Published in final edited form as:

Health Place. 2012 May ; 18(3): 475–480. doi:10.1016/j.healthplace.2011.11.002.

AIDS NGOS and corruption in Nigeria

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Abstract

Using two ethnographic case studies, the intersecting dynamics of inequality, morality, and corruption are examined as they play out in Nigerian AIDS NGOs. To the Nigerian public, local AIDS organizations are widely seen as conduits for corruption. But local opinions of particular NGOs and their leaders turn less on whether donor resources were misused and more on the ways that people who accumulate the benefits of corruption use them socially. Nevertheless, discontent swirls about corruption in general, a fact that suggests a gradual change in people's understandings of the processes that produce inequality in Nigeria.

Introduction

In the upscale sections of Lagos, in the rapidly growing subdivisions of Abuja, and even on the crowded streets of much smaller cities like Umuahia, in Abia State, the signboards are ubiquitous: Stop AIDS, Action AIDS, Youth Against AIDS, Christian AIDS Charities, and Naija AIDS Foundation. These signboards represent an explosion of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) over the past two decades across Nigeria. Probably no single social problem has produced more NGOs in Nigeria than the AIDS epidemic. Together, since 2002, the U.S. President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria have channeled \$2.25 billion to Nigeria, much of which is ultimately dispersed to NGOs. Other donors have contributed hundreds of millions of dollars as well.

Long before the Nigerian weekly news magazine *Tell* ran a cover story in July 2004 reporting on the country's lucrative AIDS industry, entitled "Feeding Fat on AIDS," I had heard countless concerns, complaints, and conspiracy theories from friends, acquaintances, and other interlocutors in Nigeria that AIDS was a boondoggle for many in government and especially in the NGO sector. While most Nigerians recognized that HIV and AIDS were real problems—particularly by the early years of the 21st century, when it was much more likely that the average citizen knew someone who was infected with the virus—it was not uncommon to hear people speculate that AIDS itself was the concoction of a new elite in cahoots with global partners, the latest form of fraud cloaked in the legitimacy of humanitarianism.¹ The findings from my research suggest that many NGOs ostensibly created to address the AIDS epidemic are indeed fraudulent. Further, among those that are

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²The names of the persons and NGOs presented in the case studies are pseudonyms and the particulars of individual biographies are altered to protect anonymity.

¹A wide range of fraud and deception are known colloquially in Nigeria as "419."

legitimate, many of their founders and staff receive handsome compensation for their good works (with expatriate employees of international NGOs exemplifying most obviously just how well one can do by “doing good”). One cannot separate an examination of corruption in AIDS NGOs from the broader context of inequality in Nigeria. Local understandings and practices of corruption—in AIDS NGOs and more generally—are directly influenced by perceptions and moral judgments about social, political, and economic disparities.

The proliferation of AIDS-related NGOs in Nigeria, the extent of fraud and corruption that characterize many of their activities, and the stories that circulate in popular discourse about people “benefiting” from AIDS through the burgeoning of civil society groups all reveal important truths and trends regarding relationships of inequality that are mediated by the power of the state, but also by international aid donors. While Nigeria’s endemic corruption is widely acknowledged and condemned among Western donors, less apparent outside the country is the fact that ordinary Nigerians often believe the West does not have their interests at heart, they do not trust their government, and perhaps most worrisomely, they suspect the motives of their fellow citizens (Smith, 2007a). In circumstances where civil society has come to be seen as a linchpin for combating the AIDS epidemic, both the reputation for and the realities of corruption can have significant consequences for the health and well being of Nigerians. AIDS NGOs are certainly not the only NGOs—much less the only formal institutions—perceived to be corrupt by the Nigerian public. But their case is particularly interesting and illuminating, in part because the AIDS epidemic itself intersects with—and is believed by many Nigerians to be precisely about—issues of morality and trust that many people perceive to be under threat in Nigeria.

But of course it is not true that all AIDS NGOs in Nigeria are scams. In fact, many local AIDS NGOs are doing heroic work, even as others are indeed the fraudulent enterprises popular rumors suggest. To divide civil society neatly into honest and corrupt NGOs navigates too easily over a much messier terrain. The people who run “corrupt” NGOs are not as bad as they may seem; nor are those who run legitimate organizations so completely different from their corrupt counterparts. Through an ethnographically grounded analysis of two examples, I explore why local NGOs have proliferated so widely, what they do in practice, what effects they have beyond their stated aims, and how they are perceived and experienced by ordinary Nigerians.

