Citizen Engagement in Nigeria's Public Policy Process: A Comparative Analysis of State and Non-State Actors' Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of state and non-state actors' perspectives on citizen engagement in the public policy process in Nigeria. It addresses a critical question: are citizens actively engaged in shaping policy, or does their participation remain largely tokenistic, as characterised by Arnstein's (1969) concept of "illusory" involvement? Employing a cross-sectional survey design with stratified and simple random sampling techniques, data were collected from 1,614 respondents across both state and non-state sectors. Descriptive analysis, using percentages and graphical presentations, reveals that while Nigeria has moved beyond the zone of non-participation associated with its historical period of military rule, citizen engagement predominantly remains within the zone of tokenism, marked by information sharing, consultation, and placation. Respondents widely perceived low levels of trust in government, poor performance, persistent corruption, and limited transparency and accountability as key barriers to deeper engagement. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests an emerging shift toward partnership models of engagement, aligning with the higher rungs of Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation. The study recommends the adoption and institutionalisation of strategies for constructive engagement to broaden and deepen citizen participation in Nigeria's public policy processes.

Keywords: Citizen engagement, citizen participation, drivers of citizen engagement, public policy process, state actors, non-state actors, and ladder of citizen participation.

1. Introduction

Citizen engagement in the public policy process in Nigeria has become a subject of renewed scholarly and practical interest. Despite this attention, a significant gap remains between how state actors (political officeholders and career public servants) and non-state actors (including civil society organisations, service beneficiaries, private sector participants, and ordinary citizens) perceive the depth and quality of citizen participation. A recurring question is whether citizens are meaningfully involved in policy processes or whether their participation remains largely "tokenistic" or "illusory," as conceptualised by Arnstein (1969).

More specifically, this study investigates how state actors assess citizen participation compared to their non-state counterparts. Do state actors view current engagement efforts as satisfactory, and to what extent do their perceptions align, or clash, with those of non-state actors? Previous research by the Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation (2025), suggests that, from the perspective of non-state actors, key drivers of engagement, such as transparency, trust, and government performance, are insufficient to promote active citizen participation. However, the perspectives of state actors on these issues remain underexplored.

Understanding the perceptions of both groups is critical for diagnosing the prevailing limitations in citizen engagement and identifying strategies to foster deeper, more meaningful participation. Accordingly, this paper presents a comparative analysis of state and non-state actors' views on citizen engagement in Nigeria's public policy process.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section outlines the theoretical background, followed by a description of the methodology employed. Subsequently, the results and their discussion are presented, before concluding

with key recommendations for enhancing citizen engagement.

2. Theoretical background

Citizen engagement, according to the World Bank Group (2017), is a concept as old as humanity itself. The practice of granting citizens a direct voice and active role in civic governance can be traced back over 2,500 years to the Greek city-states. Conceptually, citizen engagement is understood as a two-way interaction between citizens and government, aimed at providing citizens with a meaningful stake in decision-making processes to improve development outcomes (World Bank Group, 2017; Obasi & Lekorwe, 2014; Phillips & Orsini, 2002; Bourgon, 1998). This definition is supported by Waddington et al. (2019), who find that citizen engagement significantly enhances access to public services in low- and middle-income countries. However, they also caution that evidence linking engagement to broader improvements in development outcomes remains limited.

Historically, as illustrated by the Greek city-states, citizen engagement initially manifested as citizen participation. Consequently, the terms engagement and participation are often used interchangeably by scholars. There is, arguably, an inherent overlap between the two: engagement involves elements of participation, and participation embodies aspects of engagement. Both aim fundamentally at enhancing transparency, accountability, and responsiveness within democratic governance.

Nonetheless, subtle distinctions between engagement and participation have been noted. Martell (2024) argues that engagement typically follows a top-down approach, initiated by government actors, whereas participation tends to be bottom-up, driven by citizens themselves. Additionally, citizen engagement initiatives often seek to build sustained, long-term relationships between citizens and government, while citizen participation may be episodic or event-based. Drawing again from the experience of the Greek city-states, it is evident that both engagement and participation are integral to participatory democracy. It is within this conceptual framework that this paper uses the two terms interchangeably.

Whichever perspective is adopted regarding the distinctions between citizen engagement and participation, it remains clear that citizen engagement in the public policy process is a fundamental attribute of a viable participatory democracy (Obasi & Lekorwe, 2014). In democratic systems, citizens are presumed to be critical stakeholders, possessing the ability to participate either directly or indirectly, through elected representatives, in the formulation, adoption, and implementation of laws and policies that affect their lives. Public participation, therefore, constitutes a foundational component of the citizen–government relationship in democracies (Quick & Bryson, 2016; Roberts, 2004; Jacobs et al., 2009; Bryson et al., 2013).

