


**CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC POLICY IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATISATION**

**Ifeyinwa Arum<sup>1</sup> and Solomon Olufunmi Likinyo<sup>1</sup>**

**Department of Political Science<sup>1</sup>**

**Ekiti State University, Ado – Ekiti<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract**

*The participation of citizens in development has taken the center stage as an important precondition for achieving speedy and sustainable development. Democracy is still the most popular type of government practiced in the world today because of its enormous advantages over other forms of government. Democracy, be it, liberal, African or modern, involves equal opportunity for all, fundamental acknowledgement of popular sovereignty, representativeness, majority rule, minority rights, right to choose between alternative programmes and popular consultation. Citizen participation is the involvement of citizens in their affairs including involving them in formulation and implementation of public policies. It is a constitutional right of every citizen and it gives all, opportunity to participate in the political processes. Nigeria has experienced uninterrupted democracy in the past decades, yet, there is growing public apathy towards the government. The citizens are disenchanted and disconnected from the government and public policies. The objective of this paper is to analyze the benefits of citizen participation in public policies to the country. It also seeks to explain the methods of citizen participation in Nigeria and to discuss the challenges of citizen participation in public policies in Nigeria. The theoretical framework utilized for this study is the Social Capital Theory. The secondary means of data collection was utilized. Descriptive essay and narrative report were used as method of data analysis. The paper recommends that the government should develop and build public trust with the citizens as a way of attracting their support and co – operation. The government should also uphold the citizens' human rights and guarantee the freedom of speech.*

**Keywords:** Democracy, Development, Accountability, Policy decision, Government

**Introduction**

Notwithstanding Nigeria's democratic governance in the last decades, there is growing disinterestedness between the people and the government. This has led to lack of development, lack of good governance and misplacement of priorities by the ruling class. Democracy is premised on respect for rule of law, respect for citizens' right, democratic governance and citizens' participation. Citizen participation involves citizen's acquaintance and involvement in electoral processes and in government and decision - making processes. Citizen participation has been seen as a panacea for the isolated and helpless; engagement in political action may accord dignity, a feeling of powerfulness and advancement. Citizen participation in making public decisions that affect their interests is a basic constituent of citizenship. It is very vital, for development to occur or be visible in any society. The reason is that when citizens participate in decision making, they tend to give all manner of support to the government including bearing momentary pain in exchange for enduring gain. When citizens participate in decision making, it tends to invoke a feeling of sense of belonging and a feeling of co - ownership with the government on governments projects. However, when citizens alienate themselves or are alienated from public policy making, it tends to encourage lack of public accountability, transparency, corruption and general disregard for rule of law by the ruling class. Public policy making is a process by which citizens participate in making decisions and executing policies that affect them. Citizen participation is a crucial requirement for democracy to succeed as it encourages the participation of citizens in political affairs, the co - operations of citizens as stakeholders and the building of common trust and high regard among citizens. Aristotle argued that the greatest aim of humanity is a life of ease and this can only be obtained through participation within an emancipated or free society. According to Ford Foundation (2024) cited in Erude, Mukoro and Taiwo (2024) when citizens are denied the privilege to relate with their political leaders and state actors by getting involved in formulation and implementation of policies that affect them, the government has more often failed in service delivery, working for some selected minority having both political and economic power, which can result in widening the inequality gap. This paper has set some objectives for itself. First, is to analyze the benefits of citizen participation in public policies in Nigeria. Second, is to explain the methods of citizen participation. Third, is to discuss the challenges of citizens' involvement in public policies in Nigeria. The secondary means of data collection was utilized.



### **Literature Review**

Citizenship participation is defined as the engagement of citizens in public decision - making activities which span from mindfulness to having real power. Baum (2001) sees citizen participation as the citizen participation in public decision making. Citizen participation describes an activity by which people's issues, needs, interests and beliefs are integrated into decision making. It includes attempt to involve dormant citizens in the business of government as well as independent citizen enterprise in society for development, management and social action. Citizen participation is a process whereby citizens can have influence on governance by participating in the governance processes. According to OECD (2017), Citizen participation entails all ways in which interested parties in addition to citizens can participate in the formulation of policy and service delivery. Citizen participation includes citizen participation in the decision -making processes and involvement in public discussions on national discourse. When citizens engage in public policy formulation, the policies are seen to be legitimate, enjoy support, and are often sustainable. Dye (1978) sees public policy as what government decides to do or not to do. Hanekom (1991) points out that public policy is a strategy and interaction which is to work as a direction in the sharing of assets required to achieve common goals and objectives, agreed by a legislator. Ezeani (2006) sees public policy as the suggested plan of action which government wants to execute regarding a given problem. Ikelegbe (2006) notes that public policy is the consolidation of plans and programmes of action that government has put in place and the guide it has drawn to control action and practices in some problem areas.