The overall argument is that practices of corruption in AIDS NGOs are undertaken in a social context where inequality is rife, and where access to international donor resources is perceived as one of the best means by which to get ahead. The misuse of donor dollars is justified, in part, by an awareness of tremendous global inequalities and the double standards that value foreigners’ time and skills more than Nigerians’. Further, among Nigerians, the degree to which corruption is tolerated or condemned turns less on whether donor resources were misused and more on the ways that people who accumulate the benefits of corruption use them socially. Stolen money that is partly redistributed to become a good patron who helps others is judged much differently than malfeasance that benefits only an individual. But even within a society where some forms of “corrupt” behavior are accepted, discontent still swirls about corruption in general, a fact that I argue suggests a gradual change in the processes—and people’s understandings of the processes—that produce inequality in Nigeria.

NGOs and “Actually Existing Civil Society”

Globally, the proliferation of NGOs is commonly tied to the end of the Cold War and efforts to expand both a neoliberal economic order and a liberal democratic approach to governance (Kamat, 2004; Mercer, 2002). Among donors interested in promoting democracy and

development in Africa, and elsewhere in the so-called Third World, NGOs have been seen as key engines in processes of positive change. Numerous accounts have documented the increase in the amount of aid dollars spent on an ever growing number of NGOs in developing countries in general and Africa in particular. Igoe and Kelsall (2005, pp. 6–7), for example, cite a 1991 figure of 8,000 to 9,000 local NGOs in all of Africa in 1988, while by 2005 nearly 99,000 were registered in South Africa alone. Estimates of the number of NGOs in Nigeria are slippery, but by 2006 there were many thousands involving millions of personnel and volunteers (Dibie and Dibie, 2007).

In Nigeria, the dramatic rise of NGOs began in the late 1980s during military governments and in the wake of World Bank/IMF-promoted Structural Adjustment Programs. Donor support for NGOs was connected to a wider interest and faith in civil society as a crucial institutional mechanism in processes of democratization and development—including improved population health—in places perceived as lacking them (Bratton, 1989; World Bank, 2000). While the definition of civil society is variable and sometimes elusive, dominant political science perspectives describe it as situated between the state and society, or as occupying the political space between the individual or household and the state (Chazan, 1992; Mohan, 2002). The emphasis on civil society's political character and its influence on—but also its relative independence from—the state is crucial to most understandings of how it can affect processes of democratization, development, and human welfare in positive ways. For Nigeria, donors were particularly keen to promote NGOs as a means to circumvent dealing directly with non-democratic military regimes. In Nigeria itself, an entrepreneurial citizens, especially elites, responded by creating NGOs—legitimate, bogus, and everywhere in between—to take advantage of the changing landscape of international aid. As Swidler (2006) has shown, the “institutional isomorphism” of donor policies is met with local adaptation, appropriation, subversion, and resistance (see also Bornstein, 2005; Kaler and Watkins, 2001; Smith, 2003).

Even as civil society in general and NGOs in particular have been promoted by major multinational and bilateral donors as “‘the missing middle’ between citizens and the state” (World Bank, 1997, p. 114), and therefore are seen to serve as the linchpin in forms of political and economic transformation promoted by these aid institutions, significant critiques of the dominant donor perspective have emerged. Most of the criticism of donor-funded initiatives to support African civil society and local NGOs has come from within the paradigm that presumes processes of neoliberal economic development and liberal democratization are laudable goals or inexorable (if fitful) processes of social transformation—if not both. More radical assessments question the assumptions of the dominant paradigm that underlies Western governments' foreign policies and donor strategies (Escobar, 2000; Townsend and Townsend, 2004). They point out the Eurocentric biases that bolster the images of state, society, and culture accompanying programs of democratization and development, while arguing that democracy and development as conceived of and undertaken in this paradigm ultimately serve the interests of capitalism, Western societies, and Third World elites (Abrahamsen 2000; Hulme and Edwards, 1997).

Following Mamdani's admonition more than a decade ago that scholars should examine “actually existing civil society” (Mamdani, 1996), my objective here is to focus on the nature and practices of NGOs in Nigeria, specifically NGOs with an AIDS-related focus, regardless of whether they are legitimate, bogus, or somewhere in between. The NGO response to AIDS sits in between state and society, emblematic for Nigerians of their hopes, aspirations, and entrepreneurial efforts to improve their country, but also of their deep distrust and suspicion of the institutions, processes, and persons believed to be responsible for inequality and injustice, whether these are international donors, the Nigerian

government, or local NGOs and their fellow citizens who might be benefitting unfairly from them.

