

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DR ORJI ON EQUIPPING CIVIL SOCIETY FOR IMPACTFUL ENGAGEMENT IN THE NEITI/EITI PROCESS IN NIGERIA DURING THE CIVIL SOCIETY ROUNDTABLE ON EITI FRAMEWORK. 31 OCTOBER 2024

Distinguished Guests, Civil Society Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honor and privilege to speak today on a subject that is fundamental to the success of the NEITI process: the role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in shaping and driving transparency, accountability, and good governance in Nigeria's extractive sectors. The NEITI process, underpinned by the global Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) standards, provides a robust framework for ensuring that the wealth derived from our natural resources translates into development outcomes. But for this process to truly work, civil society must be fully equipped to play its critical role.

The Role of CSOs in the NEITI/EITI Process

Civil Society Organizations are the watchdogs of democracy and governance. In the context of NEITI, CSOs serve as vital intermediaries between the public and the government, helping to ensure that the benefits of transparency and accountability extend beyond reports and data to real changes in policy, management, and public welfare.

The roles of CSOs in the NEITI process are multi-faceted:

1. **Dissemination of NEITI Reports and Findings:** CSOs act as the bridge between technical reports and the public, breaking down complex data into understandable terms. They ensure that critical information reaches the grassroots, thereby fostering public awareness and demand for good governance.
2. **Advocacy for Policy Reform:** By analyzing NEITI reports, CSOs can identify gaps in governance, revenue management, and environmental protection, pushing for legislative and policy reforms that address these issues.
3. **Engagement with the Media and Public:** CSOs are instrumental in engaging the media to spotlight key findings from NEITI reports, ensuring that the public remains informed and that government action—or inaction—is scrutinized.
4. **Fostering Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue:** CSOs play a key role in creating and participating in multi-stakeholder forums that include the government, private sector, and community groups. Their participation ensures that community concerns, environmental impacts, and social benefits are considered in national resource management.

Key Issues in the 2022/23 Oil and Gas Report

The recently released 2022/2023 NEITI Oil and Gas Industry report provides a wealth of data and revelations, and several key issues stand out that require active civil society engagement:

1. **Crude Oil Theft and Pipeline Vandalism:** The report reveals ongoing challenges in addressing crude oil theft and pipeline vandalism, with significant financial losses to the country. This calls for sustained CSO advocacy, especially in monitoring the government's strategies and progress in tackling these issues. CSOs should push for accountability on the measures being implemented to curb oil theft and prevent environmental degradation.
2. **Revenue Losses and Underreporting:** The report identifies gaps in revenue collection and reporting, leading to substantial financial losses. CSOs must engage with the data to advocate for improved mechanisms in revenue collection, particularly ensuring that the full value of Nigeria's oil resources benefits the nation.
3. **Fuel Subsidy Removal and Deregulation:** The report highlights the critical issue of fuel subsidy removal and the ongoing deregulation of the downstream sector. This is an area where CSOs must engage robustly, ensuring that the government's transition plan is transparent and that the expected savings from subsidy removal are channeled into development projects that benefit the public.
4. **Environmental Impact and Sustainability Concerns:** The report also underscores the environmental cost of oil extraction, particularly in the Niger Delta. CSOs should use this information to advocate for stronger environmental protections and corporate accountability, ensuring that oil companies comply with environmental regulations.
5. **Energy Transition and Climate Change:** As Nigeria navigates the energy transition, CSOs have a vital role to play in pushing for a just transition that does not disproportionately affect vulnerable communities. The report provides data that CSOs can use to engage with the government on how to align energy policies with climate change commitments and green economic solutions.

Potential Risks for CSOs and Mitigation Measures

However, in performing these vital roles, CSOs face certain risks that must be addressed strategically to ensure their impact is sustainable and safe. Some of the potential risks include:

1. **Threats to Personal and Organizational Security:** CSOs, particularly those advocating for transparency and accountability, often face security threats. These may include harassment, intimidation, or attacks from vested interests opposed to change. To mitigate this, CSOs need to prioritize security training, establish networks of support, and collaborate with international partners to ensure their safety and amplify their voices.

2. **Funding and Resource Constraints:** The work of CSOs is often hindered by limited access to funding. To mitigate this, CSOs should build diverse funding bases, including partnerships with international development organizations, government grants, and private donations. They should also enhance their internal capacity for resource management to remain operationally independent.

3. **Government Pushback and Regulatory Barriers:** In some cases, civil society advocacy may face resistance from government actors who view their scrutiny as adversarial. CSOs must mitigate this by building strong relationships with policymakers, presenting evidence-based advocacy, and framing their work as a constructive force for national development rather than opposition to the government.

4. **Burnout and Capacity Gaps:** Advocacy for extractive sector transparency is a long-term endeavor, and many CSOs face the risk of burnout, especially smaller or rural-based organizations. To address this, CSOs must invest in internal capacity building, ensure continuous staff training, and participate in knowledge-sharing platforms that provide the necessary technical and emotional support.

Closing the Dichotomy Between Rural and Urban-Based CSOs

Another critical issue we must address is the divide between urban and rural-based CSOs in Nigeria. Too often, urban-based organizations receive more international attention, funding, and technical support, while rural-based CSOs, who often work directly with impacted communities, are left behind. This gap limits the effectiveness of grassroots advocacy and hinders broader civil society collaboration.

To close this divide, we must:

1. **Promote Inclusive Knowledge Sharing and Training:** Rural-based CSOs must have equal access to the same training and technical support that their urban counterparts receive. This includes access to workshops, seminars, and mentorship programs that build their capacity to engage effectively with the NEITI process.

2. **Ensure Fair Allocation of International Development Aid:** Development agencies and international donors must be encouraged to allocate funding equitably, ensuring that rural-based organizations are included in funding pools and have access to resources that will enable them to thrive and contribute meaningfully to the NEITI process.

3. **Facilitate Networking and Collaboration:** Urban-based CSOs must actively collaborate with their rural counterparts, sharing knowledge, resources, and strategies to ensure that the voices of all Nigerians are heard in national resource governance. This includes establishing regional and national networks that promote shared learning and joint advocacy.

Conclusion

The future of Nigeria's extractive industries and the broader governance of our natural resources hinges on the active engagement of civil society. CSOs are not just observers—they are actors who must be fully equipped to drive the change we seek. With the 2022/23 NEITI Oil and Gas Report providing a roadmap for action, we are at a critical juncture.

Let us seize this opportunity to empower civil society—urban and rural alike—to be more effective, more informed, and more strategic in their engagement with the NEITI process. Together, we can ensure that the wealth from Nigeria's resources is managed transparently, sustainably, and in a way that benefits all Nigerians.

Thank you.