**Problems and Purpose**

Nigeria’s political landscape has been characterized by exclusion and limited participation of Nigerian youths in public office decision-making as well as corruption and gerontocracy in political appointments. The practice of gerontocracy is a feature of African politics, with most African presidents attaining the highest-ranking political office of their countries above the age of seventy.[[1]](#endnote-1) Some Nigerian governments have featured a high level of corruption and mishandling of state funds. According to the Corruption Perception Index 2018, which detailed the perceived levels of corruption in 180 countries in the world rated Nigeria has a score of 27 out of 100, that is, highly corrupt due to ineffective political institutions and weak democratic values, which threaten anti-corruption efforts.[[2]](#endnote-2) There is a disconnect between the government and the governed, which has featured a government's lack of accountability and transparency. Therefore, Nigerian youths advocate for a government where political leaders consult, listen and act in their interests. A resolution of the 1980 UNESCO General Conference advocates that participation of citizens at the grassroots must be regarded both as a human right and as a means for the exercise of human rights. The invisibility feature is evident in the marginalization and subjugation of youths and women in politics, with several states in Nigeria characterized by an older and all-male legislature, respectively.

The above problems precipitated the rise of youth-oriented organizations such as Yiaga Africa, which take center stage in ensuring the active involvement of youths in Nigeria's socio-political administration and development.

**Background History and Context**

Nigerian political leaders have long been justified based on political experience while ignoring youth participation in the decision-making process. However, the 2021 list by Chandler Good Governance Index (CGGI) ranked Nigeria as the 3rd worst governed country of 104 countries based on governance, leadership, and foresight.[[3]](#endnote-3) In terms of pre-electoral activities, political parties set the tone for mainstream politics. Over the years, political parties controlled mainly by state actors have adopted mechanisms that restrict youths from obtaining tickets for elections through exorbitant prices of political nomination tickets, bullying, deception, and the use of notable older political actors as representatives. Nigeria runs one of the most expensive elections globally, a considerable barrier to the active participation of youths in politics. This attitude guides the electoral activities with a low level of youth and women participation as political candidates. Also, there are cases of electoral misconduct evident in recorded cases of violence, election boycott and manipulation (vote-buying), and altering electoral results.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In this context, Yiaga Africa was established in 2007 under the leadership of Samuel Itodo (current Executive Director). It first commenced at the University of Jos, Nigeria, as a student organization by adopting advocacy strategies limited to the submission of memoranda and participation in public hearings. It evolved into a non-governmental organization with visibility across the 36 Nigerian states. It sought a paradigm shift in Nigeria’s socio-political landscape that nibs political apathy in the bud and upholds the tenants of democracy and citizen inclusion (particularly youths) and human rights. Based on this premise, Yiaga Africa implemented the Not Too Young To Run project to improve the active participation of youths in the public sector.

**Organizing, Supporting, and Funding Entities**

In 2009, “YIAGA” evolved from an acronym meaning Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth, and Advancement; to the legal name ‘Yiaga Africa Initiative’ due to its incorporation of political advocacy in Sub-Saharan Africa. With its headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria, Yiaga Africa’s activities encapsulate the electoral process (pre, during, and post-electoral activities), with youths taking center stage. Over the years, Yiaga Africa has expanded to strengthen democracies in several African countries, including Ghana, Gambia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. This is carried out through four thematic programs: Centre for Legislative Engagement (CLE), led by Yetunde Bakare; Youth, led by Ibrahim Faruk; Accountability and Social Justice, led Tracy Keshi; and Elections, led by Segun Ogundare; while Cynthia Mbamalu supervises these programs as the Programs Manager.[[5]](#endnote-5) In January 2020, to prevent duplication of functions, a thematic overhaul led to three thematic programs: Governance and Development led by Ibrahim Faruk; Elections and Electoral Reform; and Legislative Engagement. The Governance and Development program is geared towards youth participation, community training, and equipping youth in their political agenda. At the same time, the Elections program serves as a watchdog in fostering electoral integrity, accuracy, and citizen participation throughout the electoral process. The Legislative Engagement program fosters the visibility of youth in the legislative arm of government. It also serves as “a think-tank that delivers quality research and capacity building on legislative practice and procedure.”[[6]](#endnote-6) These thematic programs serve as a foundation for initiatives and tasks implemented. An officer and an assistant assist each team leader to ensure the smooth running of administrative activities and outlined tasks.

