

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-examining State-Civil Society Relations amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examines state-civil society relations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. While previous studies established a frosty state-civil society relations in Nigeria pre-COVID, this paper provides empirical evidence to the nature of this relationship amidst the COVID-19 context. It adopts the descriptive and exploratory research designs, using primary data sourced via qualitative and quantitative methods. Findings show that, in most cases, there was a further shrunken civic space amidst the pandemic; nonetheless, there were some pockets of opening depending on the services offered. On the one hand, given the emergency situation of COVID-19, civil society worked more closely with the state and assisted it through citizen sensitisation, serving as a watchdog to the state, and the provision of emergency relief materials, etc. On the other hand, the civic space was more shrunken through passage of the Carmal law, the Twitter ban, and government restrictions on civil society's attempt to assist in responding to the pandemic. The paper concludes that the civic space was further shrunk during the pandemic in Nigeria, and that going forward—post-COVID-19—the state must begin to see civil society organisations as partners in progress, while civil society must continue to be watchful of the undemocratic tendencies of the state beyond COVID-19.

Introduction

Civil society (CS), refers to a 'self-regulating universe of voluntary associations committed to be protected from intrusion by the state on rights and freedoms' (Edwards 2004:7), while civil society organisations (CSOs) are those organisations performing the role of civil society. These two concepts are used interchangeably in this paper. While the role of civil society (CS) cannot be overemphasised especially in democratic states, in Africa, state-CS relations are often rancorous and controversial. This often stems from the desire of African states to lord it over CS, pocket them and muzzle them out from providing the crucial constructive criticisms and playing the watch dog role, they were ordinarily meant to provide in the state. Owing to the inefficiency and abysmal performance of many African states, the relationship with civil society have often not been smooth. For example, in Nigeria, the state has often made efforts to undermine the gains of civil society, and render CSOs handicapped (Songonuga 2015); peaceful protest by civil society are often muzzled and met with Police brutality; the state perceive CSOs as encroachers of state power, while CS often views the state in the bad light (Ikelegbe 2013); and the post-democratic state is largely intolerant of CSOs (Gberevbie 2013). In Uganda, there is evidence of state deterrence towards CSOs (Salamon, Sokolowski and Associates 2004); and the environment within which CSOs operate is largely constrained by the state (Kiiz 2010). In Egypt and Tunisia, CSOs have often met with confrontational relations with the state (Hassan 2009; Habib 2005). In post-independence Tanzania, the state began to portray civil society as political enemy (Mallya 2005).

African civil societies (CSs) continue to operate under very strict conditions and within continuously shrinking civic spaces. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic however, changed a lot of things across the globe, including the relationships among democratic institutions, and between these institutions and the state. Many say the pandemic created the opportunity to come together and work together to defeat the COVID-19 crisis across the world. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, how did the nature of state-CS relations in Africa shaped the role of CS in assisting the state to respond to the crisis? How did CS assist the state to respond to the pandemic? What were the challenges CS faced in its efforts to assist the state to respond to the pandemic? What prospects, if any, did the pandemic portend for state-CS relations post-COVID? These indeed, are crucial questions deserving empirical interrogation and tenable answers.

Study Context

Civil society continue to interact with the state in diverse manner. The direction of state-CS relations often depends on the prevailing circumstances in the state (sometimes, on regime type – democratic or authoritarian). While CS actively primarily involves building social capital and ensuring a pluralistic society, Anheier (2005:82-83) posits that CS play two other important roles. The first being service delivery, which it does via private and non-profit organisations in the education, religious and health sectors, among others. The second role of CS is that of expression, often achieved through organisations active in civic advocacy and fight for a given cause or play a representative role. This latter role (expression) could be in

the form of human rights and environmental protection (civic advocacy) and unions and customer organisations (representative). Evers and Laville (2004:17) portrayed the role of CS as being at the centre of state welfare through a triangular sphere of activities. This triangular sphere lies in between the sphere of the state (public agencies), market (private firms) and community (households and families). CS, thus, acts as a mediator among this triangular spheres of society. To this extent, Brandsen, Trommel and Verschuere (2017:678) aver that contemporary governments (states) tend to shift responsibility of public service delivery to CS.

Furthermore, CS has been conceived as 'the beacon of freedom, the fountain for the protection of civil rights and of resistance against state repression, the mobilising platform of society for the protection and projection of substantive interests, the compelling force for state moderation, and the epitome of popular struggles and civil power; it has been a central force in political and economic reforms' (Kiiz 2010:7). Despite this crucial role of CS, Parnini (2006); and Mojmir and Appleton (2004) posit quite correctly that in state-CS relationship, CS can neither play the role of the state, nor substitute the state in terms of roles and responsibilities.

The pattern of relationship between state and CS has been put forward in the literature. These patterns indicate that while the state and CS may maintain robust cordial relations at some points, at other instances, the relationship could be frosty and confrontational. For Young (2000:151), state-CS relations could be supplementary, complementary or adversarial. Coston (1998) developed a model to explain state-CS relations using an 8-point continuum. Coston's continuum ranks the 8 types of state-CS relations according to the 'government [state] actor's relative acceptance or resistance to institutional pluralism, degree of formalisation of the relationship, and the relative power asymmetry in the relationship' (Coston 1998:362). Coston believes that the state is not monolithic, as it incorporates other actors that are either more cooperative or repressive than the state itself. Explicitly, the point is made that the state can dominate CS much more than civil society can do to the state. Coston's 8-point continuum results in two broad groups of relations, viz: asymmetrical (repression, rivalry and competition); and balance power relations (contracting, third party, cooperation, complementary, collaboration). Examples of asymmetrical relations are the evidence of state deterrence towards CSOs in Uganda; the state repression, handicapping, muzzling and intolerance of CSOs in Nigeria; and the confrontational relations between the state and civil society in Egypt and Tunisia. Prominent examples of balance power relations are the various collaborations between the state and civil society for civic education and citizen empowerment in Nigeria; the role of CSOs as partners in national dialogue in Lesotho and Mozambique; and CS's assistance of the state in the provision of basic social amenities to the people in Zambia.

Najam (2000) derived a four C's model to explain state-CS relations. According to him, these relations could be based on cooperation (similar goals and similar strategies); confrontational (different goals, different strategies); complementarity (similar goals, but different strategies); and co-optation (different goals, but similar strategies) (Najam 2000:391). Any of the pattern

state-CS relations takes, depends on the schema of politics and sectors; and the reality and rationality of CS's institutional interests and priorities. To a very large extent, in Africa, state-CS relations have often taken the pattern of Young's adversarial, Coston's asymmetrical and Najam's confrontational patterns of relations, with only a few instances of cooperation and co-optation. There has been so much repression and muzzling of CS in Africa, thereby shrinking very significantly, the civic spaces within which they operate (Idowu 2020:7; Ikelegbe 2013).

In Nigeria, right from the military dispensation to civilian rule, CS organisations (CSOs) have continued to suffer repression from the state (Aiyede 2003). The military is authoritarian, and rules by decrees, and is therefore, not limited to any constitutional provisions in policies and actions, whereas, the civilian rule is guided by constitutional provisions, and is therefore limited in policies and actions towards CS. While the military outrightly suppressed civil society via fiat, repressive actions, and open confrontation, the civilian rule has deployed more sinister and covert methods of anti-CS policies to gag civil society.

Aiyede avers that even though CS succeeded in opening up democracy in Nigeria, it has not been able to sustain or consolidate the representative tenets of democracy. This is largely due to state activities targeted at shutting out CS and getting it compromised to be in support of the state, come what may. While there is no doubt about the fact that the country has witnessed an influx of CSs over the years, labour unions, women groups and the press; the fact remains that state-CS relations have been anything but cordial. The civic space remains shrunk for CS groups to operate freely and comfortably. This is as various governments exert or attempt to exert 'active efforts to undermine and reverse civil society's gains' (Songonuga 2015:35). The state goes as far as creating its own CS groups to drum its support in the midst of constructive criticisms coming from genuine CS groups. For instance, during elections, some CSOs who are obviously affiliated with political parties and political candidates, could be seen drumming support for such parties and candidates. While the repression of CS was prominent with the military regime in Nigeria (Aiyede 2003), evidence suggest a shrinking civic space that continue to make it difficult for CS to play its watch dog role in the country, post-military, and in the democratic era.

