

# The Role of Grassroots Stakeholder in Ensuring Credible Election in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Elections are the trademark of democracy; they also serve the rationale of peaceful change in government and confer political legitimacy on the government. Viewed from this perspective, elections represent the expression of the sovereign will of the people. However, the conduct of elections in a plural society like Nigeria is often fraught with hostility and aggression. This paper examines the role of grassroots stakeholder toward promoting credible election in Nigeria. Specifically, the grassroots stakeholder such as electoral commission, political parties and civil society groups among others. With the aid of qualitative data, the paper revealed that the grassroots stakeholder has been providing technical and financial support to credible election in terms of monitoring, observing elections, create public awareness and strengthen other forms of civic engagement in order to ensure the conduct of credible election in the country. However, the paper recommends that; Government should entrust the Independent Electoral Commissioners with the conduct of voter education and should finance civic education programme to educate citizens about the efficacy of participation in elections. This can be done through close collaboration with the media to report support provided by CSOs as a strategy for eliminating corruption in relations to effective utilization, adequate planning for and funding of voter education activities in order to achieve voter's awareness and participation in the electoral processes.

**Keywords:** Grassroots Stake Holder, Democracy, Credible Election, CSOs, EMB



## **Introduction**

From universal experience, elections are the best means of deepening democracy and promoting good governance. Credible elections make leaders accountable and responsive to the yearnings and aspirations of the people from whom they derive their mandate to govern. Free and fair elections offer citizens the opportunity to elect leaders from whom they can demand good governance, and who they can hope to reject in subsequent elections if such demand is not met. Elections, therefore, promote citizens' participation in governance through the exercise of their right to choose or reject leaders, based on the performance of such leaders in fulfilling the social contract. While elections may not be a sufficient condition for true democracy, they constitute an essential ingredient.

Nigeria is one of the most influential countries in Africa due to its strategic importance to African development. In terms of size, the country is the largest on the continent with a population of about 170 million people (NPC, 2006; NBS, 2013). Similarly, available records have shown that the per capita income of Nigeria stood at \$1280 and human development index was 0.47 (UNDP Report, 2012). Following decades of military rule, the country returned to democratic rule in May 1999 after a successful transition programme initiated by General Abdussalami Abubakar who took over as the Nigeria's military head of state after the death of General Sani Abacha. This transition ushered in the fourth republic and witnessed the influx of international agencies in the country's democratization process. Election as one of the major pillars of democratic governance received considerable attention from international agencies. Indeed, it is an undeniable fact that election is one of the most significant aspects of democratic governance. Furthermore, modern representative democracies evolved within the context of competitive elections. Periodic elections at regular intervals, therefore, represent one of the major defining elements of democracy (Baba, 2014). As an ingredient of representative government, credible elections are the best means of deepening democracy and promoting good governance (Jega, 2014). However, historical evidence revealed that elections in Nigeria are far from been credible because of series of malpractices that characterized its conduct. Reports from election observers and monitors revealed that the Nigerian 2007 and 2011 general elections are among the worst elections conducted in the country (TMG, 2012, PLAC, 2013). These elections were characterized by sharp election rigging, multiple and underage voting, ballot box stuffing and snatching and widespread electoral violence in Lagos, Kaduna, Rivers and Sokoto states (PLAC Report, 2013; INEC Study Report, 2012).

This mix of electoral experiences has generated considerable debate on the subject of transparent, free, fair and credible electoral processes among election communities. Elections stakeholders, in democratic progress itself can come with challenges; as regular elections