Citizenship participation encourages thoroughness, efficiency and effectiveness to intensify confidence in governance through consultative and collective decision - making process conforming with the well -being of citizens. Michels (2012) rightly argues that citizen participation has a distinct consequence on policy and workings of government through participatory governance. Elekwa and Eme (2013) contend that citizen participation escalates request for efficient government system and encourages opportunity to build the confidence of the citizens. Michels (2011) observes that citizen participation has many functions, which include

- Educational function: increases the citizen's civic skills which make them to be more efficient when they engage in public decision making
- Integrative function: this adds to the growth of civic virtues, invokes a sense of belonging by the citizens. It also adds to a considerable legitimacy of decisions, giving rise to rules that are agreeable to all.

Sikader (2015) submits that citizen participation encourages transparency and decreases corruption through dissemination of information in which public awareness is created for the activities of government. It creates a right of possession for policy decision activities, increases their eagerness to help and pay for services of the government. In explaining why citizens sometimes shy away in participating in public policy making, Fowler and Kam (2007) submit that citizens are reluctant or do not participate actively in policy making because they feel that their voices will not count or will not be heard. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) suggests the following procedures to engage the public:

- Sharing of Information: top - down communication, one way government produces and disseminates information to be utilized by the citizens
- Consultation: citizens give response to government, it can be through citizen surveys and opinion polls
- Active participation: cooperation between the public and government; citizens engage in decision and policy making processes.

Various democratic theories promote the idea that governments that attempt to increase citizen involvement in decision making usually gain from having a large number of citizens in their decision making. The decisions made by these governments usually benefit a greater number of citizens and more accurately reflect their needs. .Boseman (2007) argues that the will of the citizens is highly important to the policy – making environment in the creation of value via the principles of democratic theory. Coleman and Gotze (2001) rightly maintain that the government structures function excellently when citizens are actively involved in policy debates, decisions and actions. Irvin and Stansbury (2017) contend that with citizens' involvement in decision making, articulated policies might be more pragmatically grounded in citizens' tastes, the public might become more empathetic appraiser of the government administrator's hard decisions, and the enhanced support from the public might give rise to a cooperative populace to rule. Stoker (2004) sees citizen participation in governance as a way to separate power and resources from central control towards local consumers. Dean (2018) maintains that citizen participation in shaping and execution of public policies is seen as a crucial component of participatory



democracy. Rahman (2005) opines that citizens' involvement in public policy making heightens the level of transparency and accountability and upgrade the level of governance. Edwards (2005) argues that the shift from government to governance entails the provision of means to involve citizens outside government through policies which uphold effective relationships across the public, private and community sectors as they co-operate in decision making. Chiweza (2005) sees citizen participation as being formulated to support government's public accountability in policy and decision making so as to arrive at good governance and encourage development. Devas and Grant (2003) perceive citizen participation as the means in which citizens utilize influence and control over the decisions that affect them.

Cain (2006) observe that the decrease of the representation function of political parties due to voter apathy and increasing electoral violence have encouraged the discussion of the legitimacy of democracy and have increased demands for more forms of citizen participation.

Smith, Fine and Kearns (2005) see citizen participation or civic participation as the process undertaken by the citizens in which people involve in policy making and by doing indicate their devotion to the community. Debates for citizen participation multifariously sheds light to its gains to individuals, communities, and the society, including expertise, mastery, power and problem - solving ability. Citizen participation is a prerequisite to good governance. Good governance entails the delivery of essential public goods, respect for citizens right and the capability to protect the citizens lives. Sharma (2007) rightly submits that good governance has been associated to the extent to which a government is considered and taken as legitimate, obligated to improving public welfare, responds to the needs of the citizens and the ability to provide security of lives and property. Only in a society that is free with the opportunity of free participation and regard for citizens' rights can good governance be attained. Fjeldstad (2004) observes that citizens confidence in government stimulate them to engage in policy making. Arguing further, he submits that citizens confidence in government benefits the government because strategies, directives, plans and tax collection are likely to be more efficient if the citizens believe that the government is working in their advantage. Government that encounters loss of confidence and doubt may find out that their citizens neglect or are unconcerned to their appeals, and have doubts about their declarations and policies. In what seems like a repudiation, Dahl (1956) contends that a surge in political activity among the lower socio – economic classes could result to more authoritarian ideas. Arguing in the same vein, Sartori (1987) fears that massive participation could even result to totalitarianism. A society's political culture affects citizens' participation or interest in public policies or politics. Political culture is what the citizens perceive and do due to their understanding of the political system where they inhabit. Almond and Verba (1963) cited in Adediji (2022) rightly explain how political culture affects citizen's interest in politics and public policy making. According to them, there are three types of political culture:

