

**Report of the Civil Society Review Roundtable held at Gateway Hotel, Ijebu-Ode.  
May 15 -18, 2001.**

**Introduction**

Nigeria is in the midst of a long-awaited but difficult democratic transition after decades of ineffective and corrupt military dictatorships and civilian governments. The euphoria that greeted the new democracy, however, has not been met with equally strong democratic performance. There is evidence of continued loss of public confidence in the new leadership to deliver the "democratic dividend." Corruption, lack of transparency, and government's lack of responsiveness continue unabated. On the other hand, the new democracy has produced some important, though admittedly small gains – increasing freedom of expression and association, increasing recognition of the independence of the judiciary, and a few notable attempts by government to be more consultative. Despite the small gains, there is consensus by Nigerians and Nigeria watchers on the need to sustain the new democracy. In this environment, strong and responsive government institutions and a formidable civil society capable of advocating for and bringing about policy and institutional reforms are critical in preventing a derailing of the democratic process.

The USAID/Nigeria Democracy and Governance (DG) Program has been operating under a 2-year transitional program strategy to help sustain the democratic transition. The three basic components contributing to the achievement of this objective have been support for good governance, electoral processes and strengthened civil society. The key features of the program have focused on building the capacity of government institutions for better service, people orientation and transparency; and empowering civil society to participate actively and meaningfully in public deliberations and play a government oversight role. A third focus has also been to mitigate pressures on the emerging democratic structures until they are fully able to withstand and manage threats to the transition. The Civil Society component aims at increasing civil society's knowledgeable participation as an effective counterpart in democratic governance. Overall, the program has contributed significantly to improved civil society participation, particularly the strengthening of NGO and grassroots advocacy. However, in an effort to respond to wide-ranging issues, the program focus has been so broad that it has been difficult to track significant progress in any specific area.

Although the strategy period is due to end, additional time is needed to fully implement the program and consolidate the early gains that have been made. USAID Nigeria thus plans to extend this strategy for two years, and has the opportunity to review the civil society program in terms of its scope and continued effectiveness and relevance. The program review is meant to assist USAID to refocus and restructure its civil society program to improve program impact, assure relevance and increase ability to track progress towards specific goal areas.

The views and experiences of civil society organizations are critical to informing such a program restructuring. This roundtable consultation is an important component of the review. It builds on a series of countrywide consultations held in July-August 2000 with civil society stakeholders in the six geo-political zones of the country to identify program improvements.

The civil society program review is aimed at:

- Ascertaining civil society priorities for sustaining the transition.
- Helping USAID refocus its program, based on incorporating those areas of priority.
- Streamlining implementation structure mechanisms for more effective USAID civil society assistance.
- Identifying linkages between the civil society program and other USAID DG interventions in order to bring about greater program integration for the realization of maximum results in USAID's program.

### **The Roundtable Program**

The roundtable agenda was structured in a way to facilitate information sharing and analysis through a logical sequencing of activities, with each activity building on the outcome of the preceding one. Participants representing diverse groups of Nigerian NGOs and international partners engaged in candid and productive discussions. Remarkably, consensus was reached on civil society priorities and a role for USAID civil society assistance needed to help prevent a derailing of the democratic transition. The deliberations and decisions were productive.

Four group activities focused on identifying the following:

- ◆ The role of civil society in sustaining the democratic transition;
- ◆ Strengths and weaknesses of civil society in carrying out its role;
- ◆ Priority issues areas for CSO efforts; and
- ◆ Priorities for USAID civil society assistance.

### **The role of civil society in sustaining the democratic transition**

In the first group exercise, participants developed a working definition of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Civil Society Organization was defined as association of non-state, non-governmental groups, networks, organizations whose primary purpose is to contribute to the promotion of principles and practices of good governance. They are multifaceted and multi-layered groups organized around community, functional and sectoral issues as well as general public concerns that promote good governance. CSOs exclude political parties within Nigeria context. Relatedly, the groups identified the following CSOs as critical to sustaining the transition: human rights advocacy groups; social and economic rights groups; conflict management groups; civic and political education groups; anti-corruption groups; labor and constitutional reform groups; youths and women's organizations; religious groups and professional associations such as media unions; and institutions involved in capacity building.