are held. The increase of competitive elections, one-party and military regimes face potentially destabilizing challenges that could increase the risk of fraud and violence. In the broadest of terms, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is certainly more democratic and holds more free fair and credible elections today than several decades ago, but gains in some countries have been offset by losses in others, while a number have remained democratically stagnant since independence. Elections management is crucial for the attainment of development (Norman, 2003, 2005; Bird, 2004; Wallington, 2004). Nevertheless, thorough accomplishment of elections management depends on two parts of the players. Firstly, is the competence of the electoral body (Heywood, 2002:232; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2006: 9). Secondly judging from some recent turbulent electoral reform experiences in Nigeria, it is obvious that in most cases the stakeholders are narrowly defined as the electoral commission, the legislature, religious church leaders, civil society groups, parliament, government of the day, International agencies, national voters, the political executive leaders, and opposition political parties leaders were given token representation, enabling the governing party to overrule them. Given the significance of credible election in promoting good democratic governance, international development agencies committed themselves to providing financial and technical assistance towards improving electoral process with a view to raising the quality of democratic governance in Nigeria. One of the major initiatives formed by development agencies is the Democratic Governance for Development Project (DGD). The project was introduced to provide technical and financial assistance to political institutions and civil society groups towards the promotion of credible election in Nigeria. This study will elucidate the grassroots stakeholders in the electoral process and how roles affect the elections outcome.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

**Transparent and creditable elections:** The type of elections where the grassroots elections stakeholders take bold step to invite local, regional and international observers to assess the electoral process from short term to long-term period. The observer mission observes from pre-elections phase, during elections and post elections to provide reports from different elections phases (IDEA, 2006:89-92). The study went beyond cross culture and political environment to align the arguments using the above cited concepts and material.

**Elections Stakeholders:** Elections stakeholders encompass all individuals and organizations that conduct or ensure that the elections are done on the one hand and individuals to whom elections are performed on the other. Thus, stakeholders include the Election Management Bodies (INEC), the law and order institutions, political parties, civil societies, election observers the electorates and many more organizations whose are

connected with the elections. In Nigeria, for example, there were several organizations that play a vital role of observing elections (Norman, 2010:321-326). In general, the media being one of the typical and common stakeholders also refers to various means of communication. For example, television, radio, and the newspaper are different types of media (IFES, 2010:1).

**Political party:** A political party is defined as an organized group of people with at least roughly similar political aims and opinions, that seeks to influence public policy by getting its candidates elected to public office (Pippa, 2004; Alan, 1996; Butler and Leonard, 1991; Austin and Tjernsron, 2003). Parties tend to be deeply and durably entrenched in specific substructures of the specific society in a sustainable and well-functioning democracy. They can link the governmental institutions to the elements of the civil society in a free and fair society and are regarded as necessary for any modern democratic system (Wägnerud, 2000; Norman, 2009). Political parties have a big stake in elections management. Firstly, the roles of political parties are crucial since they are the once that play the game. Other elections stakeholders play a passive role.

### **Grassroots Stakeholders and their Role in the Pursuit of Credible Election in Nigeria**

The stakeholders are those individuals, groups and organizations that have an interest or 'stake' in the Election Management Bodie's operations. They can be classified either as primary stakeholders, who directly affect or are directly affected by the EMB's activities, policies and practices, or as secondary stakeholders, who have a looser connection with the EMB's activities. Genuine and open dialogue with stakeholders can contribute to confidence in the electoral process and trust in the EMB's activities.

#### **Primary Stakeholders**

Primary stakeholders include the following groups:

- a. political parties and candidates;
- b. Election Management Body
- c. The role of government;
- d. electoral dispute resolution bodies; the media;
- e. the electorate voters and prospective voters;
- f. religious organizations, native leaders and civic participation
- g. civil society organizations; and
- h. the donor community and electoral assistance agencies

#### **Secondary Stakeholders**

The range of secondary stakeholders of an EMB is likely to be diverse. Nonetheless, it is certainly worth considering the following:

- a. EMB suppliers;
- b. The public at large; and

- c. Regional and international networks. But for the purpose of this paper, the focus would be based on primary stakeholder and the public at large from the secondary stakeholders.

### **i. Political Parties and Candidates**

Political parties and candidates are key stakeholders whose concerns and interests in an EMB needs to be considering when designing and implementing policies and activities. Unless the EMB enjoys a good relationship with, and the confidence of, political parties, its policies and programmes will attract criticism that will make it difficult for the EMB to enjoy widespread stakeholder support. A political party is defined as an organized group of people with at least roughly similar political aims and opinions, that seeks to influence public policy by getting its candidates elected to public office (Pippa, 2004; Alan, 1996; Butler & Leonard, 1991; Austin; Tjernsron, 2003). Parties tend to be deeply and durably entrenched in specific substructures of the specific society in a sustainable and well-functioning democracy. They can link the governmental institutions to the elements of the civil society in a free and fair society and are regarded as necessary for any modern democratic system (Wägnerud, 2000; Norman, 2009). Political parties have a big stake in elections management. Firstly, the roles of political parties are crucial since they are the once that play the game. Other elections stakeholders play a passive role. (Prof. López-Pintor, 2000:87-167; Morling, 1997, 17).