- 1) Parochial Political Culture – where citizens are aware that there is a government but they do not have interest or knowledge about political activities. They do not have expectations from their government and they do not know the responsibilities of their government towards them. This type of culture is prevalent in the developing countries including Nigeria. Due to lack of education by a good number of people, they are not interested in politics and are not even aware of the responsibilities of their government towards them. This type of system tends to have a government that is autocratic, is not accountable, lacks transparency and have total disregard for the rule of law. This type of culture is prevalent in developing country including Nigeria
- 2) Subject Political Culture – here, citizens are well acquainted with the political activities in their State but simply do not have interest in political activities including contributing to public policy making. This type of political culture is common in developing countries where citizens are subjected to passive roles in the affairs of the government even though they are aware of government's policies
- 3) Participant Political Culture – here, citizens have a high political awareness and contribute or make input into public policy. They have very strong orientation towards shaping government policies. This type of culture is prevalent in developed countries and has resulted in them having leaders that are accountable, transparent and responsive to their needs.

In the light of the foregoing, parochial political culture has encouraged negative consequences and resulted in lack of accountability, corruption and general neglect of the citizens needs and aspirations by the ruling class in Nigeria.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**



The theoretical framework utilized for this study is the Social Capital Theory. The main proponents of this theory are James Coleman, Pierre Bourdieu, Alejandro Portes, Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama (Kreuter and Lezin 2002). A number of maxims endorse this theory and they include “One finger cannot lift a stone”, “Rich together, poor, if separated”, “United we stand, divided we fall”. The concept of social capital explains that collective actions requiring cooperative efforts are mediated by the presence or absence of trust, reciprocity, and cooperation (Kreuter and Lezin 2002). Social capital is a set of shared values or resources that allows individuals to work together in a group to effectively achieve a common purpose. The basic tenet of the theory is that members of the society can come together and work for the good and benefit of all. It posits that groups of people can work together through trust, shared identity, norms, values and collective relationship in order to achieve common goals. Citizens can work together with the government for the good of the society and to achieve common goals. Through citizen participation in public policy making citizens can work together with the government to reach better decisions that could lead to accelerated development in the interest of all in the society.

#### **Methods of Citizen Participation**

- Engaging in political discussions or political debates
- Offering information or constructive criticism to the government
- Voting in election
- Signing a petition
- Writing letters to elected representatives
- Donating money to a candidate or political party
- Taking part in meetings to obtain information or discuss issues
- Campaigning for candidates
- Lobbying for laws that are perceived as good for the citizens
- Serving as a juror
- Standing as a candidate during election
- Holding political office
- Engaging in civil disobedience, to protest against perceived or unjust course or policy

#### **Benefits of Citizen Participation in Public Policy**

- **It is good for democracy:** it encourages the involvement of all, in decision making and heightens public trust in government and democratic institutions
- **It is beneficial for policies, services, and projects:** it encourages better policy results that consider and utilize citizen’s experiences and knowledge to address problems
- **It is good for fairness and diversity:** it can include the voice of the ‘silent majority’ and empower the representation of minorities and often marginalized groups like informal workers, physically challenged, women, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex communities (LGBTI)
- **It is good for legitimacy and promotes implementation:** decisions taken after due consultation with all stakeholders are seen as legitimate and they often enjoy social support.
- **It is a right:** every citizen has the right to be involved in policy formulation, design and service delivery which can be found in international agreements and the Nigerian constitution.
- **It increases civic skills and virtues:** citizens can imbibe civic skills like political activism, community engagement, decision making skills, and involvement in politics
- **It can be helpful where there is lack of ideas and solutions:** can be useful when there is dearth of ideas by political actors or government agencies
- **Preparing long term plans:** can be useful when government is preparing long term plans or drafting constitutions
- **It can help to avert crisis:** when government considers the perspective of all while making public policies, it averts crisis that might occur if some relevant groups are not taken into consideration while formulating policies

#### **Challenges of Citizen Participation in Public Policy in Nigeria**

- **Poverty:** Poverty is one of the obstacles to citizens participation in public policy making in Nigeria. According to the world bank, inflation in Nigeria reached an all - time high of 24. 7% in 2023 dragging about 10 million Nigerians into poverty (World Bank Group, 2024). They also estimate that in 2023,



