Published in final edited form as:

Third World Q. 2010 ; 31(2): . doi:10.1080/01436591003711975.

Corruption, NGOs, and Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examines corruption in Nigeria's development sector, particularly in the vastly growing arena of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Grounded in ethnographic case studies, the analysis explores why local NGOs in Nigeria 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. It shows that even faux NGOs and disingenuous political rhetoric about civil society, democracy, and development are contributing to changing ideals and rising expectations in these same domains.

Introduction

One of the reigning jokes in contemporary Nigeria, told only partly facetiously, is that when students complete their education they have two options besides likely unemployment: founding a church or starting a non-governmental organisation (NGO). Given Nigeria's economic woes and the dearth of decent job opportunities, the humour about churches and NGOs is a collective commentary on the difficulties of everyday life. It is also an allusion to the promises of development, albeit in a manner that is simultaneously a criticism of development's failures, because the unarticulated assumption in the joke is that the NGO arena and what Nigerians call 'new breed churches' are fertile grounds for corruption. Obviously, only a tiny fraction of Nigeria's population of approximately 140 million people actually earns a living by establishing an NGO. Yet the proliferation of development-related NGOs in Nigeria since the late 1980s has been striking and extraordinary, and has spawned an equally remarkable expansion and intensification of popular complaint about corruption in this domain.

This article examines corruption in Nigeria's development industry as it is perceived and experienced by ordinary citizens, particularly in the local NGO sector. It traces the reasons behind the rise of NGOs as a donor strategy, the particular recent historical context of local NGO proliferation in Nigeria, and the dynamics of corruption in this expanding landscape of NGOs. In Nigeria, as in many settings, development programs are a common cover for some of the most venal forms of graft.¹ A study of Nigerian development NGOs offers insights with regard to the intertwining dynamics of corruption and the reproduction of inequality. While corruption is certainly prevalent in Nigeria, including among local NGOs, the failures of development are all too easily blamed on corruption, reducing a complex constellation of phenomena to a simplistic explanation. Commonly, Western notions of Nigerian corruption stand by implication for the supposed shortcomings of Nigerian – and by extension African – 'culture'.² The view that corruption is a problem of culture blocks a more accurate and nuanced understanding, protecting from scrutiny the political and economic structures and systems that enable corruption, enrich elites, and encourage ordinary citizens to participate out of a sense that they have no other options.³ Nigeria's problem of corruption is symptomatic of multifaceted and thorny issues in the interactions between development and inequality that include the complicity of donors, the evolving nature of state-society

relations in the postcolonial context, and popular ambivalence about ongoing social transformations.

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.⁴ 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. The optimism about NGOs derives from a 'general sense of NGOs "doing good," unencumbered and untainted by the politics of government and the greed of the market'.⁵ 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.⁶ Igoe and Kelsall, 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.⁷ Estimates of the number of NGOs in Nigeria are slippery, but by 2009 there were many thousands involving millions of personnel and volunteers.⁸

Donor support for NGOs, especially since the late 1980s, is connected to a wider interest and faith in 'civil society' as a key institutional engine in processes of democratisation and development – reflected in both academic literature and applied development settings.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 democratisation and development in positive ways.

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',¹¹ 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 democratisation are laudable goals or inexorable (if fitful) processes of social transformation – if not both. The literature is replete with arguments about how best to cultivate civil society, with a significant and ongoing debate about the relationship between democratisation and development. Some analysts suggest that development must lay the groundwork for democracy, with evidence (particularly from Asian cases) mustered to argue that non-democratic political institutions can be beneficial for development.¹² Other authors contend, either explicitly or implicitly, that democratic political institutions are conducive to development.¹³ In almost all of this literature, the question is primarily about getting civil society 'right' in order to take advantage of its perceived role in processes of democratisation and development – processes that are presumed to be necessary, commendable, and ultimately inevitable.

More radical assessments question the assumptions of the dominant paradigm that underlies Western governments' foreign policies and donor strategies.¹⁴ They point out the Eurocentric biases that bolster the images of state, society, and culture accompanying programs of democratisation 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 the Third World elites.¹⁵ From this point of view, democracy and development are seen as ethnocentric cultural programs and imperialistic

political and economic projects. A related perspective, which is frequently aligned with the more radical point of view, but which can also be employed within the dominant paradigm, is that conventional approaches to civil society – with their emphasis on NGOs – ignore key elements of local civil society such as religious organisations, kinship institutions, and other forms of community and association that do not fit comfortably in the dominant model.¹⁶ These more radical critiques flourish mostly in several strands of academic literature. They are much less influential among Western governments and donor institutions than the within-paradigm perspectives outlined above.