A critical issue that arises in this context concerns the scope of citizen engagement: to what extent is the relationship between citizens and the government characterised by deep, meaningful interaction? The World Bank Group (2017) outlines a broad scope for citizen engagement, encompassing consultation, collaboration, participation, and empowerment. However, it simultaneously acknowledges that these forms often involve primarily one-way interactions. This paper contends that such an interpretation is not universally applicable; the nature of engagement, whether constructive or tokenistic, depends largely on how these channels are operationalised. Consultation, collaboration, and participation can genuinely foster citizen influence when implemented with integrity, but they can also be rendered hollow or manipulative if used merely to legitimise pre-determined governmental decisions (Arnstein, 1969). In cases where engagement mechanisms are used tokenistically, they become counterproductive, undermining the very goal of influencing development outcomes.

A deeper understanding of this dynamic can be drawn from Arnstein's (1969) seminal "Ladder of Citizen Participation," which illustrates varying degrees of citizen power through an eight-rung typology. Arnstein's framework has inspired subsequent models, such as Roger Hart's (1992) "Ladder of Children's Participation," and Elizabeth Rocha's (1997) "Ladder of Empowerment," which focuses specifically on building citizen power and the structural conditions that enable or hinder it (Organizing Engagement, 2025). Arnstein's model remains a pivotal reference point in the literature, particularly for its resonance with the experiences of citizens in many developing countries, where meaningful participation is frequently constrained.

Reflecting this perspective, the Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation (2025) observes that the struggle for effective citizen empowerment often manifests as a protracted effort, spearheaded by civil society organisations (CSOs) and other advocacy groups. Against this backdrop, the following section turns to a detailed examination of

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, which provides a critical theoretical lens for understanding citizen engagement in Nigeria's public policy process.

2.1 Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation

Arnstein's (1969) typology of citizen participation is conceptualised through the metaphor of a "ladder," with each ascending rung signifying progressively greater levels of citizen agency, control, and power. In addition to the eight specific rungs, Arnstein outlines a continuum of participatory power, ranging from non-participation (characterised by a complete absence of citizen power), through degrees of tokenism (where participation is largely symbolic or superficial), to degrees of genuine citizen power (where citizens exercise substantive influence) (Organizing Engagement, 2025). The eight rungs of the ladder, progressing from manipulation to full citizen power, are outlined as follows:

Degrees of Citizen Power
➤ Citizen power
➤ Partnership
➤ Delegated power

Degrees of Tokenism
➤ Placation
➤ Consultation
➤ Informing

Non-Participation
➤ Therapy
➤ Manipulation

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation illustrates how empowered public institutions and officials often restrict citizens' power, while also highlighting how levels of citizen control can be incrementally increased (Organising Engagement, 2025). However, it is crucial to note that elevating citizen control and power is generally a challenging endeavour. Achieving this typically requires persistent agitation and collective action (Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation, 2025), where citizens, often facing considerable struggles, must organise and present their demands to the government. This process is part of what policy studies refer to as agenda-setting. In other words, the objective of citizens' struggles, whether short-term or long-term, is to shift the governmental agenda to accommodate their concerns. It is also important to acknowledge that these struggles sometimes escalate to non-peaceful forms of protest, such as violent demonstrations, as a means for citizens to attract the attention of the government. However, resorting to violent methods can provoke state repression, potentially undermining democratic processes and posing a threat to the very fabric of democracy.

2.2 Citizen Engagement and its drivers

Citizen engagement does not occur in isolation; it is influenced by several critical governance factors that motivate participation in engagement processes. The Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation's national study on citizen engagement in Nigeria identified several key drivers of engagement, including trust, responsiveness, communication channels, government performance, transparency and accountability, and reduced corruption (Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation, 2024; 2025). Both theoretical and empirical literature indicate that these factors play a significant role in shaping citizen engagement. For instance, Kumagai and Iorio (2020) describe the relationship between trust and engagement as mutually reinforcing, where the presence of trust enhances engagement, and successful engagement in turn strengthens trust. This cyclical relationship between trust and engagement extends to nearly all the other identified drivers (Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation, 2025).

Responsiveness, for example, serves as both a driver and an outcome of engagement. Research has shown that as governments become more responsive, citizen engagement tends to increase (Sjoberg, Mellon, & Peixoto, 2017; Vidacak, 2019).

There is a well-established correlation between government performance and citizen engagement (Porumbescu et al., 2019). According to the OECD (2009), public engagement can serve as a mechanism to enhance government performance. Engagement can be stimulated by both positive and negative performance outcomes. Given that the relationship between performance and citizen engagement is mutually reinforcing, inclusive policymaking has the potential to improve overall governmental performance.

Regarding transparency, a study by Jopang et al. (2024) supports the long-standing view that greater transparency fosters a more informed and engaged citizenry. In broader terms, the positive influence of transparency and accountability on citizen engagement and service delivery cannot be overstated. Transparency and accountability are widely regarded as essential tools for enhancing citizen engagement because they (a) build public trust, (b) empower citizens to actively participate in the policymaking process, and (c) contribute to improved governance and service delivery (OECD, 2017; OECD, 2024; Waddington et al., 2019).

3. Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional sample survey design, utilising a questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection. Two main respondent groups were included: state actors and non-state actors. The state actor group comprised political officeholders and career officials, while the non-state actor group included civil society organisations (CSOs), service beneficiaries, private sector organisations, and taxpayers.

