



Partecipazione e Conflitto
* *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
PACO, Issue 11(2) 2018: 472-483
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v11i2p472

Published in July 15, 2018

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SYMPOSIUM/1

BIG DATA AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN NIGERIA. INSIGHTS FROM THE *BUDGIT* ORGANIZATION AND THE #OPENNASS CAMPAIGN

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1. Introduction

Big data is increasingly becoming important in many societal sectors worldwide, from the educational sector to the health industry, from urban mobility systems to environmental problems. Indeed, the use of big data – and the related tools – allows social scientists to perform an informed analysis to possibly solve problematic situations and make inferences that provide socially instructive insights laced with analytics. In this respect, Varadharajan Sridhar points out “big data can have a big impact only if

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used on a massive scale - with safeguards - by governments for the delivery of public goods and services” (2017). At the same time, big data interlace with the realm of politics, in which their availability might give rise to better understanding of a diverse range of policy domains. From a different perspective, then, the use of big data in connection to politics might form the basis for increasing citizens’ awareness and their mobilization to participate in governance processes, supporting their demands for transparency on how governments work. As also Guy Peters states “citizens should have the right to know what actions have been taken in their name, and they should have the means to enforce corrective actions when government acts in an illegal, immoral, or unjust manner” (2007, 15). In more specific terms, Helen Potts underlines that “accountability is not the same as responsiveness, responsibility, answerability or evaluation, as none of these concepts include a legal compulsion to explain and to provide remedies [...]. Accountability begins with [...] ensuring the incorporation and implementation of accountability processes into all (health) policy. This involves continuous monitoring by government and civil society to find out what is working, what is not, what has been omitted, and what needs to change. A society that has accountability as its watchword is believed to be transparent.” (2008, 5).

Indeed, in the past years, several social movement organizations began to use big data to support their campaigns on several contentious issues, including unemployment, natural disasters, maternal mortality and healthcare provision amongst other. This contribution seeks to address the potential of big data as a leverage in grassroots mobilization to obtain accountability and transparency. More specifically, it will focus on Nigeria by discussing the case of the *BudgIT* civic organization and the development of their platform *Tracka* as well as the case of the campaign *#OpenNASS* supported by a wide coalition of civic organizations. Using secondary data like documents produced by the social movement organisations in Nigeria, what follows highlights how social movement organizations employ big data to sustain the campaign and addresses to what extent big data have influenced the accountability and transparency of governmental institutions in Nigeria. Before doing this, though, we provide in the next section an overview of social movement organizations’ big data related initiatives in the African and Nigerian context.

2. Big data and grassroots mobilizations for accountability in Africa and Nigeria

In many African countries, there are initiatives that signal the presence of a vibrant culture of big data utilization from the grassroots. For example, through the support of various social movement organizations, data on Constituency Development Funds in Kenya have been made available for public accessibility helping concerned citizens to track utilization of funds. Amongst other, a well-known example of innovative crowdsourcing platform in Africa include *Ushahidi* a crowdsourcing mapping tool capable of obtaining, verifying and disseminating large volumes of data on different contentious issues. For instance, *Ushahidi* was used for real-time transmission of information during the 2013 elections in Kenya, hence becoming a powerful monitoring tool in the hands of Kenyan citizens. In Uganda, the *U-Report* platform is another relevant instance of big data usage from the grassroots providing real time coverage of children rights in the country.

Focussing more specifically on Nigeria, several non-governmental agencies are ensuring that governmental institutions are held accountable for their promises, responsibilities, decisions and outcome of such decisions for the wellbeing of the nation. These efforts seems to have triggered also some more grassroots actions that flourished in the past years involving concerned citizens being able to employ big data to demand for accountability in governmental institutions. On the one side, with the advent of big data, individual citizens who have the digital literacy to interpret big data are put in the position to call the governmental institutions and their representatives into question whenever they provide false information to the public. An example of this is citizens' use of Twitter to unveil incorrect news by politicians. During Nigeria's Democracy Day on Tuesday, May 29, 2018, the President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari addressed the nation stating that "for the first time, 30% of the budget was earmarked for capital expenditure which represents an upward review when compared with the 2015 budget." According to the President of Nigeria, such designation of the national budget was a novelty for the country. However, a Twitter user faulted the claim made by the president tweeting, "#FACTCHECK Dear @NGRPresident, Your statement is false and wrong "For the first time, 30% of the budget was earmarked for capital expenditure which ..." In 2013, capital component of the budget was 31.9%." In a series of tweets, this same user backed his objection with images showing the allocation made from 1999 till that moment under the Federal Government of Nigeria Expenditure and Fiscal Account.