Following Mamdani's admonition more than a decade ago that scholars should examine 'actually existing civil society', the objective here is to focus local NGOs in Nigeria.¹⁷ By local NGOs, I mean organisations registered in Nigeria, operating in the country, and run by Nigerians. While NGOs can be of many types, by far the most common are those working in development. Through an ethnographically grounded analysis of several different 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.

Many other institutions of civil society exist in Nigeria, but support for NGOs has been a particularly prominent donor strategy to promote democracy and development. Further, criticism of local NGOs has featured centrally in international and local discourses about the failures to achieve these goals in Nigeria. As indicated in the introduction to this article, corruption is commonly espoused by both foreign critics and ordinary Nigerians as a primary reason for these shortcomings. Examining corruption in local Nigerian NGOs thus offers a revealing window onto the relationship between state and society in Africa's most populous country, suggesting that real processes of social transformation sit uneasily with rigid views as to whether democracy and development are imperialist projects or laudable universal aims.

Theorizing Corruption in Nigeria

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.¹⁸ 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. The view that corruption is a problem in and of itself is prevalent and powerful.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ While corruption is typically studied from the top down with a focus on the state, the emphasis on corruption as emanating from the state outward misses the complex ways in which corruption is woven into the fabric of everyday life in much of Nigerian society.²¹ Looking ethnographically at corruption in the NGO sector illustrates how it is part and parcel of both the maintenance of social inequality and the struggles to respond to it.

A central question in the study of corruption in Nigeria, including in the local NGO sector, is how ordinary citizens can be, paradoxically, 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.

Other scholars have offered analyses that contribute to explaining why ordinary Africans participate in corruption that can be inimical to their own interests. For example, in his book on politics in Nigeria, Richard Joseph emphasises the importance of various kinds of vertically organised solidarity networks in Nigerians' relationship to the state, and argues that corruption hinges partly on the inseparability of individual and collective interests: '... the fundamental social process in Nigeria is one in which these two propositions – (a) I want to get ahead and prosper and (b) my group (ethnic, regional, linguistic) must get ahead and prosper – cannot logically be separated, whether in the context of behavior, action, or consciousness'.²² Chabal and Daloz capture concisely the significance of such solidarity networks by citing what the label as an African proverb: 'whoever does not rob the state robs his kith and kin'.²³ One of the most important contributions of Africanist political science and the emergent anthropology of corruption has been explaining how so-called corruption frequently occurs as the result of social strategies, cultural logics, and moral economies that assign values different from those assumed in the ideologies of the neoliberal bureaucratic state.²⁴

Some of the initial contributions of anthropology to understanding corruption have built on the discipline's theoretical strengths regarding the social and symbolic dimensions of economics, politics, and power. For example, several anthropologists have utilised Marcel Mauss's seminal work on gift exchange to explain how interactions that look like corruption to outside observers frequently serve important social and symbolic functions in local contexts.²⁵ Other anthropologists have emphasised the importance of solidarity networks and the logics of patron-clientism through which power and prestige depend on the conspicuous redistribution of accumulated wealth in a logic that encourages corruption.²⁶

In a seminal article in the 1970s, Peter Ekeh examined corruption in Africa in terms of 'two publics', one moral and rooted in ties to kin-group and community of origin, and the other amoral, a legacy of institutions imposed under colonialism.²⁷ While Ekeh's notion of two publics is analytically useful, in practice in contemporary Nigeria the two publics overlap and interpenetrate (and I would go further and suggest that the domains of public and private intertwine as well). The realms of kinship and the state (and kinship and civil society) are mutually implicated in a political economy that is organised around patron-clientism, in which people rely on kin, on people of the same community of origin, and on other hierarchically organised social ties of affection and obligation for opportunities and assistance. To understand the motives that underlie 'corrupt behaviour', it is essential to remember the extent to which self-interest in Nigerian society (and in other African contexts) is intertwined with group interests and group identity. Rather than attributing these complex interconnections to some sort of primordial culture, and therefore assuming that processes of modernisation will weaken such ties, evidence from Nigeria suggests that the salience of kinship's reciprocal obligations may be growing at the same time as Nigerians negotiate processes of development, rural-urban migration, and democratisation within a context of pronounced political and economic instability. In such an environment, ordinary people perceive participation in corrupt activities as necessary to achieve their moral, political, and economic objectives, even as they simultaneously recognise its detrimental effects.

