Scope of Citizen Engagement in Public Policy Making, Implementation, and Reforms in Nigeria: A Non-State Actors' Perspective

The Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation,
19 Gerrard Road, Ikoyi, Lagos, Nigeria
Email for correspondence: chioma.njoku@aigafrica.org

Abstract

The scope and depth of citizen engagement in public policymaking, implementation and reforms are crucial in determining governance outcomes, as wider and deeper engagements produce more beneficial outcomes. This article focuses on an analysis of Nigeria's experience with the scope and depth of citizen engagement from the perspective of non-state actors. Methodologically, this study used a cross-sectional sample survey design comprising a sample size of 1,021 non-state actors of different sub-groups selected across the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Data were analysed with descriptive statistical tools and are presented using tabular and graphic methods. Findings, among others, reveal that the scope and depth of citizen engagement, though showing signs of improvement after a long period of military rule, are still not wide and deep enough to be transformative and that certain drivers of engagement are not high enough to engender more participation by the citizens. The non-state actors themselves attribute the problem to the erroneous view by the state actors that the public is not sufficiently well informed to take part in deeper engagements because of the complex nature of governance. Yet, inclusiveness is key to building a public service that can deliver effective and efficient services.

Keywords: Citizen Engagement, public policy making and implementation, public sector reforms, non-state actors, inclusive policymaking process.

1. Introduction

The top-down approach to public policymaking and implementation has long dominated the governance systems of many African countries. Among other factors, this is attributable to the long period of military dictatorship and/or the existence of an authoritarian one-party system in many countries on the continent (Obasi & Lekorwe, 2014). Consequently, the culture of citizen engagement has not been well-rooted in the democratic governance system of many African countries. One exceptional case, however, is the Republic of Botswana, where the success is attributable to its inherited traditional Kgotla system – an age-long popular participatory village public gathering or forum used for both political and administrative purposes (Obasi & Lekorwe, 2004, 2014).

Presently, many African countries are at different levels of citizen engagement in their democratic experiences with Mauritius, South Africa, Cape Verde, Seychelles, Tunisia, Kenya, Ghana, Senegal, and Sierra Leone making significant advancements (See 2024 MO Ibrahim Index Report for example). Crucially, however, achieving impactful levels of citizen engagement in the public policymaking process involves sustained efforts and struggle (sometimes long-drawn-out ones) by civil society organisations (CSOs) before deeper and active engagement can be achieved.

While Nigeria is making some improvements in its citizen engagement process, there is still a long way to go. The country returned to democratic rule in 1999 after a long period of military dictatorship, which involved protracted struggles with the military by CSOs and a combination of progressive and conservative politicians. Since 1999, its citizen engagement struggle became one between CSOs and other civic groups on one side, and a

section of the political class which succeeded the military government, on the other side.

Against this backdrop, a focus on the perspective of non-state actors on citizen engagement in the public policy process was included in a national study on Public Service Reforms in Nigeria sponsored by the Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation. The study investigated several drivers of citizen engagement, such as:

- • Trust,
- • Responsiveness,
- • Communication channels,
- • Performance,
- • Transparency,
- • Accountability, and
- • Anti-corruption struggles.

With reference to one of these drivers, namely trust, Kumagai and Iorio (2020) described the relationship between trust and engagement in mutually reinforcing terms. They stated that the existence of trust reinforces engagement and in turn, successful engagement increases the level of trust. The classification of the relationship between trust and engagement as mutually reinforcing can be applied to almost all the other drivers listed above.

This study investigated the perception of non-state actors on the identified drivers of engagement. The main objective of the study was to examine non-state actors' perceptions of citizen engagement in improving democratic governance and service delivery in Nigeria. The key to achieving this overarching objective of improved governance is through the implementation of appropriate public sector reforms.

The rest of this article is divided into four sections. The first section (excluding the introduction) provides a theoretical overview of citizen engagement, while section two covers the methodology of the study. The data presentation and discussion will follow in section three, and finally, section four presents the conclusion and recommendations for improved governance outcomes.

2. Citizen Engagement: A Theoretical Overview

The idea of placing the citizens at the centre of governance has a great transformational potential for the way public sector works…Citizen Engagement as an instrument of reform is only as good as the use that public officials and the citizens make of it…Reform-minded public officials can take advantage of citizen engagement in several ways (UNDP, 2016).

Generally, scholars agree that at its basic conception, citizen engagement refers to the ways, activities, and processes for involving citizens in the public policy process. However, what constitutes these various ways, activities and processes are not necessarily the same wherever or whenever citizen engagement takes place. In reality, ways of engagement appear in a continuum of a long list of mechanisms, tools or models, some of which reflect the peculiarities or circumstances in the political, economic and socio-cultural contexts of nations. (Obasi & Lekorwe, 2014). The scope of citizen engagement extends beyond the traditional notions of consultation, to encompass any activity that draws the public into a closer relationship with government (Pinto, 2000). As a two-way activity, citizen engagement is a process between citizens and their democratically elected and public institutions in search of a common good (Bourgon, 1998). In this article, the concepts of *engagement* and *participation* are used interchangeably, especially as they appear in the literature reviewed.

The benefits of citizen engagement are enormous and as the World Bank (2025) succinctly put it:

citizens play a critical role in advocating for transparency, holding public institutions accountable, and contributing to their effectiveness. They also provide innovative solutions to complex developmental challenges. Growing evidence suggests, that under the right conditions, meaningful forms of civic and citizen engagement (CCE) can lead to better governance, citizen empowerment, more constructive citizen-state relations, strengthened public service delivery, and, ultimately to development effectiveness, and well-being.