As a national study, the survey covered Nigeria's six geopolitical zones: North-central (which includes the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja), North-east, North-west, South-east, South-south, and South-west. Within each zone, two states were purposively selected based on convenience and security considerations at the time of data collection. The selected states from each zone were as follows: Nasarawa and the 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 the South-south zone; and Lagos and Oyo for the South-west zone.

Respondents from each zone were chosen using a combination of stratified and simple random probability sampling methods. The sample size was determined using the G*Power (3.1.9.4) software. For the state actor group, which consisted of political officeholders and career officials in federal agencies and their zonal offices, a sample of 593 was selected. Of this sample, 519 respondents were career officials, and 74 were political officeholders.

For the non-state actor group, the G*Power method determined a minimum sample size of 990, with approximately 165 respondents selected from each zone. Response rates varied across zones, with some states returning more questionnaires than others. Ultimately, a total of 1,021 completed questionnaires were returned, constituting the sample for the non-state actor group. Thus, the combined sample for the study consisted of 1,614 respondents.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, specifically percentages, and were presented in both tabular and graphical formats. In some cases, data from the state actor group, which were initially disaggregated, were further consolidated to facilitate comparative analysis with the non-state actor group.

4. Results and Discussion
4.1 Presentation of Results
4.1.1. Brief Notes on Demographic Characteristics of Respondents
The respondents from the federal government agencies (see Appendix 1 for illustration) were diverse in terms of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Additionally, they represented a wide range of age groups and educational qualifications. On the other hand, the non-state actor respondents were drawn from both formal and informal organisations within the private sector. Similar to the state actors, the non-state actors were also composed of both male and female participants (see Appendix 2 for illustration), and represented various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Furthermore, these respondents also exhibited diversity in terms of age and educational qualifications. Overall, both state and non-state actors were sufficiently educated to comprehend and accurately complete the questionnaire.

4.1.2. Stakeholder participation in policy process
The importance of stakeholder participation in the public policy process cannot be overstated, as the benefits of public sector reforms are often amplified and sustained through such involvement. However, how do both state and non-state actors perceive this participation? The results of key thematic issues surrounding this question are presented below.

4.1.2a Degree of Importance Attached to Citizen Participation in Policy Process
First, we present the views of state actors. Table 1 below illustrates that the importance placed on public participation in policy formulation is relatively low in Nigeria. Of the career officials surveyed, 2 percent responded with "Don't know" regarding the importance of participation, while 10 percent believed that the government and public service attach "zero" importance to it. Another 29 percent rated it as "low," and 19 percent selected "somewhat high." Only 26 percent of career officials regarded the importance of public participation as "high," with 14 percent considering it "very high".

Table 1: State Actors' Views on Degree of Importance Attached to Public Participation in Policy Formulation

Options	Percent of Career Officials (N= 519)	Percent of Political Officeholders (N=74)	Consolidated % Response (Cumulative) (N=593)
Don't Know	1.9*	2.7*	5*
Zero	10	4	14
Low	29	15	44
Somewhat high	19	18	37
High	26	42	68
Very high	14	19	32
Total	100%	100%	200

* All decimal figures are rounded up in the narrative.

Table 1 also presents the ratings given by political officeholders. While the self-assessment of career officials may be considered overly generous, the ratings provided by political officeholders are even more striking. Of the political officeholders who responded to the question, 3 percent selected "Don't know," 4 percent chose "zero," 15 percent rated it as "low," and 18 percent marked it as "somewhat high." Notably, 42 percent of political officeholders considered the level of importance attached to public participation in policy formulation to be "high," while 19 percent rated it as "very high."

Table 2: Non-State Actors' Views on the Degree of Importance attached to public participation in policy formulation

Options	Number of Non-State Actors	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%

The opinions of non-state actors on the issue of participation differ from those of political officeholders but align more closely with the views of career officials. As shown in Table 2, non-state actors are not convinced that public officials place much importance on inputs from external stakeholders, such as ordinary citizens, service beneficiaries, civic groups, and professional associations. Only 4 percent consider the importance of external inputs to be "very high," and 16 percent rate it as "high." In contrast, 45 percent view it as "low," 28 percent as

"somewhat high," while 3 percent believe public officials attach "zero" importance to external inputs, and 4 percent answered "don't know."

Table 3 compares the views of state and non-state actors. The key conclusion is that most respondents from both groups agree that citizen engagement in policy formulation is low, despite political officeholders overestimating their position, as shown in Table 1. However, it is clear that the views of career officials are more aligned with

Fig. 1. Is the the Government making enough effort to Involve Citizens in Policy Formulation?