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.²⁸ In other words, as elites manipulate the intertwining of bureaucratic and kinship-based clientelism to maximise their wealth and power, the legitimacy of both idioms is undermined.

A patron-client system has long served as a buffer against the state's capriciousness by providing access to resources through familiar (and familial) mechanisms of reciprocity. This system is widely understood by ordinary Nigerians to have given way to a much more individualistic pursuit of wealth and power. The use of deceptive mechanisms for corruption has diffused throughout society, creating a popular sense of crisis, wherein Nigerians see the repercussions of corruption in everyday life as both caused by and contributing to the demise of morality. The perception that corruption is rooted in social amorality obscures the political and economic underpinnings of inequality, whilst paradoxically creating hope. At the same time that Nigerians see themselves as complicit in corruption, they also view themselves as the ultimate agents of change. This is why, in Nigeria, local NGOs are simultaneously viewed as beacons of hope and change and bastions of corruption perpetuating the inequality of the status quo. This popular view is, in many senses, right on both accounts. In the remainder of this article, I trace the history of local NGOs and present ethnographic examples to analyse the corruption in Nigeria's NGO sector and its effects on the relationship between state and society.

Civil Society and State: Partners in Corruption

The proliferation of local NGOs in Nigeria that gave rise to the popular joke about unemployed graduates' career options is primarily a phenomenon of the last fifteen to twenty years. Two major causes combine to explain this upsurge. First, as described already, the global, Western-dominated international institutions that control development finance and aid, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United Nations, shifted over the last two decades toward a view that privileges 'civil society' as a primary locus of social, political, and economic development.²⁹ A major element in the justification for the emphasis on civil society, of which local NGOs are considered a key component, was the perception that governments in developing countries like Nigeria were bloated, inefficient and – in a word – corrupt. Presumably, civil society affords a potential corrective to the corruption of the state.

Second, for much of its history since independence, and for the entire period from 1983–1999, Nigeria was ruled by military governments that came to power through coups.³⁰ With Western tolerance of military governments waning and the promotion of democracy in non-Western societies intensifying in the wake of the end of the Cold War, international support for Nigeria's military state diminished. In particular, the annulment of the 1993 election and the repressive actions of the military dictator General Sani Abacha (who ruled from 1993 until 1998) led to the suspension of much development aid to the Nigerian government and the transfer of some of that money to the NGO sector.³¹ Nigerians were ready and able to exploit these opportunities. Their ability to identify and interpret changes in Western donor priorities and their entrepreneurial adaptability led to the dramatic proliferation of local NGOs.

In the late 1980s, when local NGOs began to multiply exponentially, the government of General Ibrahim Babangida navigated the donor community's call for structural adjustment with a dexterity that helped earn him his popular nicknames 'Maradona' (after the Argentine soccer star known for his skill at dribbling through the opposition) and 'the evil genius'.³²

Babangida managed simultaneously to placate Western governments and financial institutions, establish new mechanisms for the enrichment of the military elite and their civilian cronies, and sell the idea that he was acting in the national interest. However, the kinds of stories Nigerians told about General Babangida, about structural adjustment, and about government-organised NGOs belie any notion that Nigerians were really hoodwinked.

Development Ruses: ‘Better Life for Rich Women’ and the First Lady Syndrome

In 1986, General Babangida’s wife, Maryam Babangida, founded ‘Better Life for Rural Women’, a quasi-governmental program run by the First Lady. The Better Life program established a precedent and pattern for how Nigerian rulers and their wives at all levels of government channelled resources to themselves in the name of development. It is a phenomenon that has been copied and repeated not only by Nigeria’s subsequent leaders, but also by politicians throughout Africa.³³ Increasingly, venality became cloaked in the rhetoric and acronyms of development, and particularly through the creation and multiplication of local NGOs.