Theorizing Corruption in Nigeria

As noted above, Nigeria has a widespread reputation for corruption. In 2000, it appeared at the top of Transparency International's list of the most corrupt countries, and it continues to be regarded as a bastion of fraud, graft, and deceit (Transparency International, 2009; Smith, 2007a). In the language of cause and effect, corruption is often portrayed as an independent variable inhibiting the desired and supposedly dependent outcomes of democracy and development, including improving health outcomes (Transparency International, 2006). Despite this widespread perception, scholars have long recognised that corruption is as much a product of political and economic problems as it is their cause (Heidenheimer and Johnston, 2002). While corruption is typically studied from the top down, an emphasis on corruption as emanating outward from the state misses the complex ways in which corruption is commonly woven into the fabric of everyday life (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan, 2006; Smith, 2007a). Looking ethnographically at corruption in the AIDS NGO sector in Nigeria illustrates how it is part and parcel of both the maintenance of social inequality and ordinary people's struggles to respond to it.

A central question in the study of corruption in Nigeria, including in the local AIDS NGO sector, is how ordinary citizens can be paradoxically both active participants in the social reproduction of corruption, even as they are also its primary victims and its principal critics. Understanding Nigerians' seemingly contradictory positions requires situating corruption in its political, social-relational, and moral contexts. For Nigerians, corruption can be, on the one hand, a survival strategy and a moral imperative, and, on the other hand, a political ruse to be condemned for its deception and venality. The contradictions of corruption both mirror and explain Nigerians' growing expectations of and frustrated aspirations for democracy and development, a tension that manifests itself in popular perceptions of NGOs working to address the AIDS epidemic.

Nigeria's social context is central to explaining when and why Nigerians participate in corruption, but also to understanding what kinds of corruption are acceptable, and what kinds produce the popular discontent that fuels many salient contemporary social phenomena. Over the past few decades, new forms of corruption have emerged that Nigerians widely view as illegitimate. This illegitimacy is most pronounced where Nigerians feel deceived by the postcolonial state's failure to deliver the expected benefits of development and democracy, at the same time that more traditional mechanisms of patron-clientism are perceived to be breaking down (Gore and Pratten, 2003). In other words, as elites manipulate the intertwining of bureaucratic and kinship-based clientelism to maximise their wealth and power, the legitimacy of both systems is undermined.

Study Setting and Methods

I first went to Nigeria in 1989 to work for a U.S.-based NGO coordinating a child survival project in southeastern Nigeria, covering a region that is now Imo, Abia, and Ebonyi states. I lived three years in the Imo State capital of Owerri and, in those years, I encountered very few local NGOs. By 1995–97, when I conducted dissertation research in Abia State, there were more. During that period, I studied two local NGOs doing family planning and reproductive health projects, but few, if any, local NGOs in the region specifically focused on AIDS. Over the intervening decade—with the creation of PEPFAR and the Global Fund—the number of AIDS NGOs skyrocketed, and by the time I spent six months doing

research on the marital transmission of HIV in 2004, a World Bank call for NGO AIDS proposals generated 79 applications in Imo State alone.

I am not aware of accurate statistics on the number of AIDS-focused NGOs throughout Nigeria (indeed, the fact that many fraudulent NGOs exist mostly only on paper or the internet makes a legitimate count nearly impossible). Nor do donors as a collective or the Nigerian government itself break down the flow of AIDS dollars to NGOs. But given the overall amounts of money for AIDS and the mandate from donors to allocate significant proportions to NGOs, there can be no doubt that local NGOs in Nigeria have received tens (and probably hundreds) of millions of AIDS dollars over the past decade.

My findings, presented in the form of two case studies, come from more than 15 years of interaction with local health and AIDS NGOs in Nigeria. I draw here particularly on participant observation and interviews with NGO staff and with many ordinary people while I was conducting the study on marriage and AIDS in 2004 (Smith, 2007b; Hirsch et al, 2009). In addition, I spent several years studying corruption in Nigeria more generally, including a focus on NGOs (Smith, 2001; Smith, 2007a). The cases below were selected because they represent the divergent ways that “corruption” among AIDS NGOs is understood in Nigeria

A Poser, an NGO, and the Dynamics of Disgrace

In the mid-1990s, Pius Okadigbo got a job working for a U.S.-based NGO that ran a number of public health projects in Abia State.² A friend of mine who was the Nigerian manager for the American NGO’s projects in southeastern Nigeria spoke highly of Pius after he was hired. Based at the NGO’s Umuahia office, Pius worked as a program officer, meaning that he ran training programs, supervised field staff, collected and analyzed project data, and helped draft reports for the NGO headquarters and for donors. In his years working for the NGO, Pius learned a wide range of skills relevant for running such an organization.