### **ii. Election Management Bodies' Staff**

Institutions manage elections as an activity or activities. In some, depending on the nature of the country, these bodies are known as National Electoral Commission, Independent Electoral Commission; and Institute of Electoral Management, Independent National Electoral Commission in the case of Nigeria to mention, but a few. These institutions are worthy in managing elections. However, to facilitate an independent body, the electoral bodies need to be impartial and not affiliated to any political party (Mfundisi. 2010:89).

Therefore, the Independence of electoral body's is vital. The vitality is on the ability of the electoral management bodies, performing elections without being interfered. The assumption here is, the electoral bodies, would prefer to conduct elections activities fairly and just, thus should not be interfered. Again, a note may come across, as most of the management bodies differ from one country to another. This party covers a little bit of electoral management bodies, so as to acquire a foundation of discussion, and of the study when dealing with other stakeholders of elections, such as the voter, and the need for civic and voter education, so as to allow a fair participation in electoral process EISA (2008:21).

### iii. Role of Government

Governments form part of the three institutions of the state. Others are Judiciary and the Parliament. The three according to Norman (2003) sets the so-called checks and balances. Which literary assumes that the mandate of the three different institutions are equal. It can, of course, be argued on the one hand that the mandate is equal on the basis of the spelt of the law, particularly when it indicates that it is not proper for any arm to intervene the performance of the other. (ODIHR, 2003:10-15).

#### ➤ The Executive Branch of Government

There are many reasons for an EMB to promote sound relations with the executive branch of government. The Treasury or Ministry of Finance is often responsible for the EMB's budget. Governmental EMBs need to work within the confines of a line ministry and may need to maintain close relationships with local authorities implementing electoral processes. In many cases, an EMB relies on government ministries (and regional EMBs similarly rely on local authorities) for transport and other electoral logistical support, such as premises for polling stations, and on staff seconded from various government agencies to serve as election officials. Approvals from government purchasing agencies or import licensing agencies may be required for essential procurement. EMBs may be subject to audit by the state audit authority, and may also be required to respond to inquiries from the ombudsperson or the anti-corruption agency. An EMB relies on the police force for security and, in some countries, may rely on the armed forces for security and some transport services during electoral events.

Cooperation and coordination will be enhanced if an EMB strives to keep all relevant government ministries and agencies informed about its activities and to consult with them on a regular basis about the services and support it may require from them. It can be useful for there to be a permanent working group or liaison committee involving the EMB and the government agencies on which the EMB relies for the provision of resources for electoral events. For independent EMBs, a ministry, such as the Interior Ministry or Ministry of Justice, may be the EMB's 'liaison' ministry for representations to the Cabinet or the legislature, as in Canada.

It is essential that an EMB maintain good liaison with whichever department is responsible for vetting its budget requests and releasing EMB funding, in order to ensure that this department is familiar with the EMB's programmes and the time-critical nature of its funding requirements. For a good relationship, it is important that the Treasury or Ministry of Finance has confidence in the budgeting, accounting, financial control and reporting systems used by the EMB.

Arrangements for the chair or members of an EMB to make courtesy calls on government leaders, which may include the head of state, to create awareness about the programmes of the EMB and the challenges

it may face, such as legislative, financial or logistical constraints, will raise the EMB's profile with its executive branch of government stakeholders.

➤ **The Legislature**

Election Management Bodies need access to the legislature to ensure that their views are considered in developing electoral legal frameworks and electoral resource allocations, and to obtain feedback on their performance from an important stakeholder. This access can be facilitated by having a formal point of contact in the legislature: for example, in Australia this is a special standing committee of the legislature, while in Namibia it is the speaker of the legislature. In the Solomon Islands the speaker of the legislature is also the chair of the EMB.