Additionally, as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2024) revealed, countries with higher levels of citizen engagement tend to have more effective and responsive governments. A study of 14 American cities that examined the impact of citizen participation upon citizens, institutions, and the lives of those cities, found that there exists a fairly strong relationship between the quality of citizen participation, the quality of decision-making making and the quality of life in these cities (Markus, 1999).

2.1 The Quality and Scope of Citizen Engagement

The quality or depth of citizen engagement is a major issue in the engagement literature, specifically as relates to how some governments misuse or manipulate the engagement process. For instance, some governments gather citizens together purportedly for engagement purposes but the information flow ends up being uni-directional with the government merely passing on information to the citizens without engaging them in dialogue. A one-way flow of information from government to citizens cannot be classified as citizen engagement. Even when governments invite their citizens for dialogue, such interactions fall short of citizen engagement if the intention is merely to give citizens an opportunity to express themselves, without a deliberate intention to facilitate productive deliberation on the issues at stake and incorporate citizen input into the decision-making. It is in this context that Bone *et al*, (2006, in OECD, 2020) made useful distinctions among the concepts of *debate, dialogue* and *deliberation* (Table 1 below).

Table 1: Characteristics of Debate, Dialogue and Deliberation

Debate	**Dialogue**	**Deliberation**
Compete	Exchange	Weigh
Argue	Discuss	Choose
Promote opinion	Build relationship	Make choices
Seek majority	Understand	Seek overlap
Persuade	Seek understanding	Seek common ground
Dig in	Reach across	Framed to make choices
Tight structure	Loose structure	Flexible structure
Express	Listen	Learn
Usually fast	Usually slow	Usually slow
Clarifies	Clarifies	Clarifies
Win/lose	No decision	Common ground
Most useful when: a position or course of action is being advocated; winning is the goal.	Most useful when: People want to talk together about something without desiring a particular outcome from the conversation.	Most useful when: a decision or criteria for decision, about the best way(s) to approach an issue or problem is needed.

Bone, et al, in OECD, 2020.

The deeper or higher the level of citizen engagement, the more fruitful the engagement outcomes. In 2001, the OECD identified three stages of citizen engagement: information sharing from the government, consultation and active participation. Based on these stages, four categories or forms of citizen engagement emerged (OECD, 2001, Curtain 2003 Obasi 2004 & 2014). These four categories are (a) traditional forms of consultation such as public meetings, consultation documents, co-option to committees, and question and answer sessions; (b) client-oriented feedback such as service satisfaction surveys, complaints/suggestion schemes/boxes concerning service delivery; (c) innovative participative methods such as interactive websites, citizens' panels, focus groups and referenda; and (d) approaches that encourage citizens to deliberate over issues such as citizen juries, community plans/needs analysis, visioning exercises among others. The scope of engagement therefore is a strong factor in determining the success of the engagement process (See Sonnenfeld, *et al*, 2022).

2.2 Drivers of Citizen Engagement

As we identified in the introduction to this article, the drivers of citizen engagement are among others: trust, responsiveness, communication channels, performance, transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption struggles. We will now review some of these drivers.

Trust is a key driver of engagement, as 'low trust in public institutions is part of the reason why citizens do not engage, and the lack of citizen participation in government decision-making negatively affects performance and accountability, which leads to a decrease in trust' (Kumagai, and Iorio, 2020).

When in 2010 the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM) held one of its regional conferences in Abuja, Nigeria on the theme: *Good Governance, Accountability, and Trust*, it was a tacit acknowledgement by the conference organisers that trust deficit has been a major hindrance to effective

implementation of government policies in Nigeria (Obasi, 2023). Although there is a global decline in public trust, with a global average level of 43% as of 2024, (see OECD, 2024), the actual figure varies across different countries. Among OECD countries, for instance, the trust level was 42% in 2006 but declined to 38% in 2024. In Nigeria, the Edelman Trust Barometer 2021 report found that the public trust level was 24%.

A recent study in the *British Journal of Political Science*, by Viktor Valgarosson *et al* (2025) reported a mixed bag of global findings. According to the authors, globally, trust in representative institutions has been declining over recent decades, whereas trust in 'implementing' institutions has been stable or rising. More specifically, the study found that 'there has been an underlying trend of declining trust in parliament by 9 per cent from 1990 until 2019, **but a rise in trust in the police by about 13 points** in the same period.' (Emphasis added).

These findings appear to contradict existing evidence in many countries, with high levels of trust deficit across institutions of government, representative and implementing institutions (e.g. Nigeria, see Obasi, 2023), and across regions of the world based on OECD statistics over the years. However, even if one wants to contest these findings, the methodology used in the study (such as its dataset), seems overwhelming and unassailable. For example, the study was 'a global analysis that collated findings from 3,377 surveys conducted by 50 cross-national and national research projects in 143 countries across the world between 1958 and 2019'. The fact is that the study used very comprehensive data across regions of the world and decades.

What comes out clearly from this mix of evidence, is that some countries are probably doing better than others in their citizen engagement activities and are therefore generating positive governance outcomes. If as the OECD (2017) observed, trust is a function of reliability, responsiveness, openness, better regulation, integrity, fairness, and inclusive policymaking, then the critical role of citizen engagement cannot be over-emphasised. Since trust and citizen engagement are strongly associated, and 'trust plays a very tangible role in the effectiveness of government,' (OECD, 2017), then citizen engagement enhances the effectiveness of government.