On the other side, collective efforts that employ big data to demand higher levels of governmental accountability are also on the rise in Nigeria. The activities of big data-centred civic organizations and advocacy groups that are focusing primarily on big data became relevant in the past few years, contributing to spread the awareness of the potential big data have in ensuring accountability in governance when they are managed from the grassroots. In the next two sections we will introduce two relevant cases of such trend: the civic organization *BudgIT* and the campaign *#OpenNASS*.

3. *BudgIT* and the tracking of project deliveries

Founded in 2011, *BudgIT* is “a civic organization that applies technology to intersect citizen engagement with institutional improvement, to facilitate societal change” (BudgIT 2016). The civic organization make use of “tech tools to simplify the budget and matters of public spending for citizens, with the primary aim of raising standard of transparency and accountability in government” (ibidem). In other words, one of the main objectives of *BudgIT* is to ease the possibility for citizens to demand for accountability. Its activities include using data mining skillsets to render data accessible and empower citizens to use them to form the basis of their informed demands for an improved service delivery. The civic organization aims at improving the access to the budgets of governmental institutions by supporting data extraction as well as providing citizens the access to such institutions.

Amongst other initiatives, in 2014 *BudgIT* created Tracka that is a community of active citizens who engage in tracking the implementation of government projects in their respective communities of residence in order to ensure service delivery by those in authority. The community of citizens is involved in activities like the gathering of information and reporting on the ongoing government projects as well as increasing other citizens’ engagement in the project behind the Tracka platform. The aim is to ensure that citizens move from a complaining attitude towards acting on issues ranging from the poor quality of the delivered services to the unveiling of abandoned government projects, the negligence of the government to citizens’ plights, the checkmating of fraudulent and unethical practices. At the same time, the Tracka community also puts under the spotlight those government projects delivered successfully.

In March 2018, the Tracka community discovered that pupils of the “Ipokia Local Government Primary School” in Akere, Ipokia Local Government area of Ogun State, were attending classes in open air and under the “scorching sun without any protection over their heads” (Tracka 2018). It was also observed that six to seven pupils sit on

a bench meant for two pupils only, while others were attending classes sitting on the floor, which was without pavement and covered with sand, hence constituting a health hazard for the pupils. Additionally, the primary school was understaffed, with only four teachers despite the need for six of them to ensure regular classes. In such conditions, the learning and the very safety of pupils were put at risk. However, the Tracka community discovered that the primary school in Akeere was not supposed to be in such bad conditions. In fact, N30 million was earmarked for the “renovation of blocks of 8 classrooms in Akere, Agosasa, Ajegunle and Idogo” under the supervision of the PM Akinlade Adekunle Abdulkadir, the lawmaker representing the area in the Federal House of Representative (BudgIT 2018).

Again, in April 2018 citizens active in the Tracka community discovered a relevant anomaly in a government project worth N41 millions and contracted by the National Assembly Member Muhammad Umar Jega, a member representing Gwandu/Aliero/Jega in Kebbi State in the National House of Assembly. While a youth centre was supposed to be constructed in the agrarian community of Jega, the Tracka officer who visited the area reported that, in fact, it did not exist and that there were only abandoned machines in the site where it should have been constructed. At the moment of writing this contribution, the National Assembly Member Muhammad Umar Jega, who is a member of the All Progressives Congress party that is ruling in Nigeria, is yet to respond to the allegations that followed the Tracka discovery.

In the past, this type of discoveries were hard to make for citizens, but the combination of grassroots citizens monitoring of their local territories matched with the access to data on the budget allocation for government projects proved to be a successful match. According to *BudgIT* (2018), Tracka is now functional in 20 States, and allows Nigerians to post pictures of developmental projects in their communities, with *BudgIT*'s project officers aiding citizens offline to communicate with their elected representatives to demand completion of the government projects in their neighbourhoods. This example suggests that civic organizations might exploit the big data potential for accountability in governance.

4. #OpenNASS Campaign: Reasons, Demands and Outcomes

Another relevant example of how civic organizations use big data to increase accountability in Nigeria is #OpenNASS, an advocacy campaign “aimed at tackling the major disconnect between the elected representatives and the general voting population outside of the electoral process by providing both voter education and a communication platform to help voters reach their representative and demand the ‘dividends of

democracy’ – education, health care, shelter, water, power, access to employment or finance for enterprise” (OpenNASS 2016). The campaign began in 2014 and has been supported from the very beginning by a large coalition of civic organizations, concerned citizens and private partners including, amongst others, Enough is Enough Nigeria, *BudgIT*, *The Future Project*, *Paradigm Initiative Nigeria* (PIN), *Education as a Vaccine* (EVA), *Kudirat Initiative for Democracy* (KIND), *LYNX Nigeria*, *VOTO mobile* (now *Viamo*), the *Centre for Information Technology and Development* (CITAD), and news organizations like *Premium Times* and *YNaija*.