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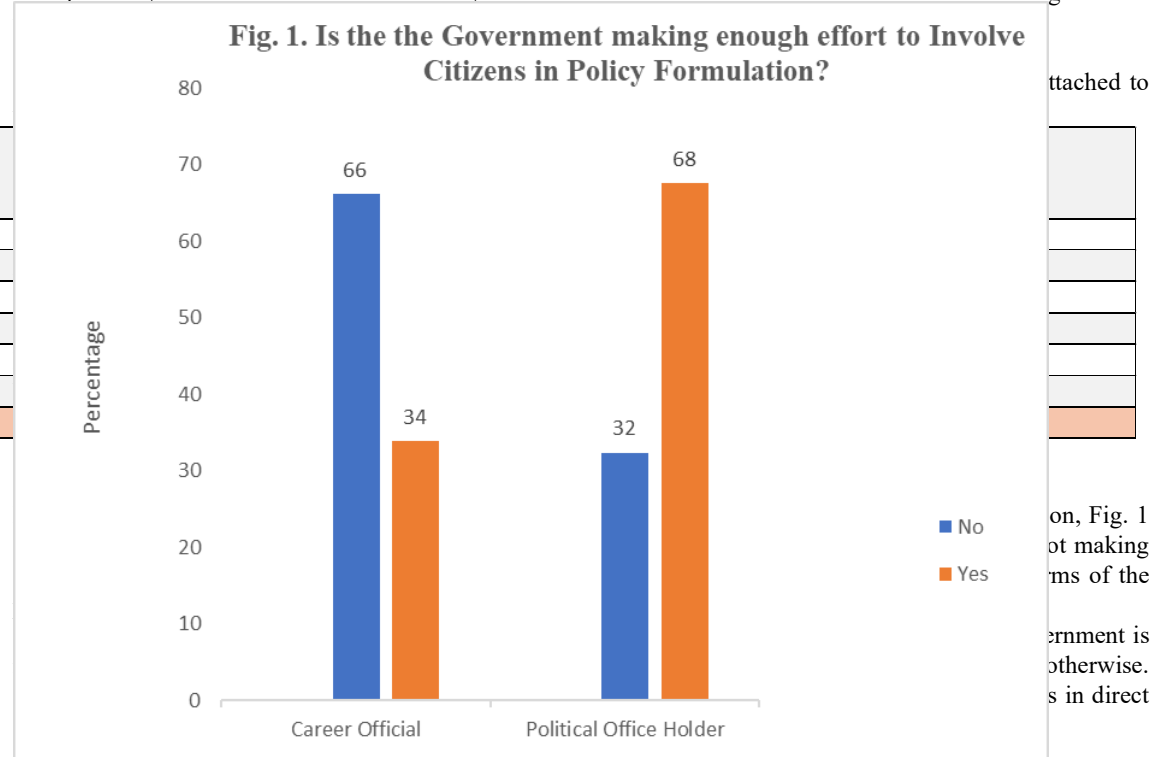
Table 4: Non-State Actors' Perception of Whether the Government is Making Enough Efforts to Involve Citizens in Policy Formulation		
Non-State Actors' Opinion	Frequency	Percent
No	774	76
Yes	247	24
Total	1021	100%

4.1.2c Civil Society Involvement in Policy Formulation and Implementation
When the question was rephrased to evaluate non-state actors' perceptions of civil society involvement in policy formulation, the overall response remained largely consistent, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Non-State Actors' Perception of the Level of Civil Society's Involvement in Policy Formulation

Level of Involvement	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	18	2
Zero	85	8
Low	518	51
Medium	360	35
High	40	4
Total	1021	100%

Aside from the 2 percent who selected "Don't know," 8 percent believe the level of civil society involvement in policy formulation is "zero." Meanwhile, 51 percent rate it as "low," 35 percent consider it "medium," and only 4 percent view it as "high." The respondents' opinions remained consistent when the question shifted to civil society involvement in policy implementation, as shown in Table 6).

Table 6: Non-State Actors' Perception of the Level of Civil Society Involvement in Policy Implementation		
Level of Involvement	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	17	2
Zero	100	10
Low	517	51
Medium	346	33
High	41	4
Total	1021	100%

4.1.2d Private Sector Involvement in Policy Process
Starting with the state actors' perspective, respondents within this group generally believe that the private sector is not heavily involved in policy implementation. For example, 33 percent of career officials and 23 percent of political officeholder's rate private sector involvement as "low." The majority of respondents (42 percent of career officials and 41 percent of political officeholders) consider it to be "medium." In contrast, while 31 percent of political officeholders rate the level of private sector participation as "high," only 14 percent of career officials share this view (see Table 7).

Table 7: State Actors' View on the Involvement of the Private Sector in the Implementation of MDA's Policies			
	Career Officials (N=519)	Political Officeholders (N=74)	Consolidated % Response (N=593)
Private Sector Involvement	Percent	Percent	Cumulative
Don't know	3.1	2.7	5.8
Not applicable	2.3	0.0	2.3
Zero	5.6	2.7	8.3
Low	33.3	23	56.3
Medium	41.6	40.5	82.1
High	14.1	31.1	45.2
Total	100%	100%	

Similar to the state actors, the non-state respondents generally believe that the private sector is insufficiently involved in both policy formulation and implementation. Apart from the 3 percent who selected "Don't know," 9 percent rate private sector involvement in policy formulation as "zero," while 44 percent consider it "low" and 35 percent rate it as "medium." Only 9 percent believe the involvement is "high" (see Table 8). The responses regarding the level of private sector involvement in policy implementation are largely consistent with these views (see Table 9).