We now turn our attention to the other drivers of engagement such as responsiveness, performance, transparency and accountability, and the anti-corruption stance of government. As an essential aspect of good governance, **responsiveness** is a desirable 'dividend' of democracy. It is both a driver of engagement as well as a fruit of the engagement process. Studies have demonstrated that the more responsive a government is, the more its citizens become engaged (Sjoberg, Mellon, & Peixoto, 2017; Vidacak, 2019). The study by Sjoberg, *et al* revealed that a government's 'genuine responsiveness to citizens' input encourages greater participation.' Also, Vidacak's empirical evidence shows that (concerning the activity of drafting legal and police acts), a marked increase in willingness to participate was indisputably linked to a significant improvement in the quality of the institutional response.

In another study by Gao, *et al*, (2024) that used large-scale data from two public service platforms in the US and China, it was found that 'the presence of government response (to citizen reports) in itself has a first-order positive impact on future engagement by the citizens.' Furthermore, the impact of government responsiveness on citizen engagement is universal across all types of service requests, even for less frequently occurring and more complex issues.

A correlation exists between **performance** and citizen engagement with engagement being triggered by either positive or negative performance. Using the police as a case study, Porumbescu *et al*, (2019) found that information about police performance strongly affects perceptions of its trustworthiness and citizens' decisions to participate in its activities. Since the relationship between performance and citizen engagement is mutually reinforcing, inclusive policymaking improves performance (OECD, 2009).

Transparency and **accountability** also have mutually reinforced relationships with citizen engagement. These two drivers promote citizen engagement and in turn citizen engagement promotes more transparency and accountability as dividends of good governance. The intertwining relationship that exists among the three concepts is reflected in the report: 'From transparency to accountability through citizen engagement' (Spotlight 11: World Development Report, 2017).

Regarding **corruption**, increasing evidence shows that it negatively impacts citizen engagement. A study by Giommoni, (2021), reveals that exposure to corruption has a general and negative effect on political participation. It affects citizen participation in elections by reducing voter turnout. Additionally, a study by Richardson, (2012), found that political corruption negatively affects civic engagement.

3. Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional sample survey design methodology although the original larger study used a

mixed-method research design. The group of respondents broadly called non-state actors in this study includes civil society organisations, service beneficiaries, private sector organisations, and taxpayers. As a national study, the survey covered the six geo-political zones of Nigeria, namely North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-South, and South-West. Within each zone, two states were selected for reasons of convenience and security.

The two states in each of the six zones are: Nasarawa and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) for the North-Central zone; Gombe and Yobe for the North-East zone; Kaduna and Kano for the North-West zone; Enugu and Ebonyi for the South-East zone; Edo and Delta for South-South zone; and Lagos and Oyo for South-West zone. Respondents in each of the clusters of non-state actors were selected using a simple random probability sampling method.

The G*Power sample size determination method was employed using G*Power 3.1.9.4 software. G*Power was used to determine the minimum sample size required to detect meaningful effects or relationships with a desired level of confidence. Through the G*Power method, a minimum sample size of 990 was selected and spread across the civic actors, service beneficiaries, private sector organisations, and taxpayers. Each zone had approximately 165 respondents. The response rate, however, varied across the zones, with some states returning more than others, bringing the total number of respondents to 1,021, which eventually constituted the sample.

The survey was conducted electronically, and this mode was chosen for its efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and ability to reach a wide and diverse audience efficiently. Additionally, the digital survey allows for easy data management and analysis. Participants were contacted electronically via email, telephone, WhatsApp, etc., and provided a direct link to access the questionnaire. To deal with the potential for technology exclusion, less literate participants were contacted physically, and the research assistants helped to explain each of the questions while they filled out the survey.

The analysis of data was done using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics was however the main tool used to summarize and present key features of the dataset through tabular and graphic presentation.
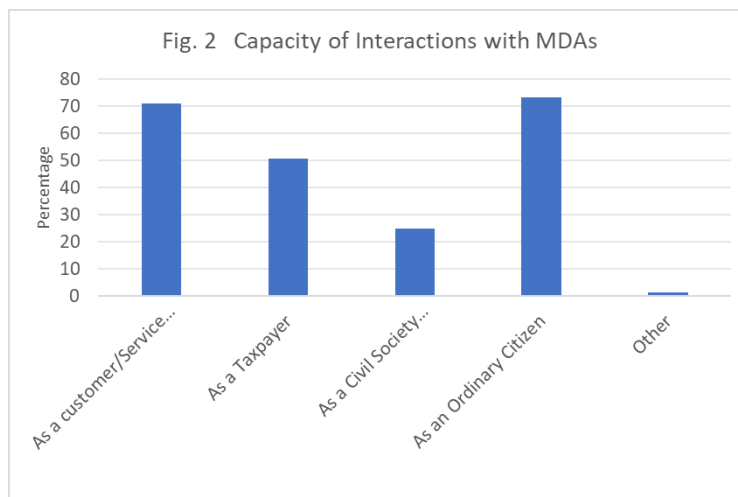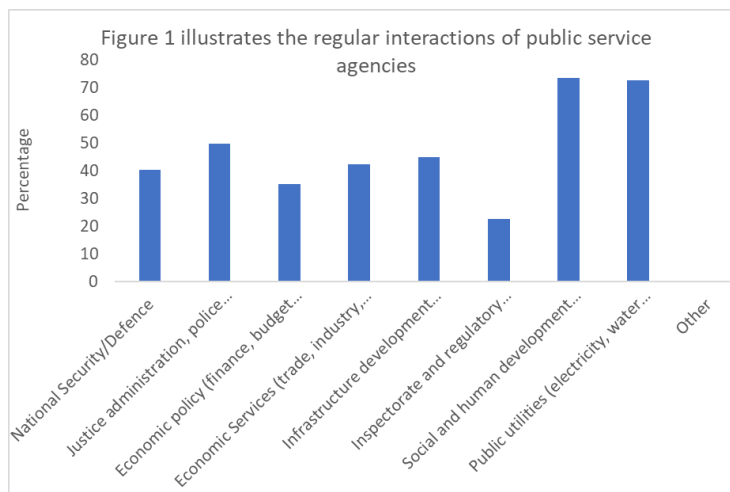
4. Data Presentation and Discussion