The *#OpenNASS* campaign aims at instituting “a culture of governance and public accountability in Nigeria through active citizenship” (Enough is Enough Nigeria 2016b) and focuses on the National Assembly, a vital institution in the nineteen-year democracy of Nigeria. The National Assembly is the Law-Making arm of the Government comprising two chambers – Senate and House of Representative, ensuring that laws are passed having gone through a rigorous process. Constitutionally, the National Assembly makes laws for the peace, order and good governance of the country; represents their constituencies and provide executive oversight to ensure they deliver on budgeted monies. The National Assembly is also responsible for the fiscal year budget approval, passed after a thorough scrutiny by different House Committees as well as the needs of the people are met through their representatives from every nook and cranny of the country.

Overall, the campaigns works towards an “open, transparent and accountable National Assembly” as stated in the homepage of the campaign website.² More specifically, the campaign aims at reaching three goals. First, make the budget of the National Assembly public and work side by side the Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal Committee (RMAFC) to review and reduce the legislators’ salaries and allowances as well as to spread publicly details of the National Assembly budget. Second, the replacement of voice voting in the National Assembly with electronic voting so that citizens can keep track of how their representatives’ vote during their duty. Third, the maintenance of a functional National Assembly website also to make public records of attendance at the plenaries of the National Assembly.

According to a survey by the *#OpenNASS* campaign in 2016, 76% of Nigerians answered in support of open government policies. These include voting records, salaries and budgets of the National Assembly and *#OpenNASS* as a path to transparency and accountability (Enough is Enough Nigeria 2016a). In this regard, *#OpenNASS* (2016) noted that:

Lack of accountability in the National Assembly is very dangerous for our democracy because those who are elected to provide oversight over the executive arm's implementation of our budget cannot be expected to provide leadership and ensure accountability when they have refused to be accountable with resources allocated to them. Over the last 3 years, the National Assembly has refused to respond to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and a court order to provide its detailed budget. The National Assembly was recently taken to court by SERAP for failing to respond to an FOI request about its running costs. It is of great concern to Nigerians that members of the National Assembly do not know the content of their own budget, yet they hold court over how the budget of the country is spent. Public auditing of spending by the National Assembly and several reports on allegations of corruption that have been investigated remain shrouded in secrecy. This does nothing for an institution that seeks to be 'responsive, accessible, representative and accountable.

In order to change the narrative, the #OpenNASS campaign also had to be visible on social media platforms, so as to trigger an active conversation on the issue at stakes in the mobilization. The conversation indeed extended through newspaper info-graphics and radio programmes. In addition, there was an inclusion of mobile technologies in the campaign that citizens could use to sign the petition on the National Assembly to breakdown their budget and other relevant information on governance issues. Again in 2017, #OpenNASS released an official statements reiterating that the demand for the breakdown of National Assembly budget "has always been about improving public sector efficiency and the image of the National Assembly as the highest organ of accountability. Accordingly, it insisted that it will continue to advocate for transparency in all government establishments to craft a more democratic society that protects the interest of its people and values citizen engagement" (OpenNASS 2017b).

The first objective of the campaign was reached in 2017, after the pressure mounted by the citizens through the four-years old #OpenNASS campaign: the National Assembly eventually released the breakdown of its budget. "Democracy wins again!" was the headline of the press release announcing the feat achieved by the advocacy campaign team. The OpenNASS (2017b) release read:

Since 2010, the National Assembly has spent almost \$3.3 billion without public accountability, and in 2013, EiE, BudgIT & other stakeholders decided it was time for openness in the legislative arm. The OpenNASS campaign commenced under the leadership of Senator David Mark in the 7th Assembly but failed to yield results dur-

ing his tenure. After protests, FOI requests, petitions, countless engagements online & offline and several promises, the legislative arm of the government has finally released a detailed breakdown of its 2017 budget to the public. [...] this will count as a worthy legacy that generations ahead will guard jealously.

According to the documents that the National Assembly published on its budget, Nigerian senators earn \$55,000 a year in salary, while House of Representatives members earn \$42,000. However, these figures are not telling the real story in that lawmakers receive lots of money in the form of substantial additional allowances. Put together, each lawmaker cost taxpayers \$540,000 to maintain in 2017. Yomi Kazeem (2017) highlighted the following:

The published budget represents a big win for #OpenNASS, the campaign for transparency and accountability in the National Assembly. The campaign has been led by BudgIT, a civic startup and EiE Nigeria, a governance and public accountability advocacy coalition. While state governments across Nigeria struggle to pay workers' salaries given the economic downturn over the past 18 months, lawmakers do not experience any delays getting paid as the National Assembly's funds are part of a statutory transfer category which the government is required to grant high priority. In a much starker contrast, the lawmakers' lavish pay is almost 10,000 times more than the national minimum wage and is more than 200 times Nigeria's GDP per capita. While getting the lawmakers' budget revealed is some progress, #OpenNASS campaigners insist there's more to be done. Stanley Achonu, operations lead at BudgIT says the campaign has more demands. 'They must begin publishing their attendance record and voting record so constituents know how their representatives voted on any particular issue,' Achonu tells Quartz. One of the campaign's demands, the introduction of electronic voting, has already been met. Crucially, #OpenNASS also demands an audit of the lawmakers' \$3.4 billion spend between 2005 and 2014.