Nigeria's poverty rate reached 38.9% with 87 million Nigerians living below poverty line making the country, the world's – largest poor population after India. They projected that by the end of 2024, about 40.7% of Nigerians will be living below the international poverty line (World Bank Group, 2024). The poverty level in the country is very high and unemployment level is very high too. There exists a good number of people struggling to survive or eke out a living. These people cannot be interested in contributing in public policy making neither are they interested in any form of citizen participation. Their interest is solely based on how they will survive

- **Lack of Education:** the illiteracy rate in the country is high and this affects citizen's participation in public policy. For instance, some States have very low literacy rate. In 2017, Yobe State had the lowest level of 7.23%, Zamfara 19.16%, Katsina 10.36% and Sokoto 15.01% and not much has changed since then (The Punch, September, 2023). Therefore, with this type of population, they will not be able to contribute meaningfully to public policies and are therefore not interested in participating in public policy making. Baum (2001) rightly pin points that citizens with higher income and education tend to participate in public policy making than citizens with low income and education.
- **Lack of Public Trust:** this is one factor that has continued to discourage citizens from participating in decision making process. There is lack of trust between the citizens and the government. The government most times have not been transparent or accountable to the public and this has resulted to lack of trust and alienation of the people from the government. Dalton (2004) contends that unemployment, financial and economic volatility affect people's trust in government. Arizti, Brumby, Manning and Senderowitsch (2010) point out that there is growing evidence that low citizen trust can undermine the social contract and lead to detachment of citizens in many key dimensions.
- **Government Institutions:** Many government institutions rely on top – down approach and do not engage or involve the citizens in the affairs that directly affect them. This makes the citizens to become disinterested in public policies as there is even no attempt by the government to involve them in their own affairs. Ajakaiye (2003) cited in Obona (2016) rightly argues that the government formulates and implements public policies without involving the citizens and this has resulted to public apathy towards these policies as the citizens feel that they are not duty bound to contribute to the success of these policies
- **Weak Civil Society:** the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Nigeria are weak as they lack the capacity and resources to advocate for change and engage or involve in decision making. There is also the problem of proliferation of these organizations and some of them are created for selfish reasons and not to make good impact. According to West Africa Society Institute (2023) civil society organizations limited self – regulation has encouraged the emergence of some unscrupulous civil society organizations that sabotage the credibility of the organization as a whole.
- **Intimidation and Attacks on Citizens:** citizens who criticize or attack government policies are usually clamped down by the government through different ways. This, discourages citizens from offering any form of constructive criticism so that they will not be punished or abused. On March 14<sup>th</sup> 2023, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) fined 25 stations over their coverage of the 2023 general elections for allegedly breaching the broadcasting code (Amnesty International, 2023). The NBC also fined Channels Television 5 million naira over views communicated by Datti Baba Ahmed, the Labour Party Vice Presidential Candidate, during a TV programme. On October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023, the NBC issued a final warning to Arise TV for airing a programme containing "unguarded comments" against the legislature, the judiciary, the executive and Mr President (Amnesty International, 2023). All these scenarios affect citizens' participation in government activities and curtail their freedom of speech.
- **Bad Leadership:** the country has problem of bad leadership which has become a bane to development efforts and has also encouraged public apathy towards the government. The leaders find it difficult to create successful participatory governance. Eze (2024) rightly contends that Nigeria as a country has remained stagnant because public policies are not driven in the interest of the masses but to satisfy a group of people who have remained in the corridors of power

### **Conclusion**

There has been a major shift from strict bureaucratic process to pro – people approach which has changed the concept of government to governance, and has introduced many ways to involve citizens in development



programmes. Citizen participation has become very necessary in order to encourage accelerated development as it ensures that the government concentrates on the citizens' needs and aspirations. To evolve a society where the citizens needs and aspirations are met should be at the heart of every good government. Citizen participation is a must and should be encouraged by all government in order to fulfil their objectives and mandates.

### Recommendations

- . The government should empower the citizens through giving them interest free loans. Jobs should be created and workers should be paid living wages as a way of encouraging them to participate in public policy making
- i. The government should make education free at all levels as it has been declared as a child's right according to the Child's Right Act of 2003. Parents who refused to send their children to school should be penalized
- ii. The government should develop and build public trust as a way of attracting the citizens' support and co – operation. Government can build trust through show of transparency, public accountability and probity
- iii. The government should uphold the citizens' human rights and stop attacking citizens' who criticize their policies
- iv. Civil Society Organizations in Nigeria should be united and work together towards upholding their courses.

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