



Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations - A case study of Nigeria

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This case study was written by Lanre Ikuteyijo, with input and editorial support from the European Democracy Hub team, as part of the Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations project.

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The “Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations” project was supported by the Robert Bosch Stiftung.



Introduction

Democracy returned to Nigeria in 1999 after a prolonged period of military rule. Since then, the country's democratic experience has been uninterrupted and the democratic process has seen a number of innovations. Although the current democratic climate in Nigeria is fragile, the practice of democracy in Nigeria is becoming more innovative. Several forms of participatory practice are being introduced at various levels, three of which are discussed in this report. These aim to counter political apathy, enhance citizen participation and make government more responsive.

As Nigeria prepares for another round of general elections in 2023, engaging citizens more effectively will be at the forefront of the campaign. Innovations already put in place to enhance citizen participation include the Not Too Young to Run bill in 2018, which encourages young people to seek elected positions and reduces the age limit for various posts. Consistent with the overall project, this paper focuses on most direct forms of participatory innovation: the Open Forum (Apero) used by the Osun State Government, the Open Government Partnership implemented by the Kaduna State Government and Option A4, introduced by the Electoral Commission.¹

Open Forum (Apero)

The Open Forum (Apero in the Yoruba language translates to Joint Consultation) is a citizen engagement programme practised in Osun State, in southwest Nigeria. The state has entrenched the Open Forum platform into governance since the return of democracy in Nigeria in 1999. Successive administrations have sustained this innovation despite the fact that different political parties have administered the state since 1999. This is a rarity in Nigeria's political history, which is often characterised by drastic policy changes and inconsistency. The aim of the Open Forum is to make governance open and accessible to the general public of Osun State.

The forum began as an initiative of the Chief Bisi Akanded-led administration, which came to power in 1999. At its inception, the forum aimed at informing citizens about government programmes and mobilising participation

in governance processes. The programme continues in the present political climate, albeit under another administration and nomenclature. The programme was initially called "Labe Odan" under the Bisi Akande administration, the name was chosen for its association with the historical evolution of the Yoruba people.² The ancient people in the southwestern part of the country, the Yoruba people, used the Odan tree (because of its umbrella structure) as a meeting place to discuss critical issues relating to governance as well as pathways for addressing the socio-political issues arising in their communities. Similarly, this forum allows all the state's citizens to contribute to issues of governance, irrespective of their socio-economic and political standing.

The programme assists the Governor of Osun State and his team to engage with the entire state and interact with citizens without any intermediary or spokesperson. Instead, the governor and their team use the Apero programme to directly engage with citizens; the programme is conducted as a series of open forum meetings that take place at regular intervals in different parts of the state. In each of these forums, citizens from the local area can present their grievances and concerns to the government as well as receive information from the government, especially on topical issues. The government also uses the programme to inform the public about their civic responsibilities and how to participate in processes that ensure inclusive governance.

There is another branch of the Apero programme called Ogbeni till Day Break, which is transmitted live on both radio and television stations at regular intervals

¹ Sam Egburunu, "Nwosu and the Option A4 legacy," *The Nation*, June 17, 2018, <https://thenationonlineng.net/nwosu-and-option-a4-legacy/>.

² Professor Olalekan Yinusa (the Commissioner for Budget and Planning, Osun State Government), interview with the author, the State Secretariat in Osogbo, February 11, 2022.

across the state, and it allows for phone-in participation from viewers and listeners at home. The programme is typically broadcast from 8 p.m. until the early hours of the morning. It serves as a bottom-up approach to policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring. Usually, Ogbeni till Day Break lasts for about three to four hours and is broadcast at regular intervals on Friday nights, with the governor leading his entire team comprising of commissioners, other government officials, traditional rulers and religious leaders. The programme is facilitated with the assistance of the state communication team under the Ministry of Information and Civic Orientation.³

The Apero forum and its radio-broadcasted version, Ogbeni till Day Break, encourage political participation since it gives citizens a sense of belonging and ownership over the government apparatus, strengthening the relationship between the government and its citizens. The essence of joint deliberation in Apero is exemplified by where the government and citizens deliberate on solutions for pressing issues, especially community-focused priorities. The authorities use the initiative to encourage citizens to fulfil their civic responsibilities to participate in local decisions.