State-CS relations in Nigeria have been characterised largely by a high level of mistrust and suspicion. Often times, CS groups are not allowed to organise freely (peaceful protests and marches are resisted by state institutions like the Police), and the press is continuously been muzzled by the state. Songonuga (2015:14) captures this scenario aptly, when he observed that where CS groups criticised civilian government in Nigeria, or 'mobilised through strikes and walkouts, the administration tended to disestablish unions, federalise media outlets and even arrest lead organisers.' This much explains the shrinking civic space within which CS operates in Nigeria. Radical and independent CS groups keep getting backlashes in favour of those who are willing to compromise and remain loyal to the state (Lee 2007:13). Also, 'government tend to see CSOs as unelected, unrepresentative and privatised realm of few individuals that are not accountable to anyone' (Ikelegbe 2013:43). They tend to be perceived

as encroachers of state roles, power and authority. While the CSOs often perceive the Nigerian state (government) in the negative light, they think the government is generally corrupt, failing and being irresponsible to citizen needs and aspirations (Ikelegbe 2013:43).

Research Problem

Since the Coronavirus (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on March 11, 2020, and Nigeria recorded its index case on March 28, 2020, efforts were put in place by both state and non-state actors to curtail the outbreak (Idowu & Afolabi 2025). Once again, the pandemic saw the influx of CS activities in Nigeria. Civil society groups put up a lot of sensitisation programmes, making donations to front line health workers in the form of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other necessities; providing palliatives to the poorest of the poor in society as ways to assist the state in the fight against, and responses towards the pandemic. While CS has largely operated within shrinking civic space, and state-CS relations have been frosty, controversial and marked by mistrust and suspicion over the years, it would appear that all hands were on deck to respond and contain the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. State-CS relations in Nigeria appeared to have taken a new shape amidst the pandemic.

While much research has been done on state-CS relations and the ever-shrinking space within which civil society groups operate, this empirical intervention seeks to examine the pattern of this relationship amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the shrinking civic space influenced how CS groups were able to respond, and assist the state in the fight against the pandemic. Thus, the critical questions the research poses are: What was the nature of state-CS relations amidst the pandemic in Nigeria, and how did this relationship shape the role of CS in assisting the state to respond to COVID-19 crisis? How did CS assist the state to respond to the pandemic? What were the challenges that confronted CS in its efforts to assist the state to respond to the pandemic? More explicitly, the study examines how CS played a role to assist the state to respond to COVID-19 crisis in Nigeria amidst the shrinking civic space within which it operates.

This is important because while previous studies have appraised the state of state-CS relations in Nigeria, they have done so outside the context of a pandemic. During emergency situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic presented, there has often been dynamics to a lot of state actions and behaviours in the past. For instance, Alves and da Costa (2020); Haider and Mcloughlin (2016) aver that state strives to do things differently during pandemics and national emergencies; and Osori (2020) posits that civil society must do more to assist the state during emergencies. While this assertion has been made more generally, it remains to be known, the state of state-CS relations during a global emergency (COVID-19 pandemic) in Nigeria. Whereas the state-CS relations were largely not cordial pre-COVID, were there avenues that the state was convinced to work more closely with civil society, and open up the civic space given the emergency situation? This is the gap this paper seeks to fill, and its strength over previous studies on state-CS relations in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Civil society has been conceived as a countervailing force. The countervailing force theory is associated with Gordon (1999). The theory avers that when two or more groups, forces, sets of interests, or centres wield power within a state, it often produces more benefits and positive effects by way of productive opposition, and the containment between and among the opposing forces, groups, centres or sets of interests. In line with the countervailing force theory, CS is seen as group which wields power with the state, and can therefore, be seen as eliciting productive opposition to the state. First, CS serves as a liberating force of collective goodness, a virtuous society of welfare and civil rights (Fatton 1999). Ikelegbe (2003:38) associated CS groups to societal changes and reforms. They are 'benign, progressive, developmental and democratic' (Adejumobi 2001:19). The CS in this light, represents the opposite of what the state represents. While the state is perceived to be corrupt, repressive, unaccountable, rapacious, crisis ridden and failing, CS is generally virtuous, conflict free and progressive, serving as alternative to the state (Ikelegbe 2013:12). The second phase of the countervailing perception of CS is the perception of the state as a 'leviathanic demon', whose excesses needs to be contained by CS. This approach particularly sees CS as watch dog to the activities of the state. Hall (1995:15) views CS in this regard as a 'strong and autonomous groups that balance the state...in opposition to the state.' CS is thus, perceived as constantly mounting the pressure on the state to do the needful at all times. It exists to moderate the hegemony of the state. It strives to limit the domination, sharp practices and abuses of the state (Bayart 1986:111-117). Hence, CS serves the role of a countervailing force/moderator to state's excesses and power. While this is the case, in Nigeria and Africa, at large, the state continues to make it difficult for civil society to play this opposing role by restricting their operations, especially through legislation and illegality.

Also, Manuell Castells' (2010a; 2010b; 2010c) network society presupposes that the structure of modern society is explainable using a metaphor of networks in which different actors play a role. These different actors (individuals or organisations, among others) are akin to important 'nodes' and the analysis of society only makes sense when it is focused on the relations between these nodes (Marshall and Staeheli 2015). Given this therefore, policy making, state responses to crises and other important activities of the state become the product of 'governing processes that are not fully controlled by governments. Policy making occurs through interactive forms of governing that involve many actors from different spheres' (Lewis 2011:1222). By this framework, the state is considered one of the numerous possible actors in the networks to hold significant influence over power. For Castells, by virtual of the presence of other actors (CS being a major one), state no longer hold unlimited powers. According to him, 'what really matters is that the new power system is characterised...by the plurality of source of authority, the nation-state being just one of these sources' (Castells 2010b:357).

Both the countervailing conceptions of state-CS relations and the network society frameworks are important to enable proper understanding of state-CS relations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, including the role that CS played to assist state responses to the pandemic. They are chosen for this study because they will allow a clear analysis of the consequences of shrinking civic space within which CS operates in Nigeria, and how this impacted on its role to assist the state in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the network society will enable an understanding of how the state is able to exploit such an important node as the CS in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria amidst the shrinking civic space it has constrained the CS to operate from, and the frosty relationship it has built with CS over the years. The framework of countervailing force will also aid an understanding of whether the CS is really serving as the countervailing force in the state, especially amidst the pandemic.

State-CS Relations in Africa/Nigeria Pre-COVID-19

A review of the status of state-CS relations before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Africa generally, but specifically in Nigeria, is important in order to better appreciate the pattern of this relationship amidst the COVID-19 outbreak. Pertinent to note that all the patterns of state-CS relations identified in the literature- supplementary, complementary, or adversarial (Young 2000); asymmetrical, and balance of power relations (Coston 1998); and cooperation, confrontational, complementarity, and co-optation (Najam 2000) exist in Africa. Albeit, not in the relational effect pattern, as some pattern of state-CS relations are easily recognisable than others.

CS emerged in Africa basically as an instrument of democratisation and to question the role of the state (Hassan 2009), and the demolition of colonial empire on the continent. Over the last decades, Kiiz (2010) and Dakyyen and Dang (2014) aver that there has been a proliferation of civil society organisations (CSOs) in Africa, having been touted as the solution for undemocratic and the underdevelopment indices prevalent on the continent.

Even though CSOs have become very popular in Africa, and their role easily noticeable, Kiiz (2010:9) argues that when compared to their counterparts in developed Western countries, African CSOs are behind in the areas of performing their expected functions, and serving as watchdog to incumbent governments. While these roles are to a large extent, well played by CSOs in developed countries, most CSOs in Africa seem to have been compromised, or suppressed by the state, or are simply self-serving and self-seeking. For instance, Salamon, Sokolowski and Associates (2004), and Dicklitch (1998) observed that the structure of CS in Uganda is superficial, and often a shadow of the idea of CS. The authors ascribed this to the factors of compromise, government deterrence, and CSOs taking sides with government, rather than serving as watchdogs.