Running concurrently with this exercise was an exercise to provide participants with information on the different stages of democratic transition and using this information as a basis for considering the relevant roles of civil society at this point in Nigeria's transition.

In a review of various stages of democratic transition - pre-transition, early transition, late transition and consolidation - Nigeria's transition phase was characterized as early transition but with an understanding that no single classification captures totally the situation in Nigeria. This selection was justified based on the following:

- There is considerable expansion of the democratic space – Civic Advocacy Organizations are educating the public, mobilizing debate and advocating fundamental political reforms;
- There is the realization by the government, although symbolic, that its legitimacy depends on popular consent based on wide-spread participation;
- Democratic elections have been held;
- Attempts are ongoing to build a new political consensus;
- Electoral reforms still in progress;
- Constitutional reform processes are still in progress and it is hoped that they will, when adopted, provide the legal basis for a new democratic order.

Participants determined that there are key roles for civil society that are particularly relevant to Nigeria's early transition phase. Thirteen roles identified for CSOs in the political transition included educating the public on their civic rights/responsibilities; advocacy and mobilization of the citizenry for political, socio-economic and legal reforms; targeting women for leadership/governance, building community capacity for conflict management, promoting grassroots participation in governance, election monitoring. Other roles identified included oversight and monitoring of government, waging war against poverty and self regulation of CSOs. (See annex #2)

Having identified the roles, participants engaged in the sobering task of performance assessment. A scorecard bearing three ratings – not doing; doing, but not doing well; doing well – was used for performance assessment. All groups gave a 'doing, but not doing well' score for oversight and monitoring role and efforts at coalition building. Four of the five groups thought CSOs have not initiated a process or framework for self-regulation. Other areas where more than three groups assigned a rating of 'doing, not doing well' were promoting grassroots participation; civic education for rights, reforms and democratic dividend; election monitoring (see annex #2).

Scores were not absolute, as caveats were attached to some scores. For instance some groups thought education efforts were stronger related to voter education and education about basic rights, but less strong on educating the masses about the need for fundamental reforms in the system. It was also thought that civic education efforts were not sufficiently institutionalized, and that geographic coverage was uneven. On conflict management, there was reservation that the conflict mitigation role appeared to have been well carried out in the Niger-Delta, while other areas of the country were not well covered.

### **Strengths and weaknesses of Civil Society**

Civil Society's weaknesses and strengths were identified and either related to specific roles or given generic application. It is instructive that concern about low capacity -

technical, organizational and resources - ran through the discussion. The oversight function and coalition building suffer from resource and information sharing limitations (see annex # 3). On conflict mitigation and peace building, groups identified the focus paid to the issue particularly by OTI as one of the main reasons for fair performance. However, the meeting considered OTI's role as reactive rather than proactive, and this was perceived as a limitation on its effectiveness.

### **Priority Issues areas for CSO efforts**

In an effort to reduce the large number of priority issues requiring attention, groups gave the highest priority to the following: electoral reforms; constitutional/legal reforms; civic education and popular participation; gender reforms; poverty alleviation/youth employment; and transparency/accountability. Conflict mitigation/ peace building was listed as a cross-cutting issue. Remarkably, there was commonality of views among the groups on areas for programming priorities. Other priority areas identified in groups but dropped at the plenary are: human rights advocacy/rule of law and capacity building for governance institutions.