The Better Life for Rural Women program was billed as a vehicle for women’s empowerment. Mrs. Babangida was the national chairperson. At the state level, the wives of the military administrators created offices and launched programs for which they served as state chairpersons. Similarly, in each local government area, the lowest tier of formal government in Nigeria, the wives of the sole administrators launched and oversaw local branches. Thus, at each level of government, the wife of that level’s most powerful person controlled the Better Life program. The program did, in fact, carry out some activities designed to assist poor women, such as adult education programs, health promotion activities, and agricultural development and micro-credit projects. But these activities were largely window dressing to cover up the fact that the NGO program was a boondoggle benefiting the elite. Large amounts of money were spent on events at which elite women enjoyed a moment of recognition associated with being a patron delivering benefits to the people, while most of the program’s resources ended up in their own pockets.

Given their scepticism regarding the motivations of elites, ordinary Nigerians were not easily fooled and such schemes contributed to popular cynicism about development programs. It quickly became clear that the only people who really benefited were the upper class. The Nigerian public coined new names for the program, such as ‘Better Life for Rich Women’ and ‘Better Life for Ruling Women’, reflecting popular awareness and discontent about the ways that ideals like gender equality, development, and democracy were used to further the privileges of the elite.

NGOs are often touted as a mechanism to give ordinary people greater access to and influence over the state, thereby mitigating the misuses of state power to enrich elites and entrench inequality. The case of the Better Life Program was emblematic for ordinary Nigerians of the reality – reproduced in many similar elite-engineered NGOs schemes – that the façade of civil society is frequently manipulated as a ruse to carry out corruption and consolidate the social positions of the powerful. After the experience of Better Life and its descendents, it was easy for Nigerians to recognise the corruption inherent in the many local NGOs that have sprung up since the late 1980s.

GONGOs and Other Schemes

The transition to a civilian government in 1999 did not diminish the symbiotic relationship between international donors and Nigeria’s governmental and non-governmental sectors in

the social reproduction of corruption. If anything the relationship was solidified. Donors could more easily acknowledge and justify supporting programs that were partnerships between the state and civil society because the state now had the veneer of legitimacy conferred by democracy. By the time civilians returned to power, donor support for NGOs was undertaken not simply as an alternative to providing development assistance to a corrupt and despotic military government, but as a means to promote and solidify democratic governance. However, a large proportion of the NGO sector in Nigeria was created solely in response to awareness that donor monies were available.

In Nigerian popular discourse, a humorous commentary emerged to criticise the proliferation of bogus local NGOs. Ordinary people invented and adopted all sorts of acronyms to describe these mushrooming organisations. For example, when government elites created NGOs of their own, relying on friends and allies outside government to serve as fronts, these were labelled GONGOs, an acronym used widely around the world to stand for government-organised non-governmental organisations.³⁴ In Nigeria, it came to carry derisive onomatopoeic connotations of greed and deception. Similar efforts by wealthy persons in the private sector to launch NGOs were labelled BONGOs or IONGOs, short for bank-organised non-governmental organisations and individual-organised non-governmental organisations, respectively. NGOs where the proprietor lived in Lagos but purported to be doing development work in poor rural areas were dubbed LABONGOs (for Lagos-based NGOs). And NGOs that were complete fabrications, where an individual sent out proposals seeking funding, but had no office, no staff, and not even the appearance of ongoing activities were variously described as PONGOs (short for post-office-box-NGOs) or E-NGOs (short for e-mail-NGOs), depending on the primary mode of communication of the time. All these acronyms reflected the average citizen's perspective that NGOs were linked to a world of fraud, deceit, and corruption.

Her Excellency's Widows

In 2004, I was invited to Abakiliki, the capital of Ebonyi State, by a close friend who teaches at one of the Nigerian universities. My friend knew the governor and wanted me to meet the governor's wife and visit some of the projects undertaken by her NGO. He figured that, given my previous work with NGOs, I might be able to offer the governor's wife some advice about running her organisation, called WidowCare, and maybe I could even be persuaded to help write some grant proposals for funding. At the very least, he reasoned that he would win favour with the governor's wife, and therefore with the governor, just for the effort of bringing an American professor to help out.