Appraising state-CS relations in the developing world and Africa, Ndegwa (1996) argues that CS has two faces. These two faces are demonstrated as CS in Africa both oppose repressive government, and accommodate them at another time. What this suggests is a partisan CS,

where, depending on whose side of the state they belong (incumbent or opposition), CS could either take an opposition or supportive posture, regardless of the kind of policies the state pursues. Kasfir (1998) also talks about the role of CS in democratisation process in sub-Saharan Africa, which he claims has been hampered by a lack of independence from the state on the part of CSOs.

Habib (2005) presents a history of state-CS relations in South Africa. According to him, during the apartheid period, CS was broadly divided into two – the ‘pro-apartheid’ and the pro-business’ (anti-apartheid). While CSOs who were critical of state policies were suppressed and treated with suspicion, and excluded from taking part in political process, those who were in support of state policies were given good treatment by the state. The historical epoch of state-CS relations in South Africa as presented by Habib (2005) also shows that this was highly conditioned by the personality of the leadership. Nonetheless, he notes that state-CS relations had greatly improved post-apartheid, and democratisation. Hassan (2009) presents the case of state-CS relations in Egypt and Tunisia. His study shows that some CSOs in Egypt are ineffective, and in fact, only exist on paper, without active relations with the state. Active CSOs on the other hand, have often met with confrontational relations with the state, in which the state tries to deploy every legal means to suppress CS. Habib (2005:075) describes state-CS relations in Tunisia as an ‘example of the beleaguered civil society in North Africa, where the various states take rather ambiguous stands towards its organisations.’ Bellin (1995) observes that the Tunisian state often adopts three strategies to maintain its dominance over CSOs in the country. These include infiltration of CSOs, creating parallel organisations, and suppression of active and vibrant CSOs through intimidation using state power, and legislations that restrict their operations.

With respect to state-CS relations in Uganda, Kiiz (2010) finds that CSOs are more active in service delivery than in intervening in, and criticising government policies. He further posits that the Ugandan state is more tolerant of service delivery focused CSOs, while it is often intolerant and uncomfortable with those acting as watchdog to state policies. To a great extent, Kiiz (2010:1) argues that ‘the political environment where civil society operates is constrained by the state’ in Uganda. Mpangala (2007) avers that while state-CS relations in Tanzania was quite cordial before independence, the ‘honeymoon’ between the state and CS was short-lived after independence. The state began to portray CS as political enemy (Mallya 2005), and found ways such as intimidation using state power, and enactment of harsh and restrictive laws to suppress and eliminate CSOs in the country.

In Nigeria, even though CSOs were active and largely involved in the emergence of democracy in the country, the emerging democratic state would later conceive CS as anti-democratic, and were largely intolerant of CSOs (Gberevbie 2013). This was stretched to the extent that criticisms of state policies by CS were treated as an offense against the state, and members of CS were jailed. For Songonuga (2015), CS has been largely handicapped by the state in Nigeria. He attributed this situation to ‘weakened traditional institutions; lack of social capital and trust between the masses, civil society, and the state; and the detrimental impact

of a primarily oil – and mineral based economic model (Songonuga 2015:14-18). For example, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, faced state repression including executions (Right Livelihood 2025). According to Songonuga (2015), these factors deter the state from working for the best interest of the people, hence, the antagonism and intolerance with any criticism from CS.

Ikelegbe (2013:33) avers that while state-CS relations appeared cordial during the periods of decolonisation, soon after independence, the state had become 'suspicious, intolerant and began to infiltrate, politicise, compromise, circumscribe and harass civil society.' While the state has made attempts and/or actually suppressed CS in Nigeria, CSOs have deployed mass protests, strikes and riots to overcome state oppression and abuses. Despite constant repression from the state, Nigerian CSOs have however, been actively involved in fighting for citizen rights and liberty, and encouraging ethnic/tribal accommodation (Vickers 2006). They have also been at the fore front in peace building, relief and humanitarian services (Ikelegbe 2013). The Nigerian CS has also been able to create relevant platforms to consistently engage the state with respect to public interest and welfare of the people. They have thus, made significant progress in terms of advocacy, providing social welfare programmes; assisting the state in the control of disease, and poverty alleviation; and human capital development (Ikelegbe 2013:36).

Ikelegbe (2013) describes state-CS relations in Nigeria as dynamic, often dependent on the CSO involved, the government in power, and the sector and the issues involved. He avers that the relations could be adversarial (i.e. confrontational, dominating, control), or constructive (dialogue, partnership, cooperation, support). More recently, state-CS relations in Nigeria have varied from 'positivity, interventions, co-optation to accommodation and partnership' (Ikelegbe 2013:41). Nevertheless, he submits that suspicion and poor trust still characterise state-CS relations in Nigeria. While state is often suspicious of CS, the latter has often held negative perception of the state. The major challenges to state-CS relations in Nigeria have been identified as the 'character of the state [often operating a secret/closed system] and the weakness of CS [with numerous internal challenges]' (Ikelegbe 2013:57).

Generally, Cooper (2018:16-20) presents some means/strategies the state usually adopts to silence CSOs, and shrink the civic space. They include, increased violence, increased surveillance, media restrictions, and restrictions on funding. On the possible factor contributing to CSOs' ineffectiveness in Africa, Kleibl and Munck (2017), and Datzberger (2015) argue that the conception of CS is highly Eurocentric, and portrays European and Northern ideas that is far from the realities in Africa. Datzberger (2015) posits therefore, that many scholars are pessimistic about the existence of CS in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Chabal and Daloz (1999:2) also submit that CS is an illusion in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This is because the state lacks deep institutionalisation and is often detached from the society, hence, the lack of synergy between the state and CS.

Despite the largely gloomy nature of state-CS relations in Africa/Nigeria, evidence also shows some positivity. For instance, a number of CSOs in Nigeria (e.g., Action Aid Nigeria, CLEEN Foundation, and YIAGA Africa, etc.) are assisting and partnering the state in the provision of social and welfare services, election monitoring and observation, human capital development, and socio-economic empowerment. In comparison with other parts of Africa, Petlane (2013) observed that CSOs in Lesotho and Mozambique are increasingly seeing themselves as important partners in national dialogue, and the state is also engaging relevant stakeholders to build peace and national reconciliation. National fora of CSOs are now frequented and addressed by state representatives in the countries. In Zambia, a prominent Village Water Zambia project by CS is supporting the state in providing safe water, hygiene and sanitation to the people (Cooper 2018).

State-CS Relations amidst Emergencies and Pandemics

Emergencies like pandemics, extreme weather conditions, insecurity, etc. demand spontaneous actions in order to nip them in the bud, alleviate their consequences, and quickly overcome them. While different levels of government are expected to respond to these situations, as it is the primary responsibility of the state to do so, Alves and da Costa (2020) argue that the state may fall short in the requisite structure and resources to respond adequately and effectively in periods of such emergencies. This is where non-state actors like the CS can come in to assist the state. Pandemics and other emergency situations inevitably create the room for doing things differently, and this could also extend to state-CS relations. This suggests that amidst pandemics and emergencies, state-CS relations may take a new shape or dimension. For instance, Haider and Mcloughlin (2016) argue that in conflict and fragility situations, state-CS work more closely together to achieve peace, nation and state building. This implies that even when state-CS relations were not cordial pre-conflict, emergent conflict situations have a way of bringing the two to work closely towards attaining peace and nation building.

Writing with respect to West African CSOs in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Osori (2020) posits that CSOs should assist the state in responding in at least three diverse ways. Firstly, is in the area of 'thought leadership' which has to do with brainstorming and engaging the state on the policy options for curtailing the pandemic. Secondly, is in the area of 'communications and advocacy' which has to do with increasing communications with, and sensitising/enlightening citizens on the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic, through both social and traditional means/media. The third is in the area of protecting citizen rights and civil liberties, which has to do with criticising and opposing government attempts to dissemble and limit information, stifle press freedom, and unleash violence and extortion on the masses through lockdown and curfew enforcements. To add to these, CSOs can also assist in the areas of provision of humanitarian services and social relief materials to those infected by the COVID-19 virus, and community development projects to respond to the pandemic.

