is through policy making and implementation. Some communities and regions tend to receive more government attention than others. This has led to the issue of marginalization and counter marginalization. CSOs can therefore serve as representatives of such places and influence government decisions to their advantage. This underscores the fact that CSOs give power to the voice of the marginalized or under-represented by fighting for their interest and inclusion in the national politics. This will promote justice and fairness in the society.

d. Watchdog for Effective Policy Implementation: CSO can hold institutions to account, and promote transparency and accountability. Several government policies and projects awarded are not implemented effectively. This is usually dominant in places that lack good monitoring strategies for the implementation of those policies. Sometimes government initiates policies just to silence agitators and not necessarily to achieve them and thus implementation becomes difficult. Civil Society Organizations can pursue such policies and projects to ensure their effective implementation.

e. Advocacy: Creating awareness of societal issues and challenges and advocating for change. CSOs can create public awareness about tolerance, respect for rule of law, and unity amongst Nigerians and the need to overcome ethno-religious bigotry. They can also advocate for government intervention in any area of national concern that is neglected. In recent times, the Bring Back Our Girls Group has been advocating for government intervention on the abduction of over 200 Chibok girls by Boko Haram in Borno State. The group has raised her campaign in different international media and organizations to persuade the government to be proactive in the rescue of the girls.

f. Capacity Builder: CSOs can serve as capacity builders by providing education, training, workshop, seminar and other capacity building to the people. Through these capacity building activities, the ideals of nationalistic and patriotic consciousness will be attained. The spirit of national cohesion and unity in diversity and the maximization of our diversities for national development will be developed.

In the governmental realm, Civil Society Organizations represent a fundamental part of the democratic system and highlight issues of importance that knit society together. They have the ability to express controversial views; represent those without a voice; mobilize citizens into movements; build support across stakeholders; and bring credibility to the political system by promoting transparency and accountability. In promoting effective policy formulation, Civil Society Organizations are valuable partners in providing deep subject-matter expertise based on first-hand experience, trialing and scaling up innovations in social services and facilitating citizen engagement(World Economic Forum, 2013).

Challenges Facing Civil Society Organization in Nigeria

Civil Society Organizations continue to press for more democratic openings, and to promote the sanity of the rule of law in Nigeria. The above functions would have deepened national integration more than experienced if not for challenges interfacing the organizations. Today, Civil Society Organizations are facing ever-tightening restrictions whether via strict media oversight or burdensome regulatory hurdles for CSOs, governments in different countries are restricting the space for civil society particularly in the arena of advancing human rights or democratic principles. These are done through limiting their access to national and foreign funding, erecting barriers to mobile communications, and applying onerous, arbitrary or poorly administrated registration processes. Beyond steps taken by specific national governments, international civil society leaders have identified a more general decline in funding for advocacy, rights-based activities, or "causes that challenge the status quo" (World Economic Forum, 2013). Other challenges include lack of capacity in terms of knowledge, skills and methods of advocacy, corruption, ranging from lack of transparency in the utilization of donor-funds to outright embezzlement/conversion of foreign donations to personal use among members; lack of internal democracy in civil society as members are usually treated as second class citizens by their leaders/founders; divisions among the Nigerian civil society along ethnic and regional lines; lack of innovation in their mode of operation by evolving new political and economic culture in Africa; reliance on government for information and direction; dependence on government for funds and other logistic supports orchestrated by lack of financial autonomy that usually results to co-option of some members; failure of most civil society to link up with social formations in the rural areas and

limiting mobilization and orientation to urban centres and elites while important social forces in rural areas are neglected.

Conclusion

With the increasing rate of social unrest, insecurity and socio-economic downturn, the various divisive elements in the country are getting deepened. This usually affects our quest for an enduring national integration. Despite the various integrating programmes established by the Federal Government, disunity, intolerance, sentiment and conflict of different dimensions are still rocking the body polity of the country. Proactive CSOs are therefore seen as part of the institutions that can promote and consolidate national integration through their numerous activities including advocacy and capacity building.

Recommendations

In order to place CSOs in a more proactive platform for effective functionality, the followings are therefore recommended:

i. In the present era of modernism and globalization, restriction of CSOs either through media or regulating hurdles should be avoided. This is because, in a heterogeneous society like ours, CSOs are instrumental in safeguarding the state and guaranteeing stability and cohesiveness.
ii. CSOs should introduce greater degree of activities in order to address the enormous societal challenges within the country and more integration across the component units. Under this, the grassroots should be heavily represented. This is because most CSOs programmes in Nigeria are urban based.
iii. There should be internal democracy among the CSOs in Nigeria. This is because most non-founding members are usually treated as second class and leadership positions are exclusively the prerogative of the visioners.
iv. Membership and location of CSOs should cut across national borders. This will give them wider representation of members hence a holistic and credible approach to national challenges become feasible. This will enable them establish new frameworks for collaboration, partnership and innovation.
v. With democracy and globalization, accessing fund from non-governmental institutions both within and without to achieve dynamic goals is no longer difficult. CSOs should therefore look outside government for financial support. They should rather develop people-oriented projects that will attract global donor agencies.

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