Table 8: Non-State Actors' Perception of the Level of Private Sector Involvement in Policy Formulation		
Options	Frequency	Percent
Don't know	35	3
Zero	89	9
Low	447	44
Medium	355	35
High	95	9

Table 9: Non-State Actors' 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	1021	100%

4.1.3 Citizen Trust in Government

Public trust in government is a significant issue in Nigeria. Interestingly, career officials seem more concerned about the decline in citizen trust in public officials than political officeholders. For example, about 21 percent of career officials rate citizen trust in public officials as "very low," compared to just 12 percent of political officeholders. Additionally, 30 percent of career officials consider citizen trust to be "low," while only 19 percent of political officeholders share this view. Furthermore, 28 percent of career officials rate it as "medium," while 31 percent of political officeholders do the same. Only 15 percent of career officials, versus 20 percent of political officeholders, consider citizen trust to be "high." Lastly, 7 percent of career officials rate it as "very high," compared to 12 percent of political officeholders (see Table 10).

Table 10: State Actors' Assessment of Citizen Faith (Trust) in Public Officials		
	Career Officials	Political Officeholders
Options	Percent	Percent
Don't know	0.6	5.4
Very low	20.6	12.2
Low	29.5	18.9
Medium	28.1	31.1
High	14.5	20.3
Very high	6.7	12.2
Total	100	100

Public officials must work to earn the trust and confidence of citizens, taxpayers, and service beneficiaries. Interestingly, the non-state actors' perception of citizen trust in government aligns more closely with that of career officials than political officeholders. From the non-state actors' perspective, declining trust in public officials is a significant challenge in contemporary Nigeria. Around 63 percent of non-state respondents rate citizen trust in public officials as "very low" (approximately 29 percent) or "low" (34 percent). When considering "medium" trust levels, the combined percentage of unfavourable assessments rises to 90 percent. Only 10 percent of non-state respondents rate citizen trust in public officials as "high" or "very high" (see Table 11).

Table 11: Non-State Actors' assessment of Citizen trust in public officials		
	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	1021	100%

4.1.4 Public service performance

The perspectives of the two groups of state officials further highlight a divergence in views. As shown in Table 12, political officeholders tend to rate themselves more favourably than career officials. While both groups generally assess public service performance positively, career officials are more cautious and realistic in their self-evaluations compared to political officeholders. Table 12 reveals that, while both groups avoid being overly critical, career officials are less satisfied with the level of public service performance than political officeholders:

Table 12: State Actors' assessment of public service performance		
Rating	Career officials (percent)	Political Officeholders (percent)
Highly unsatisfactory	2.3	0.0
Poor	13.3	4.1
Fair	43.4	21.6
Good	33.7	54.1
Excellent	7.3	20.3
Total	100%	100%

What is the perspective of non-state actors on public service performance? Despite the numerous reforms implemented over the years, one might have expected citizens and service beneficiaries to rate public service performance highly. However, this is not the case. As shown in Table 13, about 7 percent of non-state respondents deem the performance of public services "highly unsatisfactory," 19 percent rate it as "poor," and 44 percent consider it "fair." Only 26 percent rate it as "good," while just 3 percent consider it "excellent." In other words, service recipients tend to rate service quality much lower than the delivery agents, as seen when comparing Tables 12 and 13.

Table 13: Non-State Actors' Assessment of Public Service Performance		
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	1021	100%

4.1.4a Obstacles to effective performance

According to both groups of state officials, the primary obstacles to effective public service performance include bribery and corruption (including embezzlement), indiscipline, and nepotism. Among these, bribery and corruption have the most detrimental impact on performance. The views of non-state actors on performance disablers largely align with those of career officials and political officeholders.

4.1.5 Accountability and Transparency

Corruption is the top obstacle identified by non-state respondents when asked to name the key performance barriers. This is reflected in their low ratings of public service agencies on transparency and accountability, as shown in Table 14.

Table 14: Non-State Actors' Rating of Public Service Agencies on Transparency and Accountability

	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	1021	100%

Given the widespread nature of corruption, it's unsurprising that non-state actor respondents rated transparency and accountability poorly, with approximately 61 percent giving it a "zero" and "low" rating, as shown in Table 14 above.

4.1.6 Adequacy of communication channels
Both groups of state officials (around 68 percent) do not have major concerns about the adequacy and effectiveness of communication channels between public agencies and the public. However, a small percentage of respondents, 15 percent of career officials and 7 percent of political officeholders, consider the communication channels to be both "inadequate and ineffective." Others view them as either "inadequate but somewhat effective" or "adequate but not fully effective" (see Table 15).

Table 15: State Actors' Views on the Adequacy and Effectiveness of Communication Channels Between Public Agencies and Members of the Public

Options	Career Officials	Political Officeholders
	Percent	Percent
Don't know	2.9	2.7
Neither adequate nor effective	15.4	6.8
Inadequate but somehow effective	17.9	13.5
Adequate but not quite effective	27.7	31.1
Adequate and effective	28.1	29.7
More than adequate and very effective	7.9	16.2
Total	100%	100%

In contrast, the non-state actors are largely dissatisfied with the adequacy and effectiveness of communication channels. Based on Table 16, it is clear that the communication channels between the public and public service agencies are often seen as either inadequate, ineffective, or both. Only 4 percent of non-state respondents consider the channels to be "more than adequate and very effective," while 17 percent rate them as "adequate and effective." A significant portion, 28 percent, find them "neither adequate nor effective," 16 percent describe them as "inadequate but somewhat effective," and 32 percent view them as "adequate but ineffective" (see Table 16).