4.1. Data Presentation

4.1.1. Non-State Actors' Interaction with Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs)

A cluster of Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) identified in the survey as key points of interaction for non-state actors include National Security/Defence; Justice Administration, covering police protection and law enforcement; Economic Policy, including finance, budget and planning; and Economic Services encompassing trade, industry, mining, manufacture, aviation, ports management. Others are Infrastructure Development, which involves transport, inland waterways, highway rehabilitation and development; Inspectorate and Regulatory Functions; Social and Human Development services including health, education, and environmental sanitation/protection; and Public Utilities such as electricity, water supply, and communications.

Following this, respondents were asked to identify the MDAs they frequently interacted with and specify the capacity in which they engaged with these state agencies. The survey details are presented in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 highlights that citizens are primarily concerned with social and human development issues, public utilities, economic policy and services, and infrastructure development.

Figure 1 illustrates the regular interactions of public service agencies

Fig. 2 Capacity of Interactions with MDAs

4.1.2. Agency Governance Patterns and Practices

The questions on agency governance practices aim to capture non-state actors' perceptions of input conversion topics including the MDAs' approach to policy making, the frequency of authority delegation to subordinates, and the competence and morale of public officials, particularly service delivery agents.

The respondents' answers to the question on the policy process highlight the need for MDAs to place greater emphasis on data collection and analysis before formulating policies. When asked about the frequency with which MDAs rely on empirical data for policy review and formulation policy, 6 percent of the respondents selected "never", 49 percent chose "rarely", and 33 percent indicated "sometimes". Only 6 percent responded with "always", while another 6 percent selected "Don't know" (Table 2).

Table 2:

Respondents' opinions on the regularity of the MDAs' reliance on empirical data in reviewing and/or formulating policy

Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	62	6
Never	65	6
Rarely	495	49
Sometimes	337	33
Always	62	6
Total	1,021	100%

In contrast with the gaps identified by respondents in evidence-based policy, delegation in the MDAs does not appear to be a major issue to non-state actors. A significant 54 percent of respondents believe that authority is delegated downwards either "sometimes" or "frequently". Another 10 percent feel that it is "often/regularly/consistently delegated downwards. Only 22 percent think that authority is "rarely delegated downwards, while an even smaller percentage (8) think that authority is "highly centralised and never delegated downwards" (see Table 3). The remaining 5 percent "don't know" whether or not the authority is delegated.

Table 3: Respondents' opinions on the regularity of downward delegation in the MDAs		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	53	5
Highly centralised and never delegated downwards	86	8
Rarely delegated downwards	223	22
Sometimes delegated downwards	352	34
Frequently delegated downwards	210	20
Often/regularly/consistently delegated downwards	97	10
Total	1,021	100%

The level of morale and motivation within MDAs is an issue that non-state actors believe requires further attention. Only 2 percent of respondents who regularly interact with the MDAs either have no opinion on the matter or simply "don't know". As shown in Table 4, 15 percent of respondents rate the level of morale as "very low"; 47 percent consider it "low"; and another 20 percent concede that it is "somewhat high". 13 percent regard the level of morale as "high", while only 3 percent find it "very high".

Table 4:

Non-state actors' perceptions of the level of morale/motivation/team spirit among public officials

Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	18	2
Very low	149	15
Low	482	47
Somewhat high	205	20
High	132	13
Very high	35	3
Total	1,021	100%

Consistent with their views on the downward delegation of authority in Table 3, respondents find the resources transferred to service delivery agents and lower-level decision-makers insufficient. For delegated authority to be effective and respected, it should be accompanied by a commensurate delegation of resources. Excluding the 4 percent who "don't know", 14 percent consider the resources "totally inadequate"; as high as 40 percent consider it "not adequate" and 25 percent feel they are "somewhat adequate". Only 14 percent deem the resources transferred to lower-level decision-makers as "adequate", while 3 percent believe they are "more than adequate" (Table 5).

Table 5:

Respondents' perceptions (based on regular interactions with service delivery agents in ministries and departments) of the adequacy of the resources transferred to delegates and lower-level decision-makers

Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	37	4
Totally inadequate	147	14
Not quite adequate	414	40
Somewhat adequate	251	25
Adequate	139	14
More than adequate	33	3
Total	1,021	100%

4.1.3 Scope for Stakeholder Participation in Policy Formation And Reform

In addition to soliciting the respondents' opinions on the MDAs' internal governance practices, the survey questionnaire also explored their cognitive and affective feelings on participation. Specifically, the instrument asked whether citizens believe that they have a voice, and whether as citizens or service beneficiaries, their opinions on the quantity, quality and timeliness of service delivery matters.

As Table 6 shows, non-state actors are not convinced that public officials place much importance on inputs from external stakeholders, such as ordinary citizens, civic groups, and professional associations. Only 4 percent believe the importance attached to external inputs is "very high", while 16 percent rate it as "high". In contrast, 45 percent of the respondents consider the degree of importance to be "low"; 28 percent rate it as "somewhat

high", while 3 percent think public officials attach "zero" importance to external inputs. 4 percent selected "don't know".