As rightly argued by Kover (2021), CS plays an important role in the alleviation of the social problems usually associated with epidemics and pandemics. While states who exploited this aspect of CS during the COVID-19 pandemic were able to reduce the calamitous consequences of the pandemic and increased the solidarity and sense of belonging in the state, others who failed to exploit CS and its important role during emergencies and pandemics performed less (Kover 2021). Kover avers that in this latter case, CSOs were ignored and cut out by the government of the day, with restrictions in movement further serving as an obstacle to the activities of CSOs to contribute to the control of the pandemic in the countries. In the countries where government recognised the role of CS, CSOs were invited by the state as partners in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and were often empowered to participate in government responses to the pandemic. For instance, Harris (2021) found that while state-CS relations in the UK had been quite impressive pre-COVID, the COVID-19 situation brought about some more positive progress in the relationship. According to the author, more CSOs were brought in by the state and given the opportunity to be involved in crisis management in communities. Also, regulations were made more flexible to allow faster responses by CSOs, and more financial support given to CSOs by the state.

In India, Tandon and Aravind (2021) aver that in the wake of the pandemic, 'India's civil society acted both independently and in close cooperation with national, provincial and local government', and were able to respond well to the challenges posed by the pandemic and lockdowns. Tandon and Aravind (2021) however note that deep into the pandemic, there was a negative twist in state-CS relations in India. The previously existing harmony and cooperation sharply turned into tensions and mistrust. The state's legislation to limit public consultation on important social issues, and the diversion of donations to CSOs in the heat of the pandemic, are identified as factors which contributed to this negative turn of state-CS relations in India amidst the pandemic.

In their study of selected countries across the world, Nampoothiri and Artuso (2021) found that the COVID-19 situation has caused a disruption in CS – this has also resulted in the emergence of new actors in CS. Among others, the pandemic has ensured CS increased use of digital platforms and technologies; increased the need for coalition building; and reshaped state-citizen relationship (Nampoothiri & Artuso 2021). On a negative note, Brechenmacher, Youngs and Carothers (2020); CIVICUS (2020a); and Roberts (2021) aver that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected state-CS relations in a number of ways, such as disrupted CS operations, and a continued shrinking civic space (especially in Africa), among others. In England, Dayson and Damm (2020) observed two different patterns of state-CS relations prior to COVID-19 outbreak, and how these patterns of relations fared amidst the pandemic. While state-CS relations had been adversarial at the national level, these adversarial relations further worsened in the wake of COVID-19. On the other hand, state-CS relations had been more complementary at the local level, and this complementarity had further improved amidst the pandemic.

CIVICUS (2020b:7-55) highlighted several response areas through which CS assisted the state in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic across the world. They include meeting essential needs, information sharing, remote service provision, monitoring and defending human rights, influencing and engaging states, public campaigning, and coalition and partnership, among others. Young (2020) posits that the COVID-19 pandemic has created at least three patterns of state-CS relations the world over, often dependent on the type of policies pursued by the state during the period. On the one hand, he avers that the pandemic has reawakened civic activism, prompting CSOs to 'step into emergency relief roles to help manage the effects of the pandemic.' The second pattern is that of a more confrontational state-CS relations, where CS has deepened its watchdog role against state's emergency powers, anti-democratic, and anti-human rights policies in its attempt to respond to the pandemic. Thirdly, the COVID-19 pandemic has 'galvanized global civil society into pushing harder for far-reaching, radical change to social, economic, and political models' (Young 2020:2). To this extent, Buzasu and Marczewski (2020) found a sharpened confrontational state-CS relations in Poland; and a refocussed state-CS partnership in Romania.

Methodology

The study adopts the descriptive and explanatory research designs, using primary and secondary data sources. The mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) approach was employed for the study. The quantitative data was sourced using online research survey administered on randomly selected citizens. A sample size of 400 respondents was arrived at, using the Research Advisors Sample Size Table (2006) with Nigeria's population of over 200 million, and 0.05 or 5% margin of error, and 95% confidence level.

This approach is basically to reach out to citizens on how much interventions they received from CS in the face of the socio-economic hardship occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. This was to enable an insight into the extent and impact of CS interventions amidst the COVID-19 crisis. At the close of the online survey after a one month period (July 3 – August 31, 2021), a total of 332 responses representing 83 percent of the sample size were harvested for onward analysis. Conversely, five (5) CS groups were purposively selected based on their active involvement in responding to the pandemic, to participate in providing the qualitative data for the study. A total of six (6) semi-structured interviews were administered on the officials of the participating CS groups, after reaching a saturation point at this number of responses.

Qualitative data was used to examine the role CS played in assisting state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic amidst the shrinking civic space; whether the shrinking space constituted a significant barrier to how much it was able to play this role; and the challenges CS faced in its efforts to assist the state amidst the pandemic and shrinking civic space. Quantitative data complemented qualitative data on the role and activities of CSOs in assisting the state to respond to the pandemic. The qualitative and quantitative data on this

objective were collected sequentially, with the qualitative data collected first, followed by the quantitative data.

Quantitative data was subjected to descriptive statistical analysis (tables, frequencies, percentages, Standard deviation, Mean, and charts) using Microsoft Word, Excel Spreadsheet, and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). On the other hand, qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis.

The background characteristics of participating CS groups and the portfolio of officers interviewed for the qualitative data are presented in Table 1 below. For ethical reasons, and to commit to the assurance of anonymity, the names of participating CS groups are withheld, and assigned a unique number.

Table 1: Background Characteristics of Interviewees for Qualitative Data

S/N	Name of CSO	Portfolio of Key Informant Interviewee	Gender of Key Informant Interviewee	Date of Interview
1.	CSO #1	National Convener	Female	July 23, 2021
		National Co-convener	Male	August 5, 2021
2.	CSO #2	Consultant	Male	July 24, 2021
3.	CSO #3	Head of Knowledge Management and Learning	Female	July 27, 2021
4.	CSO #4	Programme Officer and Strategy Development	Male	August 4, 2021
5.	CSO #5	Country Director	Female	August 4, 2021

Source: The Author, 2025

Data Presentation and Analysis

State-CS Relations amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic and its Influence on the Role of Civil Society in Assisting the State to Respond to the Pandemic in Nigeria

Interviewees aired their views on the nature of State-CS relations amidst the pandemic in Nigeria, and how that influenced CS' ability to assist the state in responding to the crisis. While a few interviewees averred that state-CS relations got a little better during the COVID-19, they nonetheless claim that this was due to the emergency situation on ground.¹ Interviewee #2 puts it more succinctly thus:

COVID-19 is more or less like an emergency situation. So, at that particular point in time, government will welcome help from wherever it is coming. You remember they were appealing to the people at the private sector too. You remember some investors donated huge amount of money to that course...So, I want to believe because it was an emergency situation, and government at that particular point in time had no other option than to welcome help from wherever the help was coming from.²

This implies that even though state-CS relations were not cordial pre-COVID, the government had to rely on assistance from all and sundry during the pandemic, including CS. CSOs were also drafted to work with state agencies such as the Presidential Taskforce on COVID, and the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC),³ and a few collaborations with the National Primary Health Care Development Agency in responding to the pandemic.⁴

In the heat of the pandemic, certain CSOs were also given the permit to move around despite the lock down, to engage in humanitarian activities, and awareness campaigns.⁵ Interviewee #6 provides a background for the possible reason for the somewhat cordial state-CS relations during the pandemic in Nigeria. She avers that: 'It is a bit of a difference when you are talking of programmatic things, because the government doesn't believe that they can do it all in carrying out humanitarian responses. So, humanitarian response is different from when you are facing and challenging the government.'⁶ This suggests that the state's attitude towards CS could take different pattern at different times, depending on the role the CS has taken upon themselves, hence, the seemingly 'friendly' state relations with CS since CS was largely involved in programmatic and humanitarian activities, rather than opposing/criticising the state.