After several years with the American organization, Pius eventually left to run the office of a large Nigerian NGO. The local organization, United against AIDS (UAA), for which Pius directed the Umuahia office, was one of the most prominent domestic NGOs created to address the country’s HIV epidemic. UAA’s headquarters were in Ibadan in southwestern Nigeria, where it was supported by major grants from Western governments and multilateral donors. Nearly all of the big NGOs fighting AIDS, which command many millions of dollars of international aid, are based in Nigeria’s Southwest (and now, increasingly, in Abuja, the capital). Many of these mega-NGOs have regional offices around the country, like UAA’s office in Umuahia in the Southeast.

I saw Pius several times in the years while he ran the Umuahia office of UAA. He was always gregarious and polite. One day I ran into him during lunch at a restaurant in town and he insisted that I accompany him back to his office. When we entered the reception area his two staff members quickly stood up and greeted him in English, “Welcome, Sir!” One of the young ladies then opened the door for us to enter Pius’s office (which had “Director’s Office” boldly displayed on a black and gold signboard). Pius behaved condescendingly to his staff, ringing a bell when he wanted them to bring us cold drinks, and loudly scolding a secretary for a mistake in her typing.

His office had all the accoutrements that I had long since become used to seeing in the offices of “big men” (and “big women”) in government and NGOs: a chilly air conditioner, a computer and a printer, a phone (though cell phones have recently almost entirely displaced landlines), and a private refrigerator stocked with cold drinks. But in Pius’s office the furniture was more expensive than is typical, the refrigerator was bigger than usual, the

computer seemed to be the latest laptop, the printer was a laser rather than inkjet, and Pius made a point of showing me that he had internet service (at that time widely available in internet cafes, but uncommon in private offices). He clearly enjoyed showing off his success.

From what I heard from my colleagues at other Umuahia NGOs, Pius developed a reputation for ostentation and arrogance among his peers. I remember one mutual colleague telling me about Pius's participation in a consortium of AIDS NGOs in Abia State that met on a regular basis to try to coordinate their activities. He said that Pius was always late to meetings and demanded that others defer to him in discussions (often lauding over his peers—or, in his mind his inferiors—the fact that UAA was such a big player compared to the much smaller NGOs that also made up the consortium). This colleague said, “Pius would arrive carrying a pile of newspapers which he reads, or pretends to read, while his car is caught in traffic, dressed in a newly tailored traditional outfit, carrying the staff from his most recent chieftancy title, and always acting as if he was busy and in a hurry.” The idea that chieftancy titles are for sale in Nigeria, creating a surplus of what Nigerians call “naira chiefs,”³ is emblematic for many of the state of social and moral crisis in the country. Even once revered honors are reduced to commodities for sale in a prestige market where the corrupt try to legitimize their wealth buying traditional symbols of social stature.

Pius's NGO colleagues clearly resented the way Pius flaunted his new wealth and position. They called Pius a “poser,” a term used for people who pretend to be what they are not, but usually reserved in Nigeria especially for people whose conspicuous consumption and boastful personalities would have people believe they are more important than they really are. Pius had indeed made a lot of money from his job running UAA's Umuahia office, most of it rumored to be misappropriated (his salary was good, but not nearly enough to explain the car he purchased, the house he was building in his village, or the chieftancy titles he bought for himself). The dishonor of being perceived as a poser was not so much about the fact that Pius allegedly stole money from his NGO (though some people, of course, lamented that too); it was much more about how he abused his new wealth and status to intimidate others. He was seen as an inauthentic big man, not because of the source of his money, but because of the way he used it. Instead of sharing some of his money to cultivate social ties and build a network of followers, in a manner of a good patron that has a long and embedded history in Nigeria's clientelistic political economy, Pius was seen as aggrandizing himself at the expense of others.

Unusually for Nigeria, Pius's theft of project money was publicly exposed and he was eventually fired. UAA initiated criminal prosecution, though I heard that the case was stalled in court, and most people suggested that Pius would never actually be convicted. But he was thoroughly disgraced and seemed to have little hope of rehabilitating his reputation and career, at least in the NGO sector. Several friends said that Pius had been done in by his own staff, speculating that the office accountant or others who knew of his corrupt dealings had quietly made sure that the UAA office in Ibadan discovered his malfeasance. They betrayed him, these stories suggested, not because he was stealing money (after all, many NGO bosses were doing that, they said), but because he was so arrogant and selfish in his dealings with others, most especially his own staff.