Yiaga Africa has its staff, members, and volunteers spanning the 774 local governments in Nigeria to infiltrate politics at the local, state, and federal levels. This is evident in establishing the group and team heads advocating the objectives of Yiaga Africa in various capacities in their respective communities.

The availability of funds plays an influential role in ensuring the success of projects and attaining their objectives. Since its inception, Yiaga Africa’s ability to stay financially afloat is attributable to internal and external aids and donations from donors and partners such as UKAID, National Endowment for Democracy, MacArthur Foundation, Action Aid, Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), USAID, International Republican Institute, and Department for International Development (DFID). The Ford Foundation also provides financial support that aids training, workshops, and town hall meetings across the country. Yiaga Africa writes proposals and seeks grants from donor organizations. For instance, the European Union, whose vision aligns with the projects handled by Yiaga Africa.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**Participant Recruitment and Selection**

The recruitment and selection process primarily involves staff and volunteers. With a staff capacity of thirty (full-time), the staff is supported by volunteers who go through a screening process. Volunteers are recruited to carry out activities such as registration of attendees, publicity, and sensitization. Also, the voluntary capacity and duration depend on the nature of the project. For instance, in the 2019 general elections, over 3,000 volunteers were deployed across Nigeria as observers.[[8]](#endnote-8) Some volunteers and part-time staff are absorbed as full-time staff, as evident in Ibrahim Faruk, the current Program Manager (Governance and Development) who started as a part-time staff in 2012 until his promotion to full-time staff in 2015.

**Methods and Tools Used**

In implementing the Not Too Young To Run project, Yiaga Africa incorporates participatory budgeting and co-creation methods through technological initiatives, town hall meetings, workshops, public demonstrations, citizens engagement, mentorship programs, policy advocacy, outreach initiatives, and digital organizing. Research mechanisms and tools are expended to ensure the preservation of information and ensure longevity. Its research efforts improve advocacy activities across the socio-political spectrum of Nigeria and Africa at large. Recognizing the importance of information technology and data analysis/management, Yiaga Africa accentuates its course by adopting modern ways such as Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) to verify the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. Also, the development of three (3) prototypes of anti-corruption applications known as Wikiruption, Influence, and Vigilant Citizens applications.[[9]](#endnote-9) Also, there is the use of social media platforms and hashtags such as #WatchingTheVote #NotToYoungToRun to create awareness. Also, bulk text messages, television, and radio stations aid the promotion of democratic values and mobilization of citizens towards democratic innovations. Its website and social media platforms also serve as an information hub detailing its activities geared towards youth political participation, accountability, and social justice.

Its vast network has created a platform for cross-learning and interaction to ensure the methods, techniques, and initiatives viable to set goals and objectives. Perhaps, building on interdependent collaborations and strategic partnerships with organizations, media organizations, anti-graft agencies, and stakeholders has precipitated the efficacy of methods and tools.

**What Went On: Process, Interaction, and Participation**

In its self-bestowed responsibility of serving as a check on government operations and inclusion of Youths in government for development, Yiaga Africa initiates numerous tools of attaining its advocacy objectives, community engagement, and peer learning. Every activity involved in the Not Too Young to Run project is guided by its vision: “To empower state and non-state actors with relevant tools and knowledge for enhancing sustainable democracy and development in Africa.”[[10]](#endnote-10) This is carried out in the following phases: Bounce Corruption (awareness campaign), the passage of the Not Too Young to Run Bill, youth participation advocacy, and election monitoring.