Upon the release of the breakdown of the 2017 budget, there was still wastage in the cost of governance as it was observed that there was duplicity of line items in the budget. Through the #OpenNASS Datathon (a gathering of select citizens to discuss data issues), citizens went through every line item on the released budget. This was with an objective of developing a "lean and effective budget for the National Assembly as a standard for Nigeria to reduce the cost of governance" (OpenNASS 2017b). In the released breakdown, the National Assembly proposed to spend 125 billion. However, as

a result of a review by citizens during the organized #OpenNASS Datathon, it was proposed that a reduction of the budget should be made to 52.4 billion. According to #OpenNASS (2017b):

After a rigorous review, the citizens proposed the reduction of the 2017 National Assembly Budget from the approved 125.000.000.000 to 52.490.951.173. In reaching the final sum in the proposed budget, participants considered all affiliated institutions, overhead costs, maintenance costs, personnel, research costs and all the line items contained in the 2017 National Assembly Budget.

Whilst preparing the leaner and more effective budget, the participants noticed the repeated allocations made the Senate, House of Representatives, National Institute of Legislative Studies, National Assembly Service Commission and the Public Accounts Committee (Senate and House of Representatives) for purchase of stationery and computer consumables, training, travel, purchase of motor vehicles, maintenance of the National Assembly buildings and other items. Citizens argued that several overhead items which accounted for 50% of the National Assembly budget can be centralized in the General Services Unit for efficiency. The reviewed budget is not without context as citizens observed that 5.2 billions was budgeted for the University of Abuja and the National Hospital is due to receive a far lower sum at 7.6 billions in 2017. We ask that the reduction of NASS spending should continue as acquisition of certain items during the current fiscal year will no longer needed to be added in future budgets.

This implies the unwavering active citizenship championed by #OpenNASS advocacy campaign to effect the possible change to reduce wastage and make duty bearer more accountable.

5. Conclusions

Under many respects, the *BudgIT* civic organization and the #OpenNASS campaign can be considered two emblematic cases in the use of big data as a leverage to increase the transparency and accountability of governmental institutions in Nigeria. In a short time, both the civic organization and the campaign were able to create public awareness and ensure the active participation of concerned citizens to bring duty

bearers to account on the use of public resources. This, in turn, brought lay citizens out of their resignation: instead of docilely accepting the status quo, many of them entered a state of active engagement through the use of the social media and legacy media, but also the organization of public events like seminars, workshops and conferences organized to sensitize the people to the demand for good governance.

However, the *#OpenNASS* campaign had three specific objectives that could be further extended to the other governmental institutions than the National Assembly, in order to increase the transparency and accountability of the whole democratic institutions in Nigeria, including different territorial levels of governance. This, though, might prove to be a relevant challenge: while the campaign was overall successful at the federal level, its implementation at the state and local level should face a high number of different laws considering that Nigeria is organized as a federal state with 36 semi-autonomous states.

Another challenge concerns the “who” behind the “how” or, in other words, the people behind the processes. There might be a tendency for the skilled data scientists who handle big data for this type of campaigns to read them in a way that would convey their specific narratives to the public. At the same time, these skilled data scientists might be pressured by political parties to provide a certain understanding of the big data gathered in the framework of the campaign, in the attempt to hijack the national debate on the subject matter. This risk is even more relevant because big data in themselves have little impact except when interpreted so as to render it accessible to the broad population of lay citizens who would not otherwise be able to understand them.

In addition, access to and literacy of digital media is distributed unequally in the African continent and large slices of populations and constituencies are hence still left behind in the use of big data (Fayoyin and Ngwainmbi 2014). Therefore, unless internet services become more widely available to poor suburbs and the rural population in Nigeria, campaigns based on big data, like the *#OpenNASS* one, tend to remain too elitist and to then exclude significant portions of the Nigerian population, hence limiting the impact of big data for the transparency and accountability of Nigerian politics.

Finally, Nigeria remains a politically unstable climate with so much power conferred on lawmakers and corruption in the civil service. What happened in 2015, when the National Assembly proposed a social media bill to imprison Nigerians for criticizing politicians and public officials on social media, might happen again with regard to the use of big data.

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