Naija Cares: A Good Christian Lady and the Nuances of Corruption

My friend, Chidinma Alozie, who managed the U.S. NGO where Pius first worked, eventually started her own local NGO, called Naija Cares (“Naija” being common Nigerian

³Naira is the name of the Nigerian currency.

shorthand for the country's name). For local NGOs in Nigeria, the key to success is garnering support from international doors. Naija Cares did quite well in this regard. By 2010, the NGO had survived for nearly 15 years, receiving funding from multiple foundations, foreign government agencies, multilateral organizations, and the Nigerian government. Through a combination of social connections, successful project outcomes, and skill at proposal and report writing, Naija Cares has achieved exceptional durability in a context where the vast majority of local NGOs do not outlast the duration of a single funded project.

I admire much of the work that Chidinma and Naija Cares have done. But it is also important to examine critically the daily practices of NGOs (for examples, see Hilhorst 2003; Igoe and Kelsall 2005; Schuller 2009) like Naija Cares and the perceptions of these practices among ordinary citizens so that the social effects and meanings of the NGO explosion that has accompanied Nigeria's AIDS epidemic can be fully understood. Chidinma and her organization have been the subject of many rumors, warranted or not. I have no way of knowing the extent to which Chidinma has funneled money from her projects into her own hands over the years. But people around Umuahia assumed she benefited handsomely (and well beyond her salary) from the NGO she "owned," at least in part because people knew that she built an addition onto her relatively modest house in Umuahia; she was able to buy a nice (albeit used) car when her old one gave out; she joined with her siblings to build a new house for her mother in the village; and she was able to provide well for her four children (she was long ago divorced and, somewhat remarkably in the cultural context of southeastern Nigeria, raised the children as a single mother).

The maximum amounts that most donors would tolerate for a local NGO director's salary in Nigeria would not enable someone like Chidinma to afford a decent car, an added room on her modest house, or the cost of university education for her four children—even as the salaries of the expatriate personnel who award and supervise these donor funds easily exceed not only what someone like Chidinma is paid, but also what she might manage to accumulate through "corruption." I am not saying that these inequalities justify corruption, or even that they are, in any simple way, the cause of such corruption, but such inequalities are an important part of the context that one must recognize in order to understand what is going on.

It would be easy to list the various means by which Chidinma could "misappropriate" donor money. But more central for my purposes in this article are questions such as how people like Chidinma understand their own motives and behavior, how these behaviors are interpreted by ordinary Nigerians, and what consequences all this has for the evolving relationships of inequality between the state, civil society, and everyday social life in Nigeria. Like ordinary Nigerians in all sectors of the economy, a large proportion of the people who work for the thousands of small local NGOs in Nigeria can be seen as simply trying to survive in the world as they find it. But to the Nigerian public, AIDS NGOs are also symbols of precisely the things that are wrong with their society: partnerships between elites, the state, and international donors that benefit the few at the expense of the many; widespread and all too widely accepted fraud and deceit, where even the noblest goals like helping the sick and the poor are perverted for personal profit; all made worse by an overall sense of intractability, where even the disenfranchised spend more time plotting or imagining how they can benefit from this system rather than trying to fix it.

Naija Cares and Chidinma Alozie offer an instructive example precisely because she and her organization can (and, I think, must) be analyzed both empathetically and critically. From years of long conversations with Chidinma, I know that she genuinely hopes that her NGO's work can make a difference for the sick and the poor, especially poor women. She is a

devout born-again Christian. She often justifies her humanitarianism in the language of religion, noting Jesus' good works and compassion for the poor. But over the years Chidinma certainly used project resources for personal purposes. I witnessed some of it myself and heard about lots more from her staff.

It is important to point out that many of the ways that Chidinma used project resources for her own needs drew little scrutiny. In the Nigerian context, Chidinma was the "owner" of Naija Cares. As the owner, Chidinma was perceived to be entitled to use staff labor, project vehicles and resources, and even, to some extent, project money for her own benefit. The quid pro quo for this latitude was that it was expected that she care for her staff and others in her orbit in the manner that a good patron should—for example, granting time off when a staff member had a personal problem or a burial to attend, providing loans or salary advances when they were requested with good reason, or using her political connections to help a friend or relative get a job or a child get admission to a school. Part of the difference between Pius and Chidinma was the divergent manner in which each conducted him/herself as a patron.