After many formalities at the governor's residence, Her Excellency led us on a tour. She described the part of her NGO's work of which she seemed most proud: the construction of housing for widows who had been dispossessed by their late husbands' families. She took us to visit the first of fourteen such houses that reportedly had been completed or were under construction. These houses were built in the village compounds of the widows' late husbands, part of Her Excellency's effort to counter what she perceived as a traditional cultural bias against widows. The house we visited had been commissioned by Stella Obasanjo, then Nigeria's First Lady, and a plaque to that effect hung next to the front door. It was an awkward and surreal visit. Our entourage arrived at the little village compound unannounced. The lone adult in the compound – presumably a relative of the widow's late husband – informed us that the widow was not around. She had gone to the farm, he said. But he produced a key to the house and Her Excellency took us inside. The widow's house was modest and constructed from clay bricks, a material stronger than the mud walls characteristic of the houses of the very poor, but cheaper than the cement blocks used by those who can afford them. The structure consisted of two rooms, as well as a small kitchen

and a bathroom. In addition to the house itself, WidowCare had provided a bed and a couple of chairs for the parlour. What was most striking was that absolutely nothing else cluttered the house – no clothes, no pots and pans, no mess. In short, it was clear that no one was living there. Before we left, Her Excellency pointed out a small, dilapidated thatch structure where she said the widow had been forced to live by her in-laws after her husband's death until the project intervened.

As we drove away from this strange scene I asked my friend whether he noticed that the house was uninhabited. He quickly hushed me and made it clear that we should not discuss it while we were still with Her Excellency and her entourage. The governor's wife was obviously proud of the fact that these women were supposedly provided housing in their marital villages. Later, I explained to my friend how ridiculous it seemed to me to build a house for a widow in the same compound where her in-laws had so mistreated her before the governor's wife and her NGO got involved. At the very least, I speculated, most women would be afraid to occupy such a superior house in the middle of an impoverished compound of antagonistic in-laws. It might be possible if a woman had adult children capable of supporting her position, but clearly these widows lacked such support, which is one reason they were so marginalised in the first place. Yet this seemed to escape notice. If anyone else saw the project as untenable they certainly did not say so in front of Her Excellency. Throughout the day everyone praised Her Excellency for her generosity and wisdom, including – and it seemed to me even especially – my politically ambitious friend.

The ways that the governor's wife financed her NGO projects reveal the mechanisms whereby GONGOs serve the interests of their creators, which can be political as well as economic. Throughout our journey Her Excellency happily informed me of various large donations people had made to her projects. What she did not explain was why such people would give her money. I suspected, and my friend confirmed, that most of the donors were businessmen who had been awarded or sought major state contracts; or they were political appointees who owed their own patronage positions to the governor; or they were aspiring politicians anxious to gain favour. What is more, fellow politicians, such as other governors, senators, and local government chairmen, frequently make contributions to such projects in their own names, using government money. In Nigeria, it is a custom that the elite contribute handsomely to each other's public projects, including at events like launching ceremonies for a governor's wife's NGO.

The governor's wife had plenty of mechanisms by which she could make money through the power of her position. For example, in addition to the WidowCare NGO, she proudly showed us a massive private school she was building, with land the provided by the state government, and much of the money no doubt 'donated' by political supporters and sycophants seeking to curry favour with the governor. I do not know whether Her Excellency benefited financially from her WidowCare charity. But it is not necessary to prove that she did so in order to see that her NGO contributed to the social reproduction of inequality by generating political capital for her. In cases like WidowCare, elites use the creation of NGOs as a means by which to solidify their prestige and power as patrons, accruing and distributing resources through institutions of civil society that augment similar processes that they control by being in command of the levers of the state.

'Return to Sender'

While much of my focus thus far has been on corruption in Nigerian NGOs created or controlled by elites, it is important to point out that countless Nigerians work tirelessly in more grassroots organisations for goals like development and democracy, often explicitly against practices they perceive as corrupt. Over the years, I have come to know many

Nigerians working in the local non-governmental sector who I would describe as committed, talented, and honest. But even people with the best of intentions frequently get caught up in corruption.

In 2001, the World Bank loaned Nigeria approximately \$90 million to fight HIV and AIDS. The money was targeted to benefit eighteen states, including Imo State. The Imo State Action Committee on AIDS (known as SACA) used part of its several-million-dollar portion of the loan to support the efforts of local NGOs working to combat HIV, which in Nigeria infected about 5 per cent of the population at the time. In 2004, the Imo SACA issued a request for proposals through which NGOs could compete for grants of up to \$30,000 to finance their activities. No more than a handful of NGOs in Imo State had been doing any serious work on AIDS in the past decade. But the SACA competition attracted seventy-nine applications, including many from organisations created solely in order to apply for the World Bank/SACA grants. The SACA selection process highlights the ways corruption endemic in the aid apparatus in Nigeria affects even those with the best of intentions.