The present administration has also added a civic engagement aspect to Apero, which takes place at the community level. Unlike the main form of Apero, where community members bring their petitions and recommendations to the state government, these consultations are held at the local government level. This form of civic engagement is perceived to hold better prospects for stimulating political engagement at a public level, since many people cannot go to government offices, but all kinds of people are able to attend Apero meetings.⁴ According to the Commissioner for Information and Civic Orientation, the programme “ensures that the government is not winking in the dark” as it sheds light on government activities and allows the government to clarify any misconceptions about issues of governance.⁵

Some concerns have arisen with the Apero civil engagement programmes. One comes from attempts of local politicians to politicise civic engagement events, where they try to turn the Apero forum into political rallies.⁶ Another challenge is time, as citizens have the

tendency to push the governor to solve all identified problems on the day of visitation.⁷ Another issue is crowd management, as massive crowds gather to receive government functionaries led by the state governor. As regularity is also important for the forum’s success, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown measures and social distancing protocols dealt a significant blow to the Apero programme.⁸

The Kaduna State Open Government Initiative

The Kaduna State Open Government Initiative is a subsidiary of the global Open Government Partnership (OGP), which aims to improve transparency, accountability, citizen participation and government responsiveness to citizens through the use of technology and innovation.⁹ Although the OGP has been in place at the national level since 2011, the innovative ways in which the Kaduna State Government has adopted the initiative at the state level warrant attention. Kaduna State is the only state in Nigeria to commit to the OGP after the country joined the OGP. The OGP is a multi-phased governance transparency model, which uses essentially the co-created accountability mechanism to facilitate citizens’ participation in governance. The idea of a co-created accountability mechanism entails the involvement of both the state government and civil society groups to manage public resources across all sectors of Kaduna State as well as to respond to other issues around service delivery within the state. Residents of the state are empowered to report their observations on service delivery across the country during the quarterly meeting between the government and the civil society groups.¹⁰ The State Steering Committee (SSC) and the Technical Working Groups (TWGs) pilot the implementation of the OGP in Kaduna State. The coordinating agency is the national level Government Budget and Planning Ministry. The government and local civil society figures nominate the members and co-chair for the SSC and TWGs and both of these include civil society organizations together with officials. All of these representatives worked together to co-create the Kaduna Action Plan (KAP) for a two-year period (September 2018 – August 2020).¹¹

3 Osun State Ministry of Information and Civic Engagement, “Oyetola to hold civic engagements in nine constituencies,” news release, February 19, 2020, <https://www.osunstate.gov.ng/2020/02/oyetola-to-hold-civic-engagement-in-nine-constituencies/>.

4 Osun State Commissioner for Information and Civic Orientation, interview with the author, the State Secretariat in Osogbo, February 17, 2022.

5 Interview with the Osun State Commissioner for Information and Civic Orientation.

6 Interview with the Osun State Commissioner for Information and Civic Orientation.

7 Interview with the Osun State Commissioner for Information and Civic Orientation.

8 Interview with the Osun State Commissioner for Information and Civic Orientation.

9 Federal Government of Nigeria, Open Government Partnership: Nigeria Action Plan 2019-2022, accessed May 7, 2022, <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/nigeria/>.

10 Interview with the Technical Advisor to the Kaduna State Government on the implementation of the OGP via Zoom, interview with the author, February 2022, 2022.

11 Interview the Technical Advisor to the Kaduna State Government.

According to the National Democratic Institute, citizens have a set of rights and responsibilities, including the right to participate in decisions that affect public welfare.¹² In Kaduna State, citizens have taken an active part in the processes of budget preparation and implementation, in providing access to government information and other business associated with governance. For example, the state government runs an open budgeting process where projects in the state are monitored through the active engagement of citizens with the use of the phone-based platform or geotechnical tool known as “Eyes and Ears”. Eyes and Ears enables citizens to monitor state projects, which are within a two-kilometre radius of their location. This is made possible through an app, the Citizen Feedback App (CFA), which is available on the Apple and Android App stores. The app provides citizens with information on the government projects nearest to them.¹³ The citizens select projects of their choice and give feedback to the government via the app. The app has been extremely successful in giving feedback to the government. For example, it serves as an efficient way of inputting complaints into the Public Expenditure Tracking System (PETS) database, which in turn motivates the government to take action to improve project implementation.¹⁴ The use of the app and the OGP has led to increased government confidence as citizens have praised the government on its use through the toll-free telephone line. According to a planning officer, the OGP has prompted local authorities to become more open to citizens because there is now a better understanding that citizen participation in the development and implementation of government policies, projects and programmes is necessary for sustainable reforms.¹⁵