¹ Interview with Co-convener, CSO #1, July 23, 2021; Interview with a Consultant at CSO #2, July 24, 2021; and Interview with the Covener, CSO #1 July 23, 2021

² Interview with a Consultant with CSO #2

³ Ibid.

⁴ Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5, August 4, 2021

⁵ Interview with Co-covener, CSO #1; and Ibid.

⁶ Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5

On a negative note, most interviewees alluded that state-CS relations have not changed a lot from the hostile nature it had largely taken prior to the pandemic, as this was demonstrated with some of the actions of government in the middle of the pandemic.⁷ According to Interviewee #4,

The relationship between the state and CSOs in Nigeria in this time [COVID-19 pandemic] is not very positive. We have some level of hostility from the government. A lot of CSOs are still trying to understand why the government should bring up the Carmal 2020, and all the provisions in it, because some of the lines in that particular law suggest that the government is looking for every avenue to gag CSOs in Nigeria so that they don't do what they are supposed to do. That on its own contributes to the shrinking space, and it doesn't really help CSOs to freely do what they are supposed to do.⁸

Interviewees #2 and #4 shed more light on the Carmal 2020 which was passed just in the early stages of the pandemic outbreak. According to them, the law seeks to meddle into what the CS is doing, which attempts to further shrink the civic space, as the law provides that the state could take over the board of CSOs under certain gloomy and shoddy circumstances (such as allegations of misappropriation of funds, ties with, and sponsorship of terrorism, etc.).⁹ The danger with the Carmal 2020 is that in a society where the CS is seen as anti-government always, no matter what they do, for trying to demand for good governance, such law simply means that nothing is safe, as the state could take undue advantage of its provisions to punish CSOs who are not cooperating with it.¹⁰

Another area which showed the frosty state-CS relations amidst the pandemic in Nigeria, as alluded to by some of the interviewees, is in the area of the government's ban on Twitter in the middle of the pandemic; and the terror unleashed by the state on peaceful protesters against Police brutality in the country in the middle of the pandemic.¹¹ This had further shrunk the civic space, and tampered with freedom of information, and expression.¹² On whether the COVID-19 situation changed the pre-existing frosty state-CS relations in Nigeria, some of the interviewees averred that it has not.¹³ Interviewee #4 succinctly paints it thus: 'The relationship has been like this for a while, so COVID-19 notwithstanding, I don't think it

⁷ Interview with a Consultant at CSO #2; interview with the Head of Knowledge Management and Learning, CSO #3 Africa, July 27, 2021; Interview with the Covener, CSO #1; Interview with the Programme Officer and Strategy Development, CSO #4, August 4, 2021; and Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5

⁸ Interview with the Programme Officer and Strategy Development, CSO #4

⁹ Interview with a Consultant with CSO #2; and Ibid.

¹⁰ Interview with the Programme Officer and Strategy Development, CSO #4

¹¹ Interview with the Covener, CSO #1; and Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5

¹² Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5

¹³ Interview with the Head of Knowledge Management and Learning, CSO #3; Interview with the Programme Officer and Strategy Development, CSO #4; and Interview with the Covener, CSO #1

actually played a role in shifting the relationship. It has always been hostile. I think it is just getting worse by the day, even during the COVID and post-COVID, it has always been this hostile.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Interview #3 avers that irrespective of the nature of state-CS relations during the pandemic, it did not affect the work of CS in anyway, especially in terms of monitoring government interventions; carrying out advocacy and engaging in legal reforms targeted at addressing the challenges of the pandemic.¹⁵

On the channels of state-CS relations, Interviewee #1 avers that the pandemic has made CS contact with state officials and citizens much more seamless by encouraging the deployment of technologies and social media for meetings, citizen engagement and mobilisation, and awareness creation, among others.¹⁶

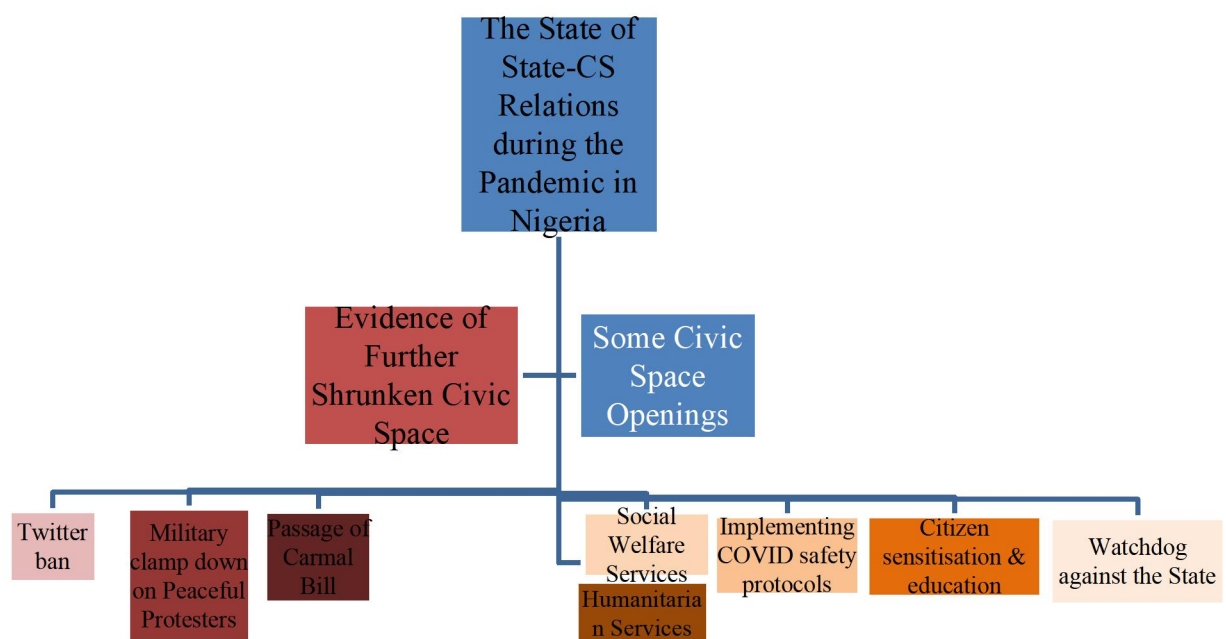


Figure 1: the Codes and Themes from Interviewees' Responses on State-CS relations during the pandemic in Nigeria

Activities of Civil Society Organisations to Assist the State to Respond to the Pandemic in Nigeria

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, CSOs undertook a number of activities to assist the state in responding to the emergency situation created by the pandemic. Most of the

¹⁴ Interview with the Programme Officer and Strategy Development, CSO #4

¹⁵ Interview with the Head of Knowledge Management and Learning, CSO #3

¹⁶ Interview with a Consultant with CSO #2

interviewees alluded that CSOs were largely involved in the areas of assisting government to implement COVID-19 safety protocols, creating public awareness and enlightenment about the pandemic, and the need to take the vaccine, and reaching out to the public in terms of provision of food and other essential item, etc., and donation of protective equipment for frontline workers during the pandemic.¹⁷ Buttressing the forgoing activities of CSOs during the pandemic, Interviewee #6 explained the activities of Action Aid Nigeria, for instance. According to her: 'We [Action Aid Nigeria] had to reach out in terms of sensitisation of people in all the communities where we worked in more than 20 states across the country...we didn't cover the whole state, but at least, we were able to try as much as we could to reach many of these communities. A lot of people with disabilities, they could not move around, we also assisted them.'¹⁸ Interviewee #1 also highlights the means through which CSOs deployed to reach out to the public, especially those living in the rural areas amidst the pandemic, noting that some CSOs were able to reach out to the people in the rural areas using Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials, media campaigns, outreaches and others.¹⁹ A number of jingles (via traditional media, online, and offline platforms) were also run by various CSOs in diverse local languages so as to reach larger populations and the rural areas to create awareness and sensitise the public about the pandemic.²⁰