I witnessed the inner workings of the ways in which people inadvertently become caught up in the strains of corruption through my involvement with an NGO called Community & Youth Development Initiatives in the Imo State capital, Owerri, run by my friend and colleague, Benjamin Mbakwem. I have met few people anywhere in the world who are more dedicated and altruistic. With a tiny budget, Benjamin initiated the state's first support group for people living with HIV. Further, CYDI began working with the city's most difficult-to-reach populations, such as adolescents who had dropped out of school and adults working in the city's informal economy. The organisation was widely respected for its work. Any time Imo State Ministry of Health officials needed serious advice about their HIV programs they consulted CYDI.

Benjamin conceived and wrote what I thought was an outstanding proposal for the SACA grant competition, focusing on adult male traders and their young apprentices in some of the roughest sectors of Owerri's markets. If Benjamin's organisation won a \$30,000 grant it would be the largest amount of money CYDI had ever had to work with. The Imo State AIDS Coordinator, who frequently consulted Benjamin for advice, indirectly assured him that funding CYDI would be one of SACA's highest priorities. The seventy-nine applications would be reviewed by a technical committee appointed by the Ministry of Health, but the state coordinator had little doubt Benjamin's proposal would rank at or near the very top. Benjamin joked that because of all the help he provided the state coordinator he might not even be expected to provide the typical 'return to sender' portion from the grant. 'Return to sender' is the phrase used to describe how in most competitive bids or proposal competitions the winners are expected to give 10 to 15 per cent of the money back to the government officials in charge of awarding it.

In the weeks leading up to the proposal deadline in October, Benjamin was deluged with requests from other local NGOs wanting help with their proposals. Even though they would be his competitors, Benjamin provided help to all that he believed were legitimate efforts. He was also bombarded with appeals from people who wanted to start NGOs solely in order to compete for the money. In those cases he only referred them to the SACA office where the proposal application was available. The proposal's guidelines stated that to be eligible for the World Bank money, competing NGOs had to have been registered with the appropriate federal or state bureaucracy for at least three years. Benjamin told me that a colleague informed him that all the newly formed NGOs were getting backdated registration certificates from an official in one of the state ministries who seized an opportunity to address the new demand for three-year-old registration certificates.

Benjamin provided more intensive help on two proposals where he felt he had no choice but to assist if he wanted his own project funded. The state coordinator came to Benjamin requesting help with a proposal for his own NGO, and also pleaded that Benjamin assist him with a proposal on behalf of the Imo State governor's wife. The Imo first lady wanted to use the \$30,000 to support AIDS orphans, a seemingly noble gesture, except that actually identifying such orphans conclusively has proved notoriously difficult in Nigeria, where intense stigma means that few families will openly admit that one of their own has died from AIDS. The governor's wife asked the state coordinator to write her proposal. He passed the task to Benjamin. Benjamin said the man begged for his help, saying, 'I don't want to lose my job.' Who could blame him? He was doing very well for himself as the state's AIDS coordinator. Benjamin helped craft these GONGO proposals and ensured that, at the very least, they met the criteria of the proposal guidelines, but he was sceptical about the efficacy and sustainability, not to mention the genuineness, of the governor's wife's plan to aid orphans.

The proposals were reviewed in November 2004 by a technical committee appointed by the state coordinator, a group made up mostly of academics from the local universities. After a week at a resort hotel and with consultant payments of over one hundred US dollars a day (a sizable sum in Nigeria, even for the relatively well-off), the technical committee presented its ranking. The first lady's project ranked first and was praised by the technical committee's chairman in a press release. The state coordinator's GONGO was also among the ten NGOs slated for funding. Benjamin's CYDI proposal did not rank in the top ten. It fell in the second ten, and by the original SACA criteria it would not be funded. Benjamin was crestfallen and told me that he had not even heard of some of the NGOs that were going to get money.