In summary, Kaduna state’s use of the OGP enhances citizen participation in governance through active engagement in the life cycle of budget planning and implementation, and it also improves fiscal transparency by encouraging public scrutiny of budget performance at the state and local government levels. Furthermore, the government promotes access to information for citizens by publishing documents regarding state laws,

budgets, development plans and financial reports among other relevant online documents. Finally, the co-created accountability mechanism promotes a form of ownership over government policies among citizens who have had the opportunity to provide regular feedback to the government on service delivery and budget performance.

Again, there are a number of shortcomings facing the Kaduna State OGP. The government has made some decisions on governance where the CSO members were not adequately engaged in the spirit of the OGP. One of these decisions was the government declaration that Fridays were to become a public holiday.¹⁶ The lack of security in the province is also a concern and complicate full citizen participation in the initiative. Still, there are numerous benefits to the use of the OGP in Kaduna State, including the provision of opportunities for citizens to monitor government operations, especially in terms of budgeting and project monitoring. The OGP has made the government more accountable to citizens through collaboration with CSOs.

Option A4

A more participative form selection process for presidential candidates from the major competing political parties, was introduced as far back as 1993. This practice is known as Option A4. This is a multilevel approach to choosing party leaders as well as candidates for various other political positions. Although this innovation has not been used at the national level since 1993, its benefits should not be overlooked as it still holds promise as a mechanism for ensuring increased participation in electoral contests. Option A4’s process is distinct from other open ballot practices in that it ensures representation emerges from a grassroots level. For instance, in 1993, party representatives had to emerge from the ward level (the smallest political unit), to be eligible to compete at the state and then the federal level. Therefore, Option A4 has also come to be known as the grassroots system for selecting candidates.

12 National Democratic Institute, Citizenship Participation, accessed March 9, 2022, <https://www.ndi.org/what-we-do/citizen-participation>.

13 Open Stories, “Eyes and Ears to Improve Public Services,” video, accessed July 13, 2022

14 Kaduna State, Kaduna State Action Plan 2018-2020, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/kaduna-state-nigeria-design-report-2018-2020/>.

15 Tara Jerimiah (Planning Officer, OGP, Kaduna), informal interview with the author, May 2, 2022.

16 Member of a civil society organisation and the Team-Lead for the Independent Monitoring Body of the OGP in Kaduna State, interview with the author, February 4, 2022.

Using Option A4 as a selection process makes it imperative for potential candidates for high office to gain acceptance at the local level. Its use in 1993 averted the challenges experienced in previous elections, mainly concerning electoral fraud and violence. The Option A4 system for selecting flag-bearers was also complemented by the modified open ballot system used in the 1993 election itself, resulting in a massive turnout. These outcomes are why the 1993 elections are generally perceived to be the freest and fairest held in Nigeria, especially when compared to the elections that have been held subsequently. When examining the elections held prior to 1993, it can be seen that they were marred by widespread violence and electoral fraud, which seriously impacted political participation. Although Option A4 is not a part of the normal open ballot system, it is still used today by some smaller parties in their primaries to select political candidates. Its wider application should be considered as its local focus, starting at the ward level, promotes more grassroots involvement.