The legislature is the body usually responsible for making laws, including electoral laws, and it may also approve the government budget and scrutinize all public accounts, including those of EMBs. In many countries the EMB is required by law or convention to submit election reports and also annual reports to the legislature. Maintaining a good relationship with the legislature enables an EMB to put forward its budget proposals and reports knowing that they will be dealt with by a body that has some understanding of its activities.

In Costa Rica and Uruguay, the EMB has the power to place amendments to the electoral law on the agenda of the legislature. Canada and Palestine are examples where the EMB may make recommendations for amendments to electoral laws, although this is done by a line ministry or a government office in many other countries. Recommendations regarding amendment to the electoral law are also a major part of the remit of the UK Electoral Commission, which does not have responsibilities for the organization of elections although it acts as an EMB for referendums. EMBs may play a particularly important role in the development of the electoral legal framework in emerging democracies. It is advisable for an EMB to liaise with the legislature to sensitize it about electoral reform needs and the importance of amendments to electoral laws being passed long enough before an electoral event to allow the EMB to make appropriate preparations. There are numerous examples of delays in law-making which affected electoral performance, as in Malawi in 1997, arising from lack of understanding or cooperation between the legislature and the EMB or between the legislature and the head of state.

➤ **Judicial Bodies**

Many components of the judicial system may interact with EMB activities. EMBs may need the cooperation of the police and prosecuting authorities in investigating alleged electoral offences, and to appear before the criminal justice or administrative court systems for any resulting court action. The EMB, its members or its staff may be subject to judicial investigation or civil litigation, and EMB administrative policies and

practices may be subject to challenges in tribunals. As with relationships with electoral dispute resolution bodies, it is extremely important that the EMB is professional, accessible and cooperative in its dealings with the wider judicial system (Prof. López-Pintor, 2000:87-167; Morling, 1997, 17).

#### **iv. Electoral Dispute Resolution Bodies (Election Tribunal)**

An EMB may have to deal with electoral dispute resolution bodies that have powers to deal with issues such as challenges to EMB decisions, disputes between the EMB and other stakeholders, the legality of the content of EMB regulations, or challenges to election results. These may be judicial, quasi-judicial or less formal conciliation bodies. Their decisions can greatly affect the activities and public perceptions of the EMB.

General openness with these bodies including ensuring that they are well informed on all EMB activities and decisions through regular meetings, receive all EMB publications, and are invited to inspect EMB operations can assist in maintaining a good relationship. This needs to be done in a manner that does not, and does not appear to, impinge on the independence of decision making of either the EMB or the dispute resolution body.

It is of critical importance that an EMB is professional and cooperative in any investigations of electoral disputes by these bodies. It will be difficult to maintain a good relationship if the EMB is obstructive of a dispute resolution body's access to relevant electoral materials or sites, if it lobbies to limit the powers of such bodies, or if its presentation of evidence on disputes is not professional.

#### **Religious Organizations, Native Leaders and Civic Participation**

Other important civil society organizations that can have a profound impact on voter education are religious institutions and native leaders, which have a large following in countries like Botswana, South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland. While religious groups in many parts of the world have played an important role in voter education, in some African countries like Botswana have been slow to participate. It is critical that these bodies become involved in order to make a positive impact on the future of communities and the nation at large. It is debatable whether political party organizations should be viewed as part of civil society. Some perceive them as outside the realm of civil society because their aim is to seize political power, but some define civil society in broader terms to include them. Political parties are indispensable in bringing voter education to the people as they have the greatest interest in the political contest. They must explain why people should vote, the voting procedures, the secrecy of the ballot, and the general security of elections, and it is in their interests to urge their followers to cast valid ballots. But the ability of political parties to conduct voter education depends on the availability of



resources, human as well as financial. In a country like Sudan, Kenya Somaliland, Botswana and Namibia political parties do not have adequate resources to carry out the mammoth and daunting task expected of them. Moreover, they are not financed by the state, but have to fend for themselves. In fact, voter education should be carried out by non-partisan organizations. Political parties are more concerned with carrying out programmes that attract more votes for them. They may even be selective, concentrating on the constituencies that are deemed most likely to be supportive. (United Nations, 2005:1-15).