The state coordinator himself was shocked and embarrassed that CYDI was not ranked in the fundable category. He had just assumed Benjamin's proposal would rank at or near the top, and he had not closely monitored the review process. In the end, he initiated a course of action to get some of the second tier of high-ranking proposals funded and CYDI eventually received a portion of the World Bank money. But so did fifteen other NGOs and some of them appeared not to be the least bit interested in carrying out effective AIDS-related projects.

Benjamin's experience illustrates a common pattern in Nigeria, where aid dollars flow in ways that further corruption as much as (or more than) they promote their ostensible development objectives. It also illuminates the ways in which well intentioned citizens can become caught up in processes of corruption even as they see themselves as critics and collective victims of these practices. To get funding for the good work of CYDI, Benjamin had no choice but to please the state AIDS coordinator, which meant helping write proposals for NGO efforts that were, at best, suspect. Finally, picking up on the point made with regard to the motivations of the governor's wife who created WidowCare (a different woman in a different state than the governor's wife for whom Benjamin had to write the orphan-care proposal), it is worth noting that popular awareness and discontent about corruption in Nigeria serves, ironically, as part of the motivation of elites to create NGOs that are ostensibly 'doing good'. In other words, GONGOs and other elite-invented NGOs are useful to politicians as facades to make them appear to be altruistic and not corrupt (or at least appearing to be caring patrons). The effort to present positive images to the public in the face of Nigerians' ubiquitous perceptions that politics and elites are almost universally corrupt paradoxically fuels the proliferation of faux NGOs.

Conclusion

Elite control of the relationship between Nigeria and international development donors contributes to the fabric of corruption and the maintenance of inequality in Africa's giant. Increasingly, as wealthy Western countries have adopted neoliberal strategies for development, emphasising civil society and privatisation over government-controlled social welfare programs, greater amounts of donor resources have been channelled to NGOs. Nigerian elites have responded by creating a plethora of NGOs designed to tap and control these resources. Politicians and other elites manipulate the promises of development, claiming to assist the most desperate and marginal in Nigeria's large impoverished population, even as they funnel a disproportionate share of development aid into their own pockets – and their overseas bank accounts.

The ideals promoted in development rhetoric are often belied by the multiple means by which development projects become vehicles for corruption and mechanisms for the reproduction of inequality. Yet even as development projects frequently fail to deliver their promised benefits, they contribute to the transformation of expectations, such that people like Benjamin and the groups he works with believe that Nigeria could be and should be different. Much as the local NGO sector is rife with corruption, it is also a sphere of dynamic social and political ferment. Indeed, the promises of organisations like the First Ladies' GONGOs raise expectations even when they fail to deliver better democracy or more development. Genuine organisations like CYDI offer hope that real change is possible, but the misuse of NGOs and corruption in civil society hamper legitimate efforts like Benjamin's. Everyone in Nigeria has to operate against the pervasive suspicion of corruption.

Nigerians, with their seemingly inexhaustible collective consciousness, constantly grapple with the problems plaguing their society. In some situations, their discontents are projected backward to better times, in a nostalgia for an idealised past. But in their frustrations over the current state of affairs, many people also look forward to anticipated transformations. The ideals of democracy and development promulgated by the postcolonial state – even when politicians' rhetoric is disingenuous – are now widely valued. Concepts of probity and official accountability are fertilized even in a setting where they are frequently deployed duplicitously.

Nigerians do not view corruption as either a traditional or a desirable feature of their culture. The fact that so much of the most spectacular and grievous corruption occurs within the state, and in particular at the interface between the state, local NGOs, and international institutions, demonstrates not only the global dimensions of the problem, but also the varying degrees of culpability for Nigerian corruption that extend well beyond Nigeria's borders. Admittedly, the global obsession with corruption may have some long-term benefits, as it gives ordinary people discursive ammunition to resist elite domination. However, when it is turned against poor countries by the rich, blaming poverty and inequality on ordinary people and local cultures, these anti-corruption discourses end up serving the interests of the powerful. Unfortunately, the degree to which ordinary Nigerians point fingers of accusation inward, quickly suspecting each other of deception, also deflects attention from the larger structural explanations for their suffering. But the fact that most Nigerians are upset about – even obsessed with – the prevalence of corruption in their society suggests that countervailing moralities and life strategies are still dominant. It is crucial to recognise the prospects for and seeds of positive social change, including in the realms of democracy and development, even through processes that look antithetical to them.

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