Table 16: Non-State Actors' Rating of the Adequacy and Effectiveness of the Communication Channels Between Public Agencies and Members of 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	1021	100%

4.1.7 Future reform priorities

Personnel policies and practices rank as the top issue that both state and non-state actors believe future reforms should address. Other key areas include evaluating current anti-corruption strategies before introducing new measures, as well as focusing on budgeting and fiscal policy. When it comes to barriers hindering reform objectives, the perspectives of state actors provide valuable insights.

The two groups of state actors have differing views on what constitutes a barrier to reform (see Table 17 and Fig 2). For instance, 56 percent of career officials view the "overbearing influence of politics" as a major issue, while only 35 percent of political officeholders share this view. Additionally, 51 percent of career officials identify "lack of political interest in reform" as a significant barrier, whereas only 37 percent of political officeholders agree with this assessment.

Table 17: State Actors' Views on Barriers to the Attainment of Reform Objectives

Barriers to the attainment of reform objectives	Percent of Career Officials selecting the barrier	Percent of Political Officeholders selecting the barrier
Overbearing influence of politics	56	35
Lack of political interest in reform	51	37
Reluctance on the part of policymakers to make hard choices	48	42
Lack of clarity of reform objectives	40	24
Internal contradictions in reform agendas	29	18
Failure to involve all relevant stakeholders in the design and implementation of reform programmes	47	27
Failure to bridge the gap between reform proposals and the government White Paper	27	26
Reform objectives are centrally managed and not made part of many MDAs' mandates.	28	23

Fig. 2. Major barriers to the attainment of Public Service reform objectives
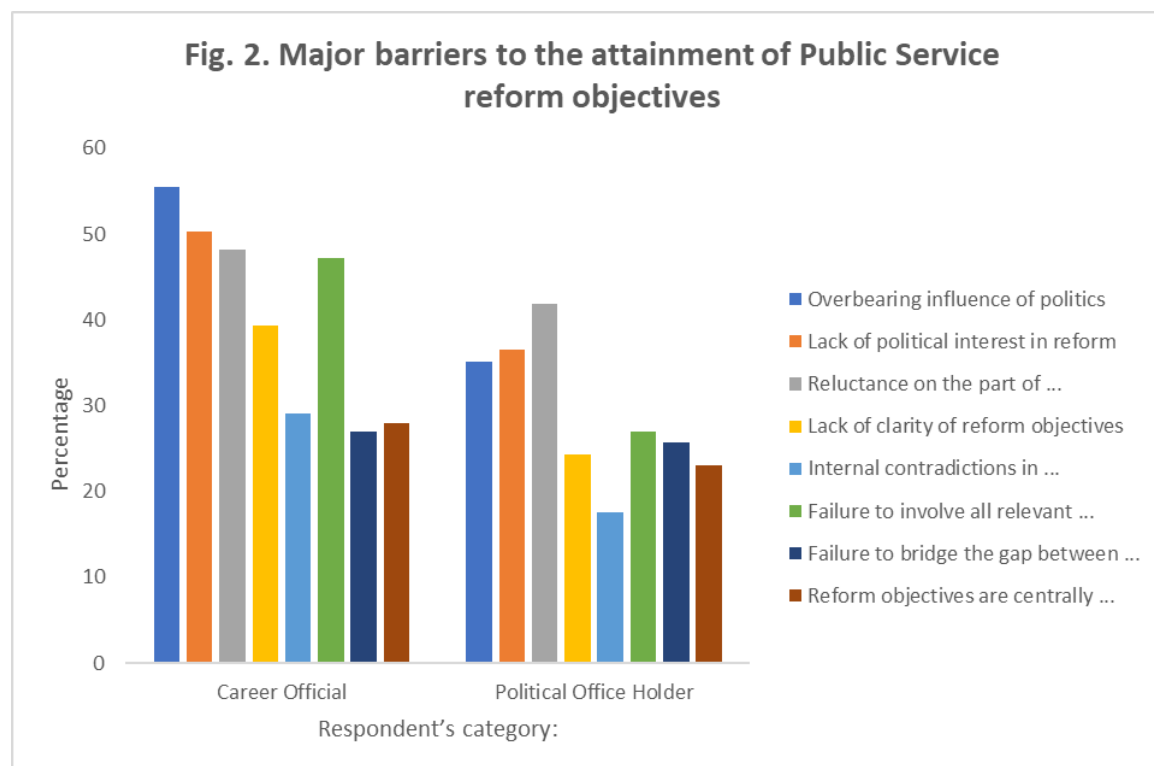
5. Discussion

Understanding the perspectives of state and non-state actors on citizen engagement in the public policy process sheds light on the depth of engagement in Nigeria's policymaking. Based on the findings in this paper, citizen engagement appears to be largely tokenistic, aligning with Arnstein's 1969 theoretical framework. The results show that both career officials (state actors) and non-state actors believe that the importance of citizen participation in the policy process is not very high in Nigeria. In contrast, political officeholders (state actors) hold a different view. Additionally, the findings reveal that both career officials and non-state actors feel that the government is not doing enough to involve citizens in the policy process, a view that sharply contrasts with that of the political officeholders. Why this disparity exits, will be explored later, along with other areas where their views diverge. Lastly, on the issue of citizen involvement, especially from CSOs and the private sector, both state and non-state actors agree that involvement remains low to medium at best.