### **The Media**

The media, print and electronic, public and private, can be a key ally of an EMB in informing the public about its mandate and operations as well as informing and educating voters about democracy and elections. People who read newspapers, watch television and listen to the radio regularly tend to inform others about what they have read, seen or heard.

An EMB needs a media relations strategy that promotes regular positive contact with the media and ensures that the media have access to accurate electoral information including on EMB activities. If an EMB does not promote a transparent relationship with the media, there is a greater risk that incorrect information that may undermine its credibility will be published.

Elements in implementing a media relations strategy for any EMB would include:

- a. Identifying the relevant media and their coverage;
- b. Identifying the key people in the various media who can ensure accurate and prominent reporting of the EMB's activities;
- c. Being proactive and transparent in releasing information to the media;
- d. Ensuring that the information given to the media is clear and easily understandable;
- e. Developing a timetable for providing electoral information;
- f. Creating one EMB spokesperson for the media and one point of administrative contact within the EMB for the media; and
- g. Setting up a media centre within the EMB.

Some specific activities that will assist an EMB in its relations with the media include:

- h. Facilitating training programmes for journalists;
- i. Issuing regular media releases on electoral issues;
- j. Organizing regular media conferences;
- k. Having a readily accessible EMB media liaison officer;
- l. Preparing a media information handbook on each electoral event;
- m. Conducting media briefings on technical electoral issues; and
- n. Making electoral data easily and freely accessible to the media.

Media conferences could be at least weekly during electoral periods and when the need arises at other times. It is advisable for an EMB to establish a full-time unit to assume responsibility for media relations and to appoint a person, preferably someone with a solid media background and who is respected in media circles, as its spokesperson.

EMBs may also need to deal with the media on a commercial basis, in relation to electoral advertising, or on a regulatory basis, if an EMB has functions in regulating political campaigns. Maintaining professionalism and probity in these relationships will assist in creating a positive atmosphere for the media's reporting of electoral activities.

### **The Electorate**

An EMB primarily exists to render services to the electorate not only those who regularly vote, but those who are entitled to vote. Given the many and wide-ranging tasks an EMB performs on behalf of voters, it needs to keep the electorate informed about its activities and programmes, and seek its views on EMB processes and performance. It is wrong to assume that, since political parties, civil society organizations, the legislature and the government is the institutions which by and large represent the electorate, an EMB need only deal with these institutions and can ignore individual voters.

An EMB can profit from creating direct channels of communication with the electorate. Potential means include telephone inquiry services; public inquiry desks and suggestions boxes at locations such as markets, shopping precincts or transport hubs; and interactive radio and television programming and 'town hall' type meetings featuring EMB members. Publicizing a list of EMB contact persons and their contact details on a regular basis is always a valuable service. In India, the EMB publishes a directory of contact details at national level on its web site within the information published under the Right to Information Act, and senior staff at state level is appointed as public information officers. During the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, the electoral office distributed a voter satisfaction survey at a sample of polling station to collect impressions and direct feedback from voters on the conduct of the elections.

It is important that an EMB responds quickly and accurately to all questions and comments received from the public. A delayed response, or no response, gives the EMB a public image of an inefficient organization that is not interested in service to the electorate. An EMB may also need to make an extra effort to provide electoral services, materials and information to those marginalized through disability, illiteracy or remoteness.

An EMB can use the media to inform and educate the electorate about elections, and undertake its own publicity programmes such as print and audio-visual information products, and a regularly updated web site to keep voters in touch with its activities. The Australian EMB

publishes a stakeholder newsletter in both hard- and soft-copy form. It is helpful to set up a professional unit within the EMB to deal with media relations and voter information.

### **vii. Civil Society Organizations**

Civil society organizations dealing with a wide range of issues such as democratic development, women's empowerment, legal reform, human rights, civic education, governance and rights for people with disabilities have a stake in an EMB's activities. Regular consultation with these stakeholders, as is practiced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana and South Africa, will allow the EMB to be advised directly about their specific needs and the EMB's programmes in their support to be discussed and publicized. EMBs may also build positive relationships with civil society organizations by using them as partners to implement electoral activities, for example, in training temporary electoral staff, or in implementing voter education and information programmes.