Table 6:

Respondents' assessment of the degree of importance that public officials attach to inputs by external stakeholders

Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	43	4
Zero	33	3
Low	455	45
Somewhat high	288	28
High	159	16
Very high	43	4
Total	1,021	100%

Do the government and public service make adequate efforts to involve civil society in the formulation of policy? The majority's response to this question is a resounding 'no'. As shown in Table 7, 76 percent of respondents answered "No" while only 24 percent answered "Yes". This is consistent with the response to the question on the level of external input in the policy formulation process highlighted in Table 2 earlier.

Table 7:

Respondents' response to the question as to whether adequate efforts are made by government and public service to involve civil society in the formulation of policy

Options	Frequency	Percent
No	774	76
Yes	247	24
Total	1,021	100%

When the question was rephrased to assess respondents' perceptions of the level of civil society involvement in policy formulation, the overall response remained largely the same. Apart from the 2 percent that selected "Don't know", 8 percent believe the level of civil society involvement in policy formulation was "zero"; 51 consider it "low" and 35 percent consider it as "medium". Only 4 percent rate it "high" (see Table 8).

Table 8:

Respondents' perception of the level of civil society's involvement in government policy formulation

Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	18	2
Zero	85	8
Low	518	51
Medium	360	35
High	40	4
Total	1,021	100%

The respondents' positions remained largely similar when the question shifted to the level of civil society involvement in policy implementation (Table 9).

Table 9:		
Respondent's perceptions of the level of civil society involvement in policy implementation		
Options	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Don't know	17	2
Zero	100	10
Low	517	51
Medium	346	33
High	41	4
Total	1,021	100%

The respondents generally believe that the private sector is not sufficiently involved in policy formulation and implementation. Apart from 3 percent who selected "Don't know", 9 percent consider the level of private sector involvement in policy formulation to be "zero", another 44 percent rate it as "low", while 35 percent view it as "medium". Only 9 percent rate the level of private sector involvement in policy formulation "high". The responses are similar to the level of private sector involvement in policy implementation (See Tables 10 and 11).

Table 10		
Respondents' perceptions of the level of private sector involvement in the formulation of policy		
Options	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Don't know	35	3
Zero	89	9
Low	447	44
Medium	355	35
High	95	9
Total	1,021	100%

Table 11		
Respondents' perception of the level of private sector's involvement in policy implementation		
Options	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Don't know	33	3
Zero	78	8
Low	445	44
Medium	378	36
High	87	9
Total	1,021	100%

According to non-state actors, channels of communication between members of the public and the MDAs are either limited or ineffective. Only 4 percent of respondents view the communication channels as "more than adequate and very effective" while 17 percent consider them "adequate and effective." 28 percent deem the

channels as "neither adequate nor effective", 16 percent rate them "inadequate but somehow effective", and 32 percent find them "adequate but ineffective" (see Table 12).

Table 12:

Respondents' rating of the adequacy and effectiveness of the communication channels between the MDAs and the public

Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	28	3
Neither adequate nor effective.	287	28
Inadequate but somehow effective.	162	16
Adequate but not quite effective.	323	32
Adequate and effective.	178	17
More than adequate and very effective.	43	4
Total	1,021	100%

The opportunities available to ordinary citizens to evaluate public service performance largely determine the range and quality of the output or services delivered. Unfortunately, based on the responses from non-state respondents, opportunities for citizens or beneficiaries to evaluate public agencies are limited in Nigeria. Approximately 50 percent of the respondents perceive "little" or "no opportunity" to evaluate the quantity or quality of services provided by MDAs. An additional 21 percent of the respondents view the opportunities for evaluation as "somewhat adequate". 18 percent find the opportunities "adequate and meaningful", while only 6 percent consider such opportunities "more than adequate and very meaningful" (Table 13).

Table 13:

Respondents' opinions on the adequacy of opportunities that the citizen/service beneficiary has to evaluate public service agencies' outputs/services

Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	46	4.5
No opportunity whatsoever	133	13.0
Little opportunity to evaluate public agencies' outputs/services	382	37.4
Somewhat adequate and meaningful opportunities	216	21.2
Adequate and meaningful opportunities	179	17.5
More than adequate and meaningful opportunities	65	6.4
Total	1,021	100%

Setting aside rationality consideration, to what extent can public service rules and regulations be relied upon as a mechanism for addressing and meeting citizen demands, particularly those related to choice, equity, courtesy, prompt, cost-effective delivery of services, and the protection of privacy and basic human rights? Approximately half of the respondents believe that the public service rules and regulations are either totally disconnected from citizen concerns (13 percent) or not quite responsive to citizen demands (37 percent). Another 24 percent of respondents think that the rules are "somewhat responsive" to citizen demands, 16 percent view them as "responsive" and 8 percent consider them "very responsive". This aligns closely with the respondents' views on the responsiveness of management and service delivery agents' decisions to citizen demands (See Tables 14 and 15).

Table 14: Respondents' opinions on the role of public service rules and regulations in meeting citizen demands

Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	26	2.5
Totally disconnected from citizen concerns and demands	130	12.7
Not quite responsive to citizen demands	381	37.3
Somewhat responsive to citizen demands	247	24.2
Responsive to citizen demands	160	15.7
Very responsive to citizen/"customer" demands	77	7.5
Total	1,021	100%

Table 15:

Respondents' answer to the question, "How would you rate the responsiveness of management (and service delivery agents') decisions to public demands?"

Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	19	1.9
Not responsive at all	116	11.4
Not quite responsive	452	44.3
Somewhat responsive	266	26.1
Responsive	144	14.1
Very responsive	24	2.4
Total	1,021	100%

4.1.4   State-citizen interaction and trust in government

Declining trust in public officials is the foremost challenge facing contemporary Nigeria. Approximately 63 percent of respondents place citizen trust in public officials, and by implication, trust in government) as either 'very low' (29 percent) or 'low' (34 percent). When the bar is raised to 'medium', the cumulative percentage of respondents with concerning evaluations rises to 90. This leaves only 10 percent who rate the level of citizen trust in public officials as 'high' or 'very high' (See Table 16).

Table 16:

Respondent's answers to the question, 'How would you rate the level of the citizen's faith (trust) in the public officials generally?'

	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	5	0.5
Very low	293	28.7
Low	346	33.9
Medium	277	27.1
High	74	7.2
Very high	26	2.5
Total	1,021	100%

The respondents' evaluation of the public service's competence, professionalism, and integrity is neither low nor high but rather falls somewhere in between. Only 16.7 percent of respondents rate the public service as 'very low' on these three evaluation criteria. Another 32 percent rate it as 'low', while the majority (38 percent) give it a 'medium' rating. Only 9 percent of the respondents rate the public service as 'high', and an even lower percentage (3 percent) rate it as 'very high' (See Table 17).

Table 17: Respondents' opinions on the integrity, professionalism, and competence of the public service		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	11	1.1
Very low	171	16.7
Low	327	32.0
Medium	389	38.1
High	92	9.0
Very high	31	3.0
Total	1,021	100%

However, the respondents rate the public service poorly in terms of accountability, transparency, and respect for the rule of law. Over 50 percent express reservations about the accountability and transparency of the public service (see Table 18).

| Table 18: Respondents' rating of public service agencies on accountability and transparency		
	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	7	0.7
Zero	71	7.0
Low	547	53.6
Somewhat high	212	20.8
High	148	14.5
Very high	36	3.5
Total	1,021	100%

4.1.5 Public service performance

Given all the various reforms implemented over the years, one would expect the citizens and the service beneficiaries to rate public service performance highly. However, this is clearly not the case. Approximately 7 percent of respondents in the non-state cluster consider the performance of the public service as "highly unsatisfactory", 19.4 percent rate it as "poor", and another 44 percent deem it "fair". A relatively small percentage (26) rate it as "good", while only 3.4 percent assess it as "excellent" (Table 19).

Table 19: How would you rate the overall performance of the public service?		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Highly unsatisfactory	72	7.1
Poor	198	19.4
Fair	446	43.7
Good	270	26.4
Excellent	35	3.4
Total	1,021	100%

The opinions of non-state actors' on the major factors hindering performance are very revealing as shown in Table 20 and figure 3:

Table 20: Non-state actors' opinions on 5 (five) obstacles to the effective performance of the Public Service

Options	Frequency	Percent
Bribery, corruption, and embezzlement of public funds	901	88.2%
Indiscipline and poor attitude to work	760	74.4%
Nepotism and faulty personnel practices	660	64.6%
Lack of incentives and motivation	562	55.0%
Absence of output, cost, time, and quality standards, resulting in laxity and indifference	400	39.2%
Over-centralization (and failure to delegate functions and authority to service delivery agents)	205	20.1%
Reporting and accountability lapses	382	37.4%
Improper demarcation organization and structural boundaries	117	11.5%
Lack of client/citizen feedback	220	21.5%
Defective layout of offices and service perimeters	59	5.8%
Other	1	0.1%
Total	4,267	417.9%
Total number of respondents = 1,021		

Fig. 3. Obstacles to Effective Performance
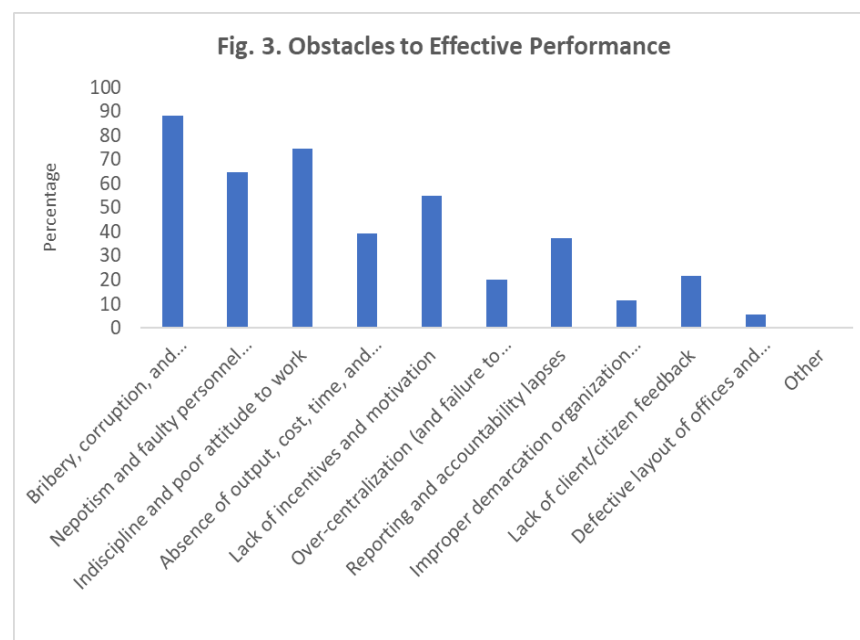
4.1.6   Future reform priorities

Public awareness of reforms undertaken in previous or recent years is relatively limited. As shown in Table 21, the percentage of respondents in the non-state cluster who are aware of past and current public service reforms (52 percent) is almost the same as those who are unaware. Unsurprisingly, a large proportion (53 percent) of the respondents cannot recall key details of past or recent reforms (See Table 22 further down). This group includes those who responded 'Yes' to the question on awareness of public service reforms.