If public participation is a fundamental aspect of the public-government relationship in democracies, as many scholars argue (see Quick & Bryson, 2016; Roberts, 2004; Jacobs et al., 2009; Bryson et al., 2013), then it can be said that the Nigerian government acknowledges and incorporates engagement in its democratic process. However, it has yet to assign the necessary level of importance to it. This is further evidenced in this study, which shows that the government has not made sufficient efforts to enhance the quality or extent of citizen involvement. So, how can Nigeria's experience with citizen engagement be characterised using Arnstein's (1969) eight-rung ladder of citizen participation as a theoretical framework?

Using Arnstein's "descriptive continuum of participatory power," which ranges from non-participation (no power) to tokenism (counterfeit power), and finally to citizen power (actual power), this study suggests that Nigeria has moved past the non-participation phase that defined the military dictatorship era. Currently, Nigeria appears to be in the tokenism zone, prevalent throughout much of its democratic period since 1999. This tokenism phase is marked by information sharing, consultation, and placation—practices that can either be constructively or manipulatively utilised by government agencies.

It is important to note, however, that there are isolated instances where engagement has successfully moved beyond tokenism and into the zone of citizen power. This zone is characterised by delegated power, partnership,

and citizen power. Of these, partnership has been particularly evident, though it is not frequently applied unless referring to public-private partnerships (PPPs) that are commonly discussed. For instance, some examples of successful private sector involvement in government policies and programs exist. A notable example is the Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation, which has been collaborating with the government on public sector reforms and public leadership programs for several years. With more consistent efforts and constructive engagement, the quality and scope of citizen involvement may improve over time.

Turning to other key issues affecting citizen engagement, this study also highlights the topic of public trust in government. Findings reveal that both career officials (state actors) and non-state actors agree that public trust in government is low, as is the performance of public service agencies. The views of political officeholders, however, differ. Regarding corruption, both groups of respondents identify it as a significant barrier to performance, with a unanimous recognition of the substantial threat it poses to Nigeria's national integrity and institutional credibility. This is reflected in the non-state actors' low ratings of public service agencies on transparency and accountability. Furthermore, communication channels between the government and citizens were seen as adequate but ineffective by both state and non-state respondents. Due to the lack of transparency, human resource management has also been negatively affected. Although not discussed in detail due to space constraints, the practice of allocating jobs to the politically connected, often known as "job slots," remains prevalent and concealed. This study found that both career officials and non-state actors overwhelmingly called for reforms in personnel policies and practices as a top priority for improvement.

Barriers to achieving reform objectives were identified as a significant concern by both state and non-state actors. Four major barriers were highlighted: (a) overbearing political influence, (b) lack of political interest in reform, (c) reluctance among policymakers to make difficult decisions, and (d) failure to involve all relevant stakeholders in the design and implementation of reforms.

Overall, the findings from this study reveal a common pattern of agreement between career officials (from the state actors cluster) and non-state actors. However, political officeholders often held differing views, which may not be coincidental. Nigeria's governance system is heavily influenced by the political class, which dominates the bureaucracy, often led by career officials. Career officials, while serving under the political class, can also be victims of political interference, just like ordinary citizens. They hold political officeholders accountable for not adhering to rules and regulations within the system.

To explain why political officeholders differ in opinion from both career officials and non-state actors, we apply the "multiple fiefdoms theory" proposed by M. J. Balogun et al. This theory, developed in the context of Nigeria's complex and heterogeneous society, offers a more specific analysis compared to broader frameworks like the radical political economy or New Public Management (NPM). It suggests that public administration, originally designed to serve one sovereign, has instead become accountable to multiple dominions, which have fragmented into several "fiefdoms." The theory also distinguishes between two environments, the 'hard' environment of formal politics and the 'soft' environment of bureaucratic institutions, each with its own conflicting view of public office.

On one hand, the soft environment views public office as collectively 'owned' and develops mechanisms to promote open and fair competition for vacancies, aiming to eliminate any barriers to access. This environment ensures that all qualified citizens have an equal opportunity to compete for public positions, with merit, competence, integrity, and professionalism being the key considerations in staff selection. It strives to identify and appoint the best candidates based on these qualities.

On the other hand, the hard environment does not prioritise merit or professionalism. Instead, it treats public office as an extension of the ruling class's personal fiefdoms. In this environment, considerations such as kinship, family ties, religious affiliation, political loyalty, and proximity to power take precedence. Rather than promoting open competition, the hard environment erects barriers that only those with access to the political elite can overcome. While the soft environment looks for evidence of ability and a commitment to public service, the hard environment views public office as an opportunity to reward the incumbent's supporters—relatives, friends, political associates, or those able to buy and secure positions through patronage (Balogun, 2022).