Other critical areas in which CSOs played a role during the pandemic was with the monitoring of government interventions in the area of distribution of palliatives and other essentials; engaging in advocacy, and legal reforms targeted at addressing the challenges of the pandemic.²¹ By legislative involvements, such as the Disease Control Bill, CSOs were able to ensure that citizens' rights and liberties were not trampled upon during the pandemic in Nigeria – they were often mounting the pressure on government to act right in cases where such rights were abused through the excesses of the state in its efforts to curtail the spread of the pandemic.²² On the watchdog role CS played to the activities of the state during the period, Interviewee #5 averred:

When they [government] are not reaching out at all, and they claim to be reaching out, we challenge them. We challenge them on how they are reaching out, and how they are

¹⁷ Ibid.; Interview with the Covener, CSO #1; Interview with the Co-convener, CSO #1; Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5; Interview with the Head of Knowledge Management and Learning, CSO #3; and Interview with the Programme Officer and Strategy Development, CSO #4

¹⁸ Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5

¹⁹ Interview with the Co-convener, CSO #1

²⁰ Interview with a Consultant with CSO #2

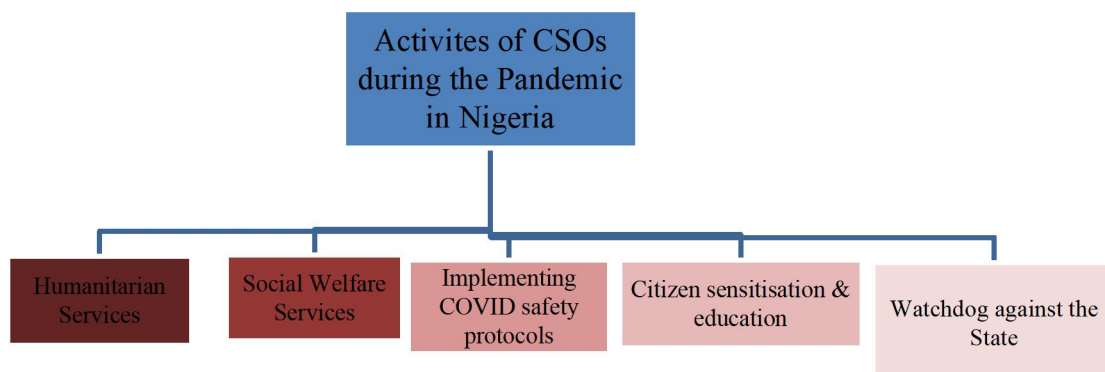
²¹ Interview with the Head of Knowledge Management and Learning, CSO #3; Interview with the Co-convener, CSO #1; and Interview with a Consultant with CSO #2

²² Interview with the Converner, CSO #1; and Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5

distributing...We [CSOs] were able to come up with the report that most of the palliatives did not get to the people that it was meant for. Without the CS, there is no way the taskforce would have known that some of the palliatives did not get down to the people, because the palliatives were procured, and of course, we raised flag about the opaque nature the palliatives.²³

CSOs also assisted the state in the area of training of personnel as to how they can handle emergency in the COVID-19 situation, while also providing technical support to various government institutions such as the National Assembly, Ministry of Women Affairs, etc.²⁴ Interviewees #5 and #6 also highlighted the role of CSOs in reaching out specifically to women and children, who, according to them, are often more vulnerable, and neglected amidst an emergency such as the COVID-19.²⁵ In the same vein, while sexual and gender based violence had increased during the pandemic in Nigeria, CSOs played a role to curtail the situation. An interviewee averred: 'There was something that became very rampant during the COVID-19 pandemic – sexual and gender based violence...Some [CSOs] were taking up cases of sexual abuse, or rape, or stuffs like that during the pandemic.'²⁶

The Figure 2 below shows the codes and themes from the interviewees' responses on the activities of CSOs during the pandemic in Nigeria.



Source: The Author, 2025

Figure 2: the Codes and Themes from Interviewees' Responses on the Activities of CSOs during the pandemic in Nigeria

²³ Interview with the Convener, CSO #1

²⁴ Interview with a Consultant with CSO #2; and Interview with the Head of Knowledge Management and Learning, CSO #3

²⁵ Interview with the Covener, CSO #1; and Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5

²⁶ Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5

Citizens also aired their views on the role CSOs played to assist the state in responding to the pandemic. The Tables 1 and 2 below present the background characteristics of respondents and a summary of their views.

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
What is your gender?		
Female	155	46.7
Male	177	53.3
Total	332	100
Which age bracket do you belong?		
18-25	114	34.3
26-35	113	34
36-50	82	24.7
Above 50	23	6.9
Total	332	100
Region		
Northcentral	43	13
Northeast	27	8.1
Northwest	29	8.7
Southeast	31	9.3
Southsouth	63	19
Southwest	139	41.9
Total	332	100
Which is your status?		
Employed	96	28.9
Self-employed	80	24.1

Student	123	37
Unemployed	33	9.9
Total	332	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Table 2: Background Characteristics of Respondents for the Survey

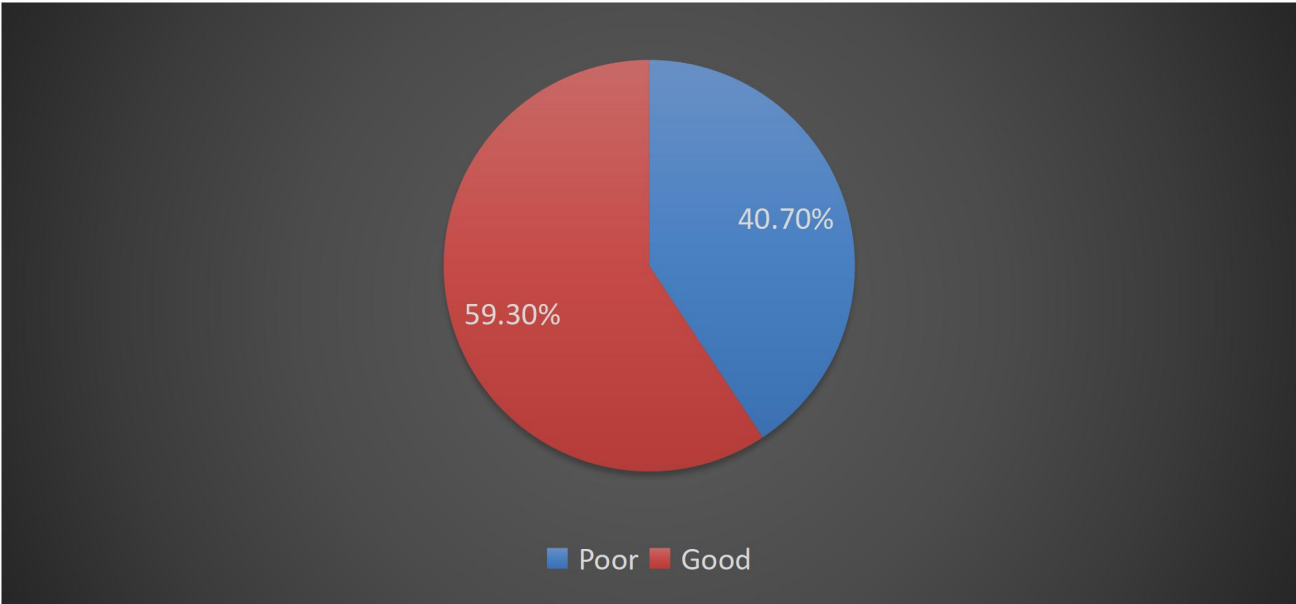
Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Total	Mean (SD)
I received palliatives (food items, money, material necessities, etc.) from a civil society group at least once during the pandemic	162(48.8)	93(28)	21(6.3)	37(11.1)	19(5.7)	332(100.0)	1.61(0.97)
I know of someone who received palliatives (food items, money, material necessity, etc.) from a civil society group at least once during the pandemic	101(30.4)	130(39.2)	25(7.5)	48(14.5)	28(8.4)	332(100.0)	1.86(1.03)
I received any of nose mask, hand sanitizers, or hand washing soaps from a civil society organisation at least once during the pandemic	117(35.2)	129(38.9)	24(7.2)	42(12.7)	20(6.0)	332(100.0)	1.75(0.97)
I know of someone who received any of nose mask, hand sanitizers, or hand washing soaps from a civil society group at least once during the	93(28.0)	131(39.5)	30(9.0)	49(14.8)	29(8.7)	332(100.0)	1.86(1.06)