### **Priorities for USAID civil society assistance**

Prescriptions on programming presented by the roundtable drew largely from information on weaknesses and strengths as well as the institutional and environmental constraints enumerated. Before commencement of the group exercise, Dr. Elizabeth Hart, USAID DG Program Advisor, gave a brief talk on constraints and opportunities in USAID DG programming. Her sharing of information on programming possibilities and limitations (see annex # 4) helped inform groups in discussion to identify realistic recommendations for USAID consideration. The following are recommendations for USAID by the roundtable:

1. Facilitate the emergence of a CSO coalition to be actively involved in voter registration, education, electoral procedure and monitoring
2. Provide intensive training in advocacy and lobbying based on America's long history of presidential democracy.
3. Help reactivate and expand cluster-based DG networks nationwide and assist CSOs to establish and sustain an information sharing system as a way to encourage networking and collaboration.
4. Increase funding cycle to two years and include adequate provisions for institutional support
5. Reactivate the Rapid Response Fund mechanism to assist CSOs to react timely to burning issues
6. Facilitate engagement between CSOs and legislators for effective legislative advocacy.
7. Help elevate and improve the profile of civil society programs and activity through the presence of USAID/Embassy key officers at public CS functions, as was the case during the Walter Carrington era.
8. Provide training opportunities for CSOs on the technical imperatives of project crafting and management.

9. Address the issue of geographical lopsidedness in the activities of CSOs in the country through a mandate to USAID's implementing partners.
10. Training to enhance CSOs' managerial skill for improved accountability, responsibility and transparency for the evolution of enduring internal democracy among CSOs.
11. Provide regular information packs on USAID's activities to enable CSOs to understand its programs.
12. Document activities and methodologies of grantees to provide models and ideas for best practices.
13. Fund in-depth participatory research on priority issues from time to time.
14. Develop direct program relations with CSOs in the country

### **Discussion**

The ease at which consensus was reached on issues such as roles for CSOs in the transition, performance and capacity of CSOs, programming priorities by groups working independently, was not only indicative of common understandings, by CSOs of issues crucial to the sustenance of democratic transition, but also reflective of the need for collective action and partnership amongst CSOs.

Focusing on issues of electoral and constitutional reforms will require stepping up civic education, mobilization, coalition and advocacy efforts amongst CSOs and engaging relevant institutions of government constructively. In order to ensure that any intervention to build capacity enhances CSOs' contribution to sustaining the political transition, there will be need for assessment of CSOs' current capacity. Such a study could consider those insightful questions raised by Sharon Pauling in her discussion of capacity building – What capacities need to be built? Who decides it? And capacity building for what? Sharon's admonition that values associated with partnership and accountability are inextricably linked to capacity building considerations will also be useful in making decisions on assistance. Priorities identified have raised issues relating to building linkages among USAID's programs. There is need for linkages particularly between DG and the program that addresses economic growth. The rating of poverty alleviation and transparency and accountability as crucial issue areas is instructive of the need for cross-sectoral work to ensure maximum results. Poverty reduction is vital for building confidence of CS in the political transition. A group report captured the implication of pervading poverty succinctly, "poverty forces attention on current needs rather than luxurious democratic reforms". For USAID, the area of Poverty Alleviation may be implemented largely by the economic growth sector as a result of the emphasis place on the issue by the economic growth sector. However, the DG sector will be contributing to concern in the area of poverty alleviation by promoting responsiveness of government to the people. The determination that conflict management is a cross-cutting issue is a strong recommendation for carrying on where OTI left off by the DG team of USAID who will be assuming some of OTI's activities. Peter Ozo-Eson, for instance called for drawing on traditional resources embedded in culture in programming for conflict management and peace building. The recently completed conflict assessment will provide further recommendation.

### **Next steps by USAID**

- Review existing activity to reflect priorities identified
- Strengthen and integrate mechanisms responding to government institutions within the D/G purview to facilitate partnership between government institutions and CS.
- Consider partnership with local CSOs in addition to international implementing partners as a way of mentoring Nigerian CSOs for greater tasks to ensure sustainability and ownership of development assistance
- Work with other sectors of USAID in achieving maximum results in areas identified.
- Verify level of assistance from other donors in making informed decision on areas and scope of programming.
- Set realistic targets/results achievable at the end of the projected two years.
- Ensure regular consultations with CSOs on the political transition and also activate information dissemination machinery of the USAID DG office.