The process begins with Bounce Corruption, designed to mobilize citizens to lead the war against corruption, impunity and hold public institutions and officials accountable at the local and national levels. It facilitates access to information on corruption and anti-corruption efforts by using data, technology, media reporting of corruption cases, and going the extra mile to expose corrupt practices and demand prosecution of indicted suspects. At least one On-Air Personality is identified in each state as Bounce Corruption Radio Ambassadors who use their platform to mobilize citizens to fight against corruption. A grant-worthy contest is also organized for the one-air personalities to propose innovative methods and radio programs of achieving its aim. There is the training of community-based organizations focusing on rural areas as change-makers on ways to participate in budgeting and social auditing in their respective communities to ensure transparency and accountability in project implementation. Other town hall meetings are incorporated through Campaign, Advocacy and Movement Building (CAMB) training held across the thirty-four states of the country to ensure sensitization and mobilization of youths on matters pertaining to political participation and adequate tools of engagement with relevant bodies such as political parties, government bodies, and electoral offices.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Convened by Samuel Itodo (Executive Director, Yiaga Africa), the Not Too Young to Run project characterized by age reduction amendment tackles the invisibility and exclusion of youths in government positions due to the age limitations contained in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Constitution stipulated that the age requirements for candidates to the office of the President was 40 years; for governorship, 40 years; membership of the Senate, 40 years; and the federal House of Representatives, 30 years. For Yiaga Africa, the acceptable age of candidacy allowing for better inclusion of the country’s youths in the political process and structures of decision-making needed for: President, 30 years; State governor, 30 years; Senate, 30 years; the federal and state Houses of Assembly, 25 years.[[12]](#endnote-12)

In 2016, Yiaga Africa got a young member of the legislative to sponsor a constitutional amendment bill. Recognizing the importance of grassroots involvement, at least two volunteers were mobilized in each state as state coordinators. These volunteers are trained to carry out sensitization activities on the state level through town hall meetings, rallies, and visits to tertiary institutions. A national debate was organized to gain diverse views regarding the proposed bill, while state coordinators replicated this debate at a state level. The Yiaga Africa team employed other strategies such as writing personalized letters to all 109 senators, 363 members of the House of Representatives, and 991 members of the State Assemblies. This involved media engagement and meetings with stakeholders in a bid to create awareness. There were advocacy meetings with the Constitution Review Committee, such as the Deputy Senate President, rallies through the National Day of Action urging for the passage of the proposed bill, social media campaigns, and broadcast across media houses such as Channels Television. Citing unfavorable responses from the legislative arm, Yiaga Africa came up with a Hall of Fame and Hall of Shame to inform the public of legislative members who supported or opposed the proposed bill, respectively.[[13]](#endnote-13) This resulted in positive outcomes evident in the passage of the bill by 24 out of the 36 state houses of Assembly (a requirement for a constitutional amendment in Nigeria) on February 15, 2018; and subsequently, the signing of the bill into law on May 31, 2018, by President Muhammadu Buhari.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Having tackled age restrictions, political aspirants are geared to take up the political mantle and serve as active participants in steering politics to ensure the advancement of their communities and country in general. This next phase involves youth participation advocacy known as The Ready To Run, an affirmative response to youth participation in politics that equips youth candidates (across various political parties) with necessary tools for effective political campaigns, mentorship, and networking. It should be noted that such supports exclude financial exchange due to the non-partisan position of Yiaga Africa. In electoral seasons, Yiaga Africa advocates for youth political participation through media appearances broadcasted on a local television station as a platform for young political candidates to reach a wider audience and canvass support from the public. In 2019, the show was broadcasted for thirteen weeks on Channels Television. Also, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) media action in which Yiaga Africa trained journalists on effective ways of reporting stories and interviewing youth political aspirants. Before the election, Yiaga Africa trains party agents across the thirty-six states in Nigeria.[[15]](#endnote-15)

In the last phase, the election monitoring process involved a citizen's driven voter mobilization that helps in the sensitization of the public through social media platforms, door-to-door interaction, and registration of voters. The volunteers help electoral bodies who, in most cases, are short-staffed in the data capture process, helping the elderly and physically challenged to ensure a seamless registration process. In the same vein, *Watching the Vote* serves as a check and monitoring unit of the electoral process during registration of voters, voting, and counting of votes towards attaining credible elections in Nigeria and Africa. *Watching The Vote* “is designed as a movement of citizen observers with the capacity to gather data, detect fraud and escalate critical incidents that could potentially undermine the conduct of elections.”[[16]](#endnote-16) This is ensured by staff and volunteers with the sole purpose of ensuring a free and fair election process. During the 2019 elections, Yiaga Africa deployed 3906 observers across local government areas in Nigeria.[[17]](#endnote-17) The election process is crowned with The Convergence: Power, Capacity, Politics, a three-day event for networking and brainstorming to attain better results. In its self-proclaimed capacity as promoter of human rights and social justice, Yiaga Africa takes up the responsibility of seeking recourse in cases whereby Nigerian youth's rights have been maligned through public advocacy and capacity building.