The chairman of the National Electoral Commission introduced the innovation to serve as a bottom-up approach for selecting presidential candidates from the two main parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC).¹⁷ The need for Option A4 in 1993 can be understood by examining the skewed nature of previous elections, which were not reflective of mass opinion. Before Option A4, the opinion of the elites determined elections in Nigeria, irrespective of the preferences of the masses. However, due to the use of Option A4, for the first time in independent Nigeria the major candidates running for president truly reflected the popular choice of the general public.¹⁸

The historical background of this innovation dates back to an early African political system, whereby popular votes determined who became leaders. The use of an open ballot system had been in practice in Nigeria before the introduction of a secret ballot system by the British colonial administration in 1923.¹⁹ In contrast to the secret ballot system, which was abolished just before the 1993 elections, an open ballot system allows supporters of a candidate to queue up behind the picture of their

preferred candidate. Then, electoral umpires take a headcount of votes indicated by the number of people standing behind each candidate's picture. Using Option A4 and an open ballot system together have made electoral victories less contestable as there is less room for rigging or falsifying electoral results. Option A4 is also beneficial in terms of cost-effectiveness as elections in Nigeria are usually quite expensive and this innovation saves the nation a significant amount in state expenditure as ballot printing expenses are eliminated. Furthermore, the logistics of securing ballot papers, which (in the Nigerian context) are susceptible to hijacking and vandalism by political thugs, are eliminated with the use of Option A4, making elections less violent. Recently, the innovation has seen more interest as political parties, such as the All People's Party (APC), in Ebonyi State, have used Option A4 to conduct their primaries. In 2021, it was used to nominate this party's ward representatives across the 171 electoral wards in the state.²⁰

However, the Option A4 innovation has challenges it must overcome, which include the possibility of losing credible candidates that may not have local backing or those who may not be grassroots politicians. This can be seen in the case of the election of the former President Olusegun Obasanjo, who won the 1999 presidential and parliamentary elections, his victory was secured mainly from votes cast outside of his own region, where he performed poorly. Therefore, the use of Option A4 would have eliminated the possibility of Obasanjo being elected if the electoral umpire had resorted to using Option A4. In addition, arising from the open nature of the voting system, the confidentiality which voters enjoy in the secret ballot system is eroded as they publicly queue behind their chosen candidates.

17 Peter M. Lewis, "Endgame in Nigeria? The politics of a failed democratic transition," *African Affairs* 93, no. 372 (1994): 323-340.

18 Professor Femi Mimiko, interview with the author, Department of Political Science at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, January 26, 2022.

19 Egburunu, "Nwosu and Option A4 Legacy."

20 News Agency of Nigeria, "APC Congress: Ebonyi Adopts Option A4 Voting System," *The Guardian*, August 1, 2021, <https://guardian.ng/news/apc-congress-ebonyi-adopts-option-a4-voting-system/>.

Conclusion

Several lessons can be derived from Nigeria about democratic innovations. Both the state governments and the federal government have introduced such innovations. Firstly, the Open Forum has engendered responsiveness and public accountability on the part of the government as well as a sense of ownership of governance processes among citizens.

When the government makes deliberate efforts to keep citizens informed on governance developments within the country, the tendency for misconceptions to arise is drastically reduced. Representation is one of the cardinal principles of democracy and the government will make a lot of progress if they continue to demonstrate to citizens that their interests are well represented, thus leading to greater cooperation and trust.

Secondly, the Kaduna State Open Government shows that citizens are capable of monitoring how the government spends taxpayers' money. In addition, quality feedback received from citizens has led to the revitalisation of education and health care provision within Kaduna State. Moreover, as the first state to sign up to the OGP, Kaduna has performed so well that other states have been given a genuine model to emulate. Kaduna State has also become a model for collaboration between state governments and CSOs in Nigeria.

Lastly, the use of Option A4 has been used to enhance the trust of voters in the credibility of elections, and in one important instance, its use may have contributed to popular participation as voter turnout was high during the 1993 elections. However, Option A4 is not just about boosting election turnout, it has encouraged citizens to participate at other levels of the democratic process, including standing for elected office.

Overall, these innovations are helping boost political participation and if developed further could become tools for creating more democratic deliberation among citizens. Democracy is a continuum and not a fixed end point, meaning that there is a need for the progress achieved to be sustained as the country advances in its civil rule. This is possible if the nation continues to guarantee the attainment of the core principles of democracy, which include minority rights, majority rule, popular participation, public accountability, transparency and responsiveness.

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About the project:

'Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations' is a research project supported by Robert Bosch Stiftung, which explores emerging innovations in democratic participation around the world and offering an overview of the lessons learned throughout the application of these innovations. The project highlights policy implications and gives a set of recommendations for European policymakers and practitioners working on the EU's internal democratic renewal. The project brings together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to exchange best practices in democratic political innovations.