### **ix. The Donor Community and Electoral Assistance Agencies**

The key role played by donor agencies in democracy building and electoral assistance around the world makes them an indispensable partner of many EMBs. Donor funding may go direct to an EMB, or through an intermediary, such as a government ministry. There may be a direct bilateral electoral assistance agreement with a donor, or multiple donors' assistance may be channeled through arrangements such as a UN Trust Fund (as in Indonesia in 2004 and in Liberia at the turn of 2004) or a UN Basket Fund (as in Haiti, Tanzania and Yemen). In all cases, an EMB needs to ensure that all donor requirements, including budgets, project implementation reports and financial reports, and any requests for access to inspect the EMB's activities, are met with maximum efficiency and timeliness. Donor round tables can be used as a mechanism for an EMB to report on its progress in electoral administration and use of donor funding. Donors may require, and certainly appreciate, an EMB acknowledging donor assistance in its public relations events, publications and media productions.

### **x. The Public at Large**

The general public is also an EMB stakeholder. As an organization promoting democratic values and improved governance, an EMB has responsibilities to be a good corporate citizen. In its activities it needs to consider the community's health and safety, and be environmentally safe. In its external and internal working relationships, an EMB has a responsibility to be a good practice model of the values that it represents, such as democratic decision-making processes; respect for the rule of law; non-intimidating practices; honesty and incorruptibility; transparency;

accessibility for all societal groups, including those marginalized through disability, illiteracy or remoteness; and promotion of gender balance. An EMB can seek to develop programmes of social responsibility by ploughing back into the community the skills, knowledge and other resources at its disposal. (Source: International IDEA: Electoral Management Design handbook (2006))

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This paper examines grassroots stake holders support towards credible elections in Nigeria. The paper identified various forms of stakeholders and their effect in conducting free, fair and credible election in Nigeria. However, historical evidence revealed that elections in Nigeria are far from been credible because of series of malpractices that characterised its conduct. In view of the foregoing, this paper recommends thus...

1. Thorough accomplishment of elections management depends on two parts of the players. Firstly, is the competence of the electoral management body; Secondly is the ability of entire elections stakeholders in articulating rules and regulations that govern elections and realizing the fact that one among the political parties must emerge a winner for the entire election. This will facilitate a healthy democracy which should be the pride of an active civic society's groups and other stakeholder's engagement in all facets of public life. Citizens should play an active role in all the socio-economic and political structures and institutions available in the country.
2. Inclusion of community-based associations located in rural areas. This will greatly enhance rural participation and by extension influence in credible election in Nigeria.
3. Government should entrust the Independent Electoral Commissioners with the conduct of voter education and should finance civic education programmes to educate citizens about the efficacy of participation in elections.
4. The paper also recommends close collaboration with the media to report support provided to CSOs as a strategy for eliminating corruption in relation to effective utilization. Similarly, it is recommended that those involved in electoral malfeasance be sanctioned to serve as deterrence to those who often connived with politicians to commit all sort of electoral malpractices.
5. In addition, there is also the need for proper coordination of international support in order to eliminate duplication and ensure that the assistance trickle down to the grass root where electoral malpractices are more visible. Moreover, international development partners should be encouraged to develop an instrument of evaluation and tracking of support utilization as well as closely monitor the

management of support at intervals in order to ensure proper conduct by the CSOs. This will not only help in ensuring democratic consolidation but also build citizens confidence on democratic governance in Nigeria.

6. The introduction of civic education into the national curriculum of primary and secondary schools is long overdue many countries in Africa. The country must instill a concept of civic responsibility at a tender age in order to enhance popular participation in the political process in the long run. In addition to civic education, voter education programmes would contribute to specific issues pertaining to the electoral process. There should be thorough implementation and evaluation of voter education programmes. Moreover, adequate planning for and funding of voter education activities are important to the achievement of voter awareness and participation in the electoral process.

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