pandemic							
I, or someone I know received business support from a civil society group during the pandemic	125(37.7)	128(38.6)	33(9.9)	28(8.4)	18(5.4)	332(100.0)	1.62(0.96)
I know at least one civil society group that donated personal protective equipment to frontline health workers during the pandemic	71(21.4)	101(30.4)	63(19.0)	66(19.9)	31(9.3)	332(100.0)	1.79(1.22)
I know at least one civil society group that was involved in assisting to implement COVID-19 safety protocols	40(12.0)	48(14.5)	38(11.4)	116(34.9)	90(27.1)	332(100.0)	2.54(1.31)
I received sensitisation (physically, on social media, radio, or television) about COVID-19 from at least one civil society group	28(8.4)	25(7.5)	31(9.3)	136(41.0)	112(33.7)	332(100.0)	2.81(1.25)
I know at least one civil society group that was involved in sensitisation (physically, on social media, radio, or television) about COVID-19	30(9.0)	22(6.6)	34(10.2)	144(43.4)	102(30.7)	332(100.0)	2.75(1.26)
Generally, I feel that civil society played a major role in assisting the government to respond to the	27(8.1)	33(9.9)	50(15.1)	120(36.1)	102(30.7)	332(100.0)	2.59(1.39)

pandemic							
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Source: Field Survey, 2021

Table 3: Citizens’ View on How CSOs assisted the State in Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria



Source: Field Survey, 2021

Figure 1: Summary of Citizens’ Report on CS Support during the Pandemic in Nigeria as Collated from Responses to the Survey in Table 3 above

Challenges CSOs Faced in Assisting the State to Respond to the Pandemic

A number of Interviewees admitted that the CS faced some challenges in its attempt to assist the state to respond to the pandemic. One of such challenges CSOs faced was with respect to resistance from the state. As Interviewee #1 puts it ‘In a situation whereby you are now requesting to know or want to critique the expenses during the pandemic, want to look into the situation of materials, definitely, you are going to meet some kind of resistance.’²⁷ Government restrictions during the pandemic also posed some challenges to CSOs’ response to the pandemic.²⁸ Inadequate funds, and the challenge of gaining access to funds from donors in order to respond promptly to the pandemic, was yet another challenge identified by respondents.²⁹ Buttressing this challenge, Interviewee #3 alluded that: ‘You know that

²⁷ Interview with the Co-covener, CSO #1
²⁸ Interview with the Programme Officier and Strategy Development, CSO #4
²⁹ Interview with the the Head of Knowledge Management and Learning, CSO #3; Interview with Convener, CSO #1; and Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5

most of our special organisations get grants, and you know how grant is. The granting system is a bit difficult. It is not like charity fund that you give out, so they usually expect you to carry out the intervention that will yield hasten results.³⁰ The fact that most of the donors to CSOs in Nigeria are foreign, and were also faced with the same pandemic requiring them to also support their home countries, made it further difficult for CSOs in terms of accessing funds.³¹ While a number of international supports were recorded, Interviewee #3 avers that they were more of government to government support, or international organisations giving to governments, rather than to CSOs.³²

Another critical challenge that came up for CSOs during the pandemic was the passage of the Carmal 2020, which was an attempt to gag the CS. This had distracted CS in its efforts to assist the state in responding to the pandemic.³³ Furthermore, the government's ban on Twitter in the middle of the pandemic restricted CSOs' ability to reach out to the teeming youth population.³⁴ Interviewee #6 succinctly described how the ban on Twitter was a challenge to CS' activities during the pandemic. According to her, 'COVID-19 is not gone, it is still on, but the government has taken off Twitter. The government is squeezing the civic space. It is very strange that the government will ban something like Twitter because you have a volume of about 40 million of your citizens – the young people on this Twitter, that's an opportunity for you to reach out to them. So, the looming nature of the future is that some of the information that we used to push out for COVID-19, we are not able to do that, because for the youth, that's one of the easiest way that you can reach out to them.'³⁵

The Figure 3 below shows the codes and themes from the interviewees' responses on the challenges which affected CSOs in their efforts to assist the state in responding to the pandemic in Nigeria.

³⁰ Interview with the Head of Knowledge Management and Learning, CSO #3

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Interview with a Consultant with CSO #2; and Interview with the Programme Officer and Strategy Development, CSO #4

³⁴ Interview with the Head of Knowledge Management and Learning, CSO #3; Interview with the Convener, CSO #1; and Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5

³⁵ Interview with the Country Director, CSO #5

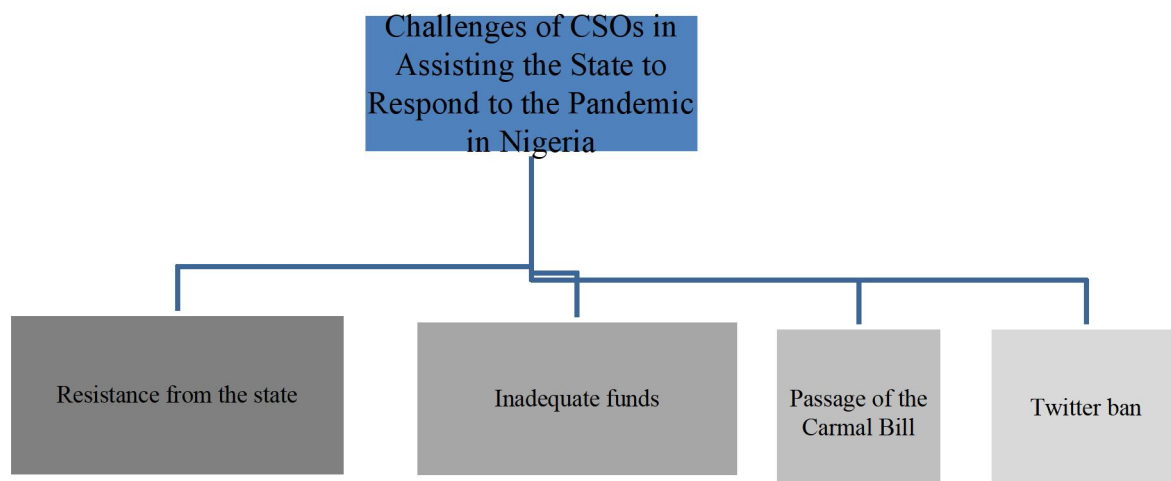


Figure 3: the Codes and Themes from Interviewees' Responses on the challenges of CSOs in assisting the state to respond to the pandemic in Nigeria

Discussion of Findings

The objectives of the study were to examine the state of state-CS relations amidst the pandemic in Nigeria, and how that influenced the ability of CS to assist the state to respond to the crisis; appraise the activities of CSOs in assisting the state to respond to the pandemic; and identify the challenges experienced by CSOs in assisting the state to respond to the pandemic.

On the first objective, the study finds that amidst the COVID-19 in Nigeria, there were evidences of a further shrinking civic space, nonetheless, with some pockets of opening, often depending on the nature of services offered by the CS groups. On the one hand, amidst the COVID-19 in Nigeria, further shrinking civic space was evidenced in the ban on Twitter, a social networking site where most citizens aired their views on governance and democracy in the country. Also, the military clamp down on peaceful protesters demanding an end to Police brutality under the #EndSARS movement where many were feared dead, shows attempts by the state to further shrink the civic space amidst the pandemic in Nigeria. Another evidence of a further shrinking civic space amidst the pandemic was the passage of the Carmal Bill into law during the early phase into the pandemic. The Carmal law which seeks to further regulate activities of CSOs, has some undemocratic provisions and tendencies embedded in it. While the Bill had been in place pre-COVID, it was however passed in the face of COVID-19. This finding aligns with Brechenmacher, et al. (2020); CIVICUS (2020a); and Roberts (2021), who found negative effect of the pandemic, and continued shrinking civic space in parts of Africa. It also aligns with Tandon and Aravind (2021) who found that state-CS relations worsened deep into the pandemic in India. The

finding however negates what Harris (2020) found in the UK, where state-CS relations improved amidst the pandemic. Another major finding is in the aspect of increased deployment of technologies in state-CS relations amidst the pandemic in Nigeria. This is also as Nampoothiri and Artuso (2021) found an increased use of digital platforms and technologies by CS amidst the pandemic.