**Influence, Outcome, and Effects**

Sustainable development is a fundamental aim of Yiaga Africa carried out through accurate documentation of activities, deliberate mentorship programs, and inspiring the younger generation to play active roles and take up leadership positions.

Yiaga Africa embarked on signing the Not Too Young to Run Bill into law climaxed by the assent of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, on May 31, 2018, who described the landmark achievement as a “landmark piece of legislation conceived, championed and accomplished by young Nigerians.”[[18]](#endnote-18) In essence, the bill metamorphosed into the first constitution amendment assented by the President. The efforts of Yiaga Africa in ensuring age reduction constitutional amendment resulted in an increase of youth participation in seeking public offices, particularly in legislative positions with youths under the age of 30 running for political office in Nigeria and emergence of under thirty-five-year-olds as the Speakers of State Assemblies in Nigeria (Oyo, Zamfara, Plateau, Kwara states), a hitherto unimaginable accomplishment.[[19]](#endnote-19) Youth candidacy in Nigeria’s elections rose to 34.2 percent, as against 21 percent in 2015. Also, 13.5 percent of the candidates vied for the Senate, and 27.4 percent for the House of Representatives. In addition, whereas only 6.8 percent of the members-elect in the House of Representatives were youths, 22 out of the 68 of them were beneficiaries of the Not Too Young to Run Bill in the state houses of Assembly.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Subsequently, the Not Too Young To Run movement launched in African countries like Kenya, Gambia, Liberia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Cameroun, and Sierra Leone. This offers testimonies of successful candidates in improving the track record of political participation by the youths. The 2019 general elections recorded the largest gathering of youth candidates who ran for elective offices and the history of Nigeria, which saw 500 youth candidates contest in the general elections.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Its public advocacy activities have ensured that maligned youths obtain fair treatment by the government. For instance, on March 15, 2014, the death of twenty Nigerian youths due to the stampede during Nigerian Immigration Service recruitment generated backlash heightened by government apathy. Consequently, Yiaga Africa seeks justice through public advocacy and capacity building against impunity for victims who lost their lives or sustained injuries.[[22]](#endnote-22) Also, in the last quarter of 2020, the widely publicized #EndSars campaign (the campaign was a call for the termination of the special anti-robbery squad accused known as Sars for improper conduct) served as a platform for Yiaga Africa to buttress its agenda of respect for the rights of Nigerian citizens, particularly the youths.

Yiaga Africa has raised awareness in all tiers of government on diverse issues such as budgeting, advocacy, and participatory governance, which has instilled the importance of participating in activities that affect citizens and their communities. Succinctly, Yiaga Africa strives for open and responsive government and youth political participation, resulting in increased youth contests for public office.

**Analysis and Lessons Learned**

Despite the laudable achievements of Yiaga Africa, its focus on the legislative arm of government restricts its accessibility to youths interested in the executive arm and other positions available in public office. Some citizens believe that the Not Too Young To Young project cannot change the opaqueness of Nigerian politics, evident in the low nomination of youth aspirants and the unaffordable nomination forms made available by political parties.[[23]](#endnote-23) Some critics opine that gerontocracy in the Nigerian government should not be restricted to reducing age eligibility but also believe that the retirement age in public service (60 – 70 years) should be adopted as the age limit to contest for elective offices in the country.[[24]](#endnote-24)

However, Yiaga Africa adopts a progressive stance of ensuing a responsive government through active, strategic, and systematic engagement with democratic and political institutions. It contributes its quota by tasking and equipping Nigerian youths to the moving train of active political engagement to ensure the government’s mandate pertaining to Nigerian citizens is adequately upheld and to attain an open government. According to Premium Times, the Not Too Young To Run project was highly structured that reflected the “political determination of the youths to take their engagement with Nigeria more seriously.”[[25]](#endnote-25)  The importance of youth inclusion and participation in governance is best articulated by Cynthia Mbamalu, Director of Programs, Yiaga Africa, who said, “…build our nation where young people can feel they belong and equal partners in the development of our country Nigeria.”

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