Table 21:

Respondents' answer to the question, "Are you aware of public service reforms undertaken previously or in recent years?"

Options	Frequency	Percent
No	488	47.8
Yes	533	52.2
Total	1,021	100%

Table 22:

Proportion of respondents who can recall the highlights of public service reforms undertaken previously or in recent years

Options	Frequency	Percent
No, I can't recall.	538	52.7
Yes, I can.	483	47.3
Total	1,021	100%

Despite the knowledge deficits, a relatively high percentage (72 percent) of respondents believe that the government and the public service are not making sufficient efforts to involve civil society in the re-engineering and reform of public service processes (Table 23). This mirrors the earlier conclusion regarding the limited involvement of external stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation.

Table 23: Respondents' answer to the question, "Do you think that the government and the public service make enough effort to involve civil society in the re-engineering and reform of public service processes?"

Options	Frequency	Percent
No	737	72.2
Yes	284	27.8
Total	1,021	100%

As part of the study, respondents were asked to indicate three factors which, in their opinion, are responsible for the government's failure to involve citizens and service beneficiaries in the public service reform process. Their responses are indicated in Fig. 4 as follows:

Fig. 4 Factors that Hinder Citizens' Participation in Reforms
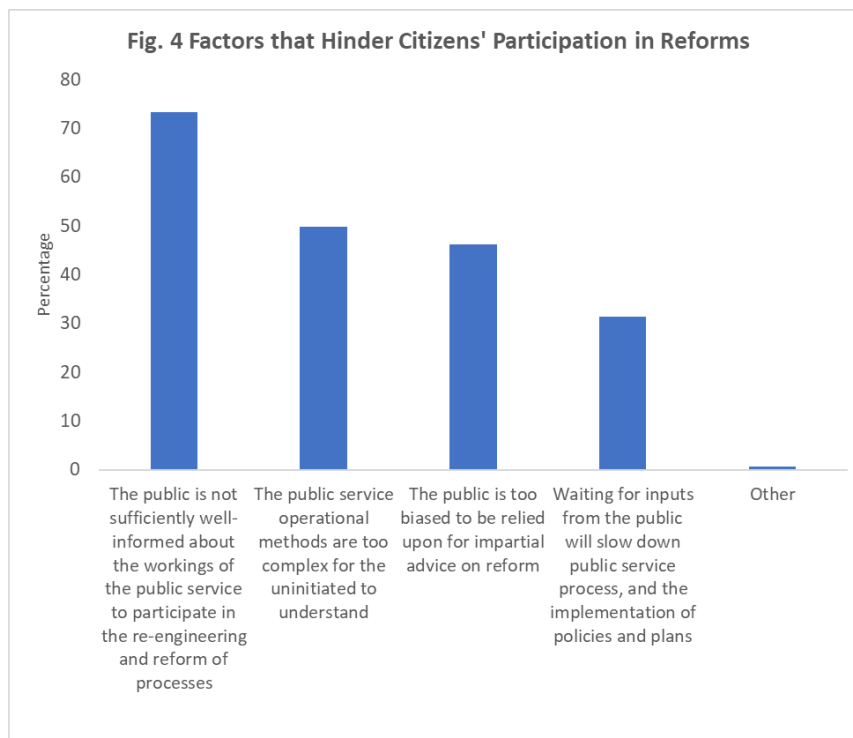
The respondents were also asked to identify issues which they believe future reform efforts should address. The most commonly mentioned issues are presented in Fig. 5 as follows:

Fig. 5 Issues Reforms Should Address
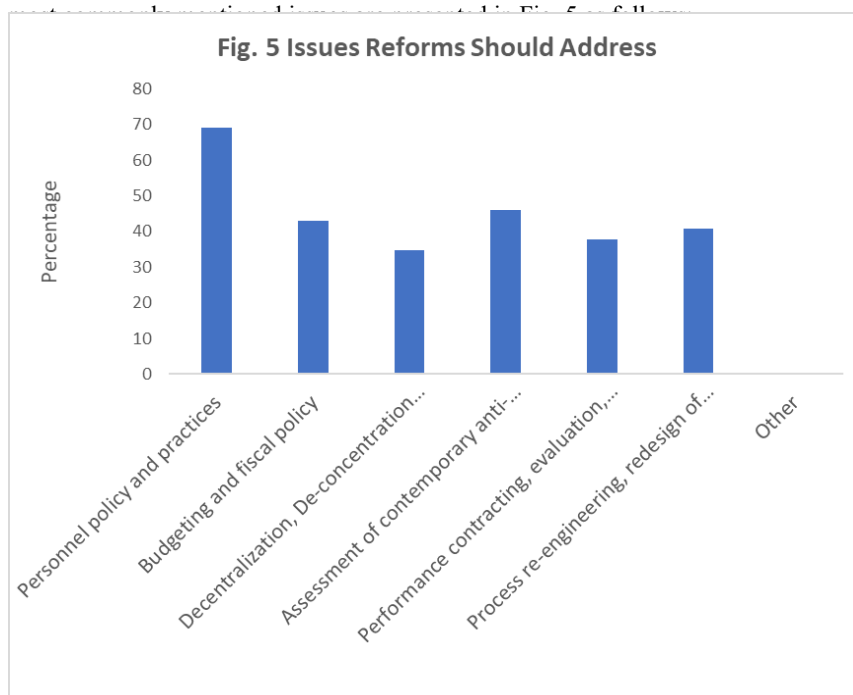
In line with the importance they place on the reform of personnel policies and practices, respondents overwhelmingly advocate for the immediate elimination of job slots allocated for eminent personalities and their proteges. While 13 percent of the non-state respondents have no opinion on the matter, a staggering 75 percent recommend discontinuing the practice immediately. Only 13 percent want it retained (Table 24).