The juxtaposition of toleration for some corruption—as the "owner" of Naija Cares it was expected that Chidinma would use its resources to benefit her family, her church, her client networks, and herself—with the intense jealousy and resentment that similar corruption can provoke if the benefits are used more selfishly, as in Pius's case, speaks to the complexity of the intersection of inequality, morality, and everyday life in contemporary Nigeria. Like the AIDS epidemic that so many NGOs have been founded to fight, these organizations sit at the center of these intertwining strands of social life. They are institutions created, in part, to help manage difficult social change, but they are also implicated in aspects of change about which Nigerians are extremely ambivalent.

Conclusion

A considerable literature suggests that AIDS interventions, many of which are implemented by local NGOs have reconfigured the relationship between the individual and state, creating what is now commonly referred to as "therapeutic citizenship" (Nguyen, 2010). While the particulars are different in specific cases, the general argument is that access to health care (and in the case of HIV and AIDS, access to antiretroviral therapy) has emerged as an arena in which people can make claims on the state in ways that simultaneously, circumvent, reinvent, but also reproduce the inequalities that have typically characterized the relationship between ordinary people and their governments. The picture painted in these accounts is both hopeful and depressing—hopeful in that in some instances the resort to therapeutic citizenship has enabled people to claim and receive benefits from the state—and from international donors—that they have not otherwise been able to effectively demand or access; depressing in that only some patients are able to leverage their suffering for recognition and assistance. Further, in very few instances does therapeutic citizenship translate into broad political representation and rights; it may even impede these broader goals by substituting a narrower conception of individual rights and state/donor obligations.

In this article, I have focused on Nigeria's burgeoning AIDS NGO sector as a social space where problems of inequality, morality, and social change associated with the epidemic are being expressed and reconfigured (and, in some respects, reinforced). The fact that NGOs in Nigeria are often mechanisms for the reproduction of inequality is not all that surprising, and it is an occurrence not confined to Nigeria. But perhaps more interesting is how these NGOs provoke popular political imagination. The stories that circulate about "feeding fat on AIDS" speak to ordinary Nigerians' awareness that the dynamics of domestic disparity are tied to the larger global system of inequality. People are certainly cognizant of these

connections when it comes to the oil industry, the country's largest source of revenue, but they are also well aware of the importance of access to donor dollars as the linchpin for success in the arena of health and other development-related enterprises. It is commonly believed that most of the money in NGO work comes from abroad, and that those who get rich in this "business" are those with the best connections to foreign funds.

In addition to providing commentary on the role of global powers in the reproduction of inequality in Nigeria, the stories about NGOs feeding fat on AIDS also reveal Nigerians' awareness and anger (but also ambivalence) about a moral economy in which practices of patronage undermine and outweigh competing rules based on bureaucratic accountability. On the one hand, the stories and widely expressed discontents about NGO corruption suggest that Nigerians are fed up with politics and economics of patronage. On the other hand, the distinction between Pius and Chidinma suggests that there are still many moral pressures and social rewards for using "ownership" of an NGO to build one's career as a patron. Pius was condemned not so much because he benefitted financially from his position at UAA, but because of the way he mishandled himself in his relationship with his staff, his peers, and his various publics. He was seen as greedy and self-aggrandizing, whereas Chidinma was seen, by and large, as a good patron and a moral person. Nevertheless, Chidinma was also the subject of rumors and defamatory gossip, suggesting that even the position of a good patron is becoming suspect in Nigeria's changing political economy.

Nigerian AIDS NGOs are also more than just objects of discontent in popular discourse. They sit at the nexus of significant processes of social and political change. They are caught up in the social reproduction of inequality, exemplifying how local elites navigate the flow of global aid dollars and the politics of patronage to perpetuate inequality. Nevertheless, the very fact that many NGOs are popularly acknowledged as illegitimate—and even those like Naija Cares are the subject of critical rumors—suggests that inequality sits uncomfortably with collective morality, whether the moral economy is grounded in patron-clientism, a more bureaucratic neoliberal order, or some mix of the two. AIDS NGOs are both bellwethers of and active participants in these changing dynamics, where inequality and morality are central to people's experiences of AIDS and of contemporary social life more generally.

Research Highlights

Inequality, morality, and corruption are examined in Nigerian AIDS NGOs.

Local opinions of NGOs turn on how the benefits of corruption are used socially.

Nigerians' understandings of the processes that produce inequality are changing.

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