Applying this theory to our findings reveals that the political class, represented by the political officeholders,

largely embodies the culture of the hard environment, exploiting divisive factors such as ethnicity and religion for political gain. Driven by selfish interests, this class operates outside the constraints of formal rules. In contrast, career officials are initiated into the soft environment, where they are expected to adhere to established rules and regulations. However, they are vulnerable to the overbearing influence of the political class. The clash between these two cultures plays out in the day-to-day functioning of governance. Unfortunately, the corrupt values of the hard environment dominate, leading to poor public agency performance, low public trust in government, widespread corruption, lack of transparency and accountability, and the allocation of job positions to politically connected individuals. All of these ultimately affect the scope and depth of citizen engagement in the public policy process. These outcomes are strongly supported by the evidence from this study.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

Citizen engagement in Nigeria is experiencing gradual progress, though it remains slow in terms of both the scope of issues involved and the depth of engagement. Using Arnstein's (1969) theoretical framework, it can be observed that Nigeria has moved past the era of non-participation, which was typical of its long period of military rule. Today, Nigeria finds itself predominantly in the zone of tokenism, a phase that has characterised much of the democratic era since 1999. This zone of tokenism is marked by practices such as information sharing, consultation, and placation, which can either be used constructively or manipulatively by government agencies. Currently, Nigeria is struggling in several key areas of engagement, including public trust in government, performance, reduction of corruption, and improvements in transparency and accountability. The dominant influence of the 'hard environment' is clearly evident in this context.

Nonetheless, some isolated examples of engagement go beyond tokenism and approach the zone of citizen power. This higher level of engagement is characterised by delegated power, partnership, and citizen empowerment. Notably, there is evidence that partnerships have become an integral part of Nigeria's engagement process. For example, the Aig-Imoukhuede Foundation has been successfully partnering with the government for several years on initiatives such as public sector reforms and leadership programmes. This serves as a positive and encouraging example of effective collaboration. With continued efforts and constructive engagement, it is hoped that the scope, quality, and depth of citizen engagement in Nigeria will improve over time.

6.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following four broad recommendations are put forward:

First, a strategy of constructive engagement should be maintained and expanded to both broaden the scope and enhance the quality of citizen involvement in the public policy process. This approach will not only yield greater benefits within the current zone of tokenism but also facilitate deeper engagement, ultimately advancing Nigeria towards the zone of citizen power.

Second, in response to the overwhelming influence of politics and the prevailing culture of the 'hard environment' (as outlined in the multiple fiefdoms theory), it is essential to form a 'coalition of the willing'—a group of Nigerians with a progressive outlook and a commitment to enlightened self-interest. This coalition should actively contribute to agenda-setting within the public policy process. It should include both current and retired individuals from both the public and private sectors, moving away from the current tendency of merely maintaining the status quo that benefits a select few.

Third, it is recommended that a coalition of genuine civil society organisations (CSOs) intensify their efforts in educating and mobilising citizens for meaningful engagement with the government. Many so-called CSOs are compromised due to their financial dependence on the authorities, which undermines their independence. These CSOs are often caught in a divide-and-rule strategy employed by those in power. Therefore, raising awareness and strengthening the integrity of civil society should be prioritised to encourage more genuine and constructive participation.

Finally, given Nigeria's low performance in key areas such as public trust in government, performance, corruption, transparency, and accountability, there are numerous opportunities for reform and continuous improvement. Non-state actors should actively engage with the government to address these critical issues in the policy process, contributing to the much-needed reforms that can strengthen governance and enhance citizen

trust.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1
State Actors' Category: Gender Background of Respondents across Six Geo-political Zones of Nigeria

S/N	Geopolitical Zone	GENDER		RESPONDENT CATEGORY		Total Responses
1	North-Central*	Male	87	Career Official	121	135
		Female	48	Political Office Holder	13	
2	North-East	Male	87	Career Official	114	126
		Female	39	Political Office Holder	12	
3	North-West	Male	59	Career Official	57	68
		Female	9	Political Office Holder	11	
4	South-East	Male	58	Career Official	79	106
		Female	48	Political Office Holder	27	
5	South-South	Male	58	Career Official	83	90
		Female	32	Political Office Holder	7	
6	South-West	Male	29	Career Official	65	68
		Female	39	Political Office Holder	4	
	Total	593		593		593

* This includes the Federal Capital Territory, **Abuja**, Nigeria's seat of government.

APPENDIX 2
Non-State Actors' Category: Gender Background of Respondents across Six Geo-political Zones of Nigeria

S/N	Geopolitical Zone	GENDER		Total Responses
1	North-Central*	Male	102	162
		Female	60	
2	North-East	Male	185	243
		Female	59	
3	North-West	Male	117	156
		Female	39	
4	South-East	Male	95	146
		Female	51	
5	South-South	Male	91	151
		Female	60	
6	South-West	Male	84	163
		Female	78	
	Total		1021	1021

* This includes the Federal Capital Territory, **Abuja**, Nigeria's seat of government.