Table 24:

Respondents' opinions on the allocation of job slots/public service vacancies to eminent personalities

Options	Frequency	Percent
No opinion	131	12.8
Wrong and should be scrapped	761	74.5
Right and should be retained	129	12.6
Total	1,021	100%

5   Discussion

Empirical evidence presented in the tables and figures above indicates that Nigeria performs poorly across all the drivers of citizen engagement investigated in this study.

First, declining trust in public officials is a significant issue. 63 percent of respondents rate citizen trust in public officials as either 'very low' (29 percent) or 'low' (34 percent). When the threshold is raised to 'medium', the percentage of respondents with negative evaluations increase to 90 percent. Only 10 percent rate the level of citizen trust in public officials as 'high' and 'very high'. These findings align with the Edelman Trust Barometer 2021 report, which reported public trust in Nigeria at just 24 per cent. Similarly, the Afro-barometer survey (a collaborative work with NOI Polls & CDD) found that only 27% of Nigerians sampled trust their president and just 19% trust their Parliament (Senate and House of Representatives). As argued by Kumagai, & Iorio (2020) argue, low trust in government is part of the reasons citizens do not engage.

Secondly, empirical findings in this study show that non-state actors believe public officials do not prioritise inputs from external stakeholders such as ordinary citizens, civic groups, and the private sector. As high as 76 percent of respondents felt that the public service does not make sufficient efforts to involve civil society in policy formulation. with the majority rating the level of involvement of external stakeholders as "low". This perspective holds for policy implementation as well, where 61 percent of respondents believe that the involvement of external stakeholders is either low (51 percent) or non-existent (10 percent). The private sector's involvement in policy formulation and implementation is similarly viewed as inadequate with only 9 percent rating it "high". This lack of involvement is concerning because as Kumagai and Iorio (2020) argue, such exclusion negatively affects performance and accountability, which in turn decreases trust. As the African Union (2022) aptly states, without citizen participation, efforts to create and sustain positive changes in governance, peace and security processes will be futile.

Thirdly, regarding accountability and transparency, respondents rate the public service poorly, with over 50 percent expressing reservations about the accountability of, and transparency in, the public service. This finding is alarming for citizen engagement as 'poor accountability and transparency significantly hinder citizen engagement by fostering distrust, disengagement, and a sense of powerlessness, ultimately leading to a less active and informed citizenry.' (World Bank, 2017).

Fourthly, with all the public sector reforms that have taken place over the years, one might expect that citizens and service beneficiaries would rate public service performance high. However, this is not the case as 7 percent of respondents rate public service performance as "highly unsatisfactory", 19.4 percent rate it "poor", and another 44 percent rate it "fair". Only 26 percent consider it "good", and just 3.4 percent rate it "excellent". Low citizen engagement negatively impacts public sector performance as the OECD, (2024) found that countries with higher levels of citizen engagement tend to have more effective and responsive governments.

Finally, from our survey, 52.2% of respondents were aware of past and present reform initiatives and 47.3% of respondents can recall major highlights of the past reforms. However, when addressing the question of why the government does not involve citizens more in the policy process and public service reforms, three reasons were identified: (a) the public is not sufficiently well-informed about the workings of the public service; (b) the operational methods of the public service are too complex for the uninitiated to understand; and (c) the public is considered too biased to be relied upon for impartial advice on reform. While citizen knowledge is indeed crucial for effective engagement, mere knowledge does not mean sufficient understanding to engage. From Figure 4, 73 percent of the respondents indicate an insufficient understanding of the workings of the public service to

participate in the re-engineering and reform of processes as the main hindrance to citizen participation. This further highlights the need for public service transparency to drive effective citizen engagement.

6   Conclusion and Recommendations

The empirical evidence presented in this article demonstrates that key drivers of citizen engagement such as trust, performance, accountability, transparency, and responsiveness, among others, are insufficiently developed to foster deeper citizen engagement in Nigeria. These drivers have a mutually reinforcing relationship with citizen engagement, indicating that low levels of trust, performance, accountability and transparency, for instance, will lead to a decline in citizens' interest in further involvement. This disengagement will in turn negatively affect governance outcomes.

Notwithstanding the status quo, the following recommendations are made to improve citizen engagement and consequently governance outcomes.

First, greater efforts towards inclusiveness are essential for transforming service delivery in Nigeria. Active and deeper citizen involvement, including the participation of the private sector, must be institutionalised in the policy process. This engagement should begin with the budget-making process (including its implementation) which should adopt a *bottom-up approach*, rather than the current *top-down* method that leaves the process solely to bureaucrats and political officeholders. To start, specific and specialised CSOs should be involved in monitoring the budget-making and implementation processes of various public sector organisations.

Secondly, the credibility of state institutions plays a crucial role in restoring citizen trust in government and in public officials. Key drivers of institutional credibility such as effective delegation and decentralisation, (i.e. increasing the scope for rank-and-file participation in decision-making), adherence to the letter and spirit of the rules, observance of due process, and greater accountability and transparency in decision-making, are vital in rebuilding citizens' faith and trust in government.

Lastly, a broad measure of consensus is necessary for the successful implementation of public service reforms. Unfortunately, such a consensus is currently lacking. One way to achieve this is by ensuring that public service reform is no longer seen as the exclusive responsibility of career public servants. Instead, it should be integrated into the daily activities of political parties and civic groups' deeper engagement in the governance process.

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