On the pockets of openings, finding shows that the state only worked more closely with CS groups, especially those offering humanitarian and social welfare services during the pandemic because it was an emergency situation. Hence, while state-CS relations pre-COVID was not cordial (Ikelegbe 2013; Vickers 2006), amidst COVID, there was the need for all hands to be on deck to address the national health emergency which the pandemic presented. This finding aligns significantly with Haider and Mcloughlin (2016), who found that in emergency situations, CSOs work more closely with the state to address the situation. Also, Kover (2021) found that CSOs play important role in alleviating problems associated with pandemics. This pattern of state-CS relations has previously existed pre-COVID, as Ikelegbe (2013) avers that state-CS relations in Nigeria is dynamic, often dependent on, among others, the issues involved. Where it has to do with criticising government policies and playing the watchdog role, the state may frown at CS, whereas, where the CS is involved in humanitarian services like the ones it was involved in during the pandemic, the state will usually have no problem with that, but welcomes it. Therefore, the often rancorous state-CS relations in Nigeria pre-COVID-19, had not significantly affected the role of CSOs in assisting the state to respond to the pandemic. Nonetheless, given the often frosty state-CS relations pre-COVID-19, and the various restrictions on civic space during the pandemic (e.g., the passage of the Carmal Bill, the ban on Twitter, etc.), it appears CSOs could have done more to assist the state if the relationship had been cordial pre-COVID-19, and there were no restrictions during COVID-19.

With respect to the activities of CSOs, or how CS assisted the state to respond to the pandemic, the paper finds that CSOs assisted the state in implementing COVID-19 safety protocols; and citizen sensitisation and education. Other areas where CSOs assisted included the creation of public awareness about the pandemic and vaccination; the provision of food and other essential materials to households; and the donation of protective equipment for frontline workers. CSOs also acted as watchdog against undemocratic tendencies of the state amidst the pandemic and helped in protecting citizens' rights and civil liberties. They also monitored government's intervention and engaged in advocacy and legal reforms towards addressing the pandemic. Training of personnel, and the provision of technical support to the state during the COVID-19 pandemic, were the other areas in which CSOs assisted the state during the COVID pandemic in Nigeria. These findings align significantly with those of CIVICUS (2020b); Kover (2021); and Young (2020), who found that citizen sensitisation, protection of citizens' rights and civil liberties, and the provision of emergency relief materials, etc. are the roles of CSOs in addressing the pandemic the world over, and in West Africa (Osori 2020). The Epic-Africa and @AfricanNGOs' Report (2021) on the activities of CSOs across 46 African states also aligns with this finding. In context, Epic-Africa (2021) Report

shows that there was an increase in the demand for services provided by African CSOs from 31.5 percent in 2020, to 40.7 percent in 2021, while many CSOs introduced new programmes in response to the pandemic, and changed the focus of their activities to COVID-19 related ones.

From citizens' perspective of CSOs' activities during the pandemic in Nigeria, it appears CSOs were more engaged in citizen sensitisation, as 41 percent of respondents agreed, and 33.7 percent strongly agreed to have received this service from CSOs during the pandemic. Whereas, in the aspect of the provision of palliatives (such as food items, money, material necessities, etc.), only 11.1 percent agreed, and 5.7 percent strongly agreed to have received this service from CSOs amidst the pandemic.

The countervailing force, and the network society theories upon which the study is built, apply significantly to these findings, and help make sense of them. The countervailing force theory, among others, sees CS as a force which moderates the hegemony of the state, strives to limit the domination, sharp practices and abuses of the state. As a countervailing force, the CSOs played active and critical watchdog role over the activities of the state during the pandemic, to ensure that the state does not abuse its power, or when it does, CS spoke out against the state. The CS, through its watchdog role as a countervailing force, also made efforts to ensure that the state does not take undue advantage of the COVID-19 situation to abuse citizen rights, or act in unconstitutional manner. Nevertheless, to what extent these efforts paid off, is debatable. Also, with respect to the network society theory, CS proved itself as an important and relevant node in the Nigerian society. As the network society framework presents CS as one of the important nodes in society, through which state governing process is complemented and not fully controlled by the government, CS groups lived to this expectation during the pandemic. As an important node in society therefore, the CS assisted and complemented state efforts through the provision of various services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

On the challenges experienced by CS in its effort to assist the state during the pandemic, the paper finds that CS faced resistance from the state. Also, the activities of CSOs were constrained by government's restrictions put in place amidst the COVID. While some members of CS got the permit to move around, this was insufficient for CS to get involved fully. Another challenge was inadequate funds. Donors to CSOs had withheld funds either because they were experiencing financial burden owing to the COVID-19, or because they needed to address challenges posed by the pandemic in their home countries, or even on themselves. Where the funds do come, they were directed to the state, rather than CS. The passage of the Carmal law, and the ban on Twitter by the state amidst the pandemic were other challenges experienced by CS during the pandemic in Nigeria. While the Carmal law had distracted the attention and focus of CS in assisting to address the pandemic crisis, Twitter ban constituted a major constraint to online citizen engagement, mobilisation, and sensitisation by CSOs. This finding aligns with those of Habib (2005), Bellin (1995), Kiiz (2010), Songonuga (2015), and Ikelegbe (2013), who found similar challenges confronting the

activities of CSOs in South Africa, Tunisia, Uganda, and Nigeria respectively. Epic-Africa and @AfricanNGOs' Report (2021) also found inadequate funding/under-resourcing, and shrunken civic space as a major constrain to the activities of CSOs across 46 African states during the pandemic.

Conclusion – The Prospects of State-CS Relations in Nigeria Post-COVID-19

There was obvious evidence to the fact that the civic space was further shrunken during the pandemic in Nigeria, however, there were some pockets of opening, often depending on the services offered by CS. Going forward, the nature of state-CS relations in Nigeria post-COVID is very much likely to be dependent upon the kind of demands that CSOs are making, and the type of services they offer. This is because, it appears that the state tends to kick against any demands which do not sooth its interest, and it supports those demands or activities/services (most of the types embarked upon during the COVID-19 crisis) which favour it. Also, COVID-19 should serve as an eye opener to government because there were some things CSOs were doing which broke initial protocols put in place by the state in terms of its relations with CS, especially with respect to gaining access to government officials. While it used to be very difficult for CS to gain audience with the state on critical state issues, going forward, the state should have learnt a lesson that CSOs are only complementing its efforts, as such, make efforts to bring them closer in order to be more functional and effective. Going forward, there are new knowledge, there are new information as to how to get in. In the area of planning, the government has to work more closely with CSOs, which should include preparations towards addressing future pandemics.

The state should begin to see CSOs as partners in progress because all CSOs want to do is to keep the state on its toes, to ensure that the state does, or is doing what it is expected of it, and to ensure that government gives the citizens the electoral campaign promises. Therefore, the optimism is that going forward, the state is expected to see that as the goal of CSOs. While the fact remains that there are CSOs that are not doing what is expected of them, government should see that CSOs in the country are actually just trying to fight for the voiceless, and ensure that government is doing what is expected of it. Going forward, CS needs a healthy environment, a healthy land, it needs the government to look at the public service – the health sector, and also education sector. Beyond the COVID-19 crisis, the state and CS need to listen to each other, and both Nigerian government and citizens need to listen to each other, and CSOs must be watchful and mindful of the undemocratic tendencies of the state.

While there had been some twists in the patterns of state-CS relations during the pandemic, the pattern of relationship post-COVID-19 is not so much different. For instance, the ban on Twitter amidst the COVID-19, the passage of the Carmal Bill, and some of the observed pockets of openings during the pandemic, were only temporary and were not extended beyond the pandemic. However, the Carmal Bill, which tends to interfere into the affairs of CSOs and put a dent on their operational independence from the state, needs to be further

studied in order to fully capture the extent of effect the law is having on the operations of CS, and state-CS relations post-COVID.

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