

Human Rights Advocacy and Campaigns in Amnesty International

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ABSTRACT

This essay looks primarily at Human Rights Advocacy and Campaigns in Amnesty International, in Nigeria since 2009. The author will define Human Rights, elucidate on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), address Human Rights Advocacy, give a brief history of Amnesty International, state accounts of human rights violations in Nigeria and Amnesty International's key campaigns to uphold human rights. The challenges of human rights advocacy will also be enumerated alongside recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

Accordingly, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) defines human rights as rights people have simply because they exist as human beings; they are not granted by any state (OHCHR, p.2). For Alan Gutterman (2022, p.2), human rights are distinct activities, conditions, and liberties entitled to human beings to enjoy, by virtue of their humanity, regardless of their status. In the words of Marks (2014), human rights are a set of norms that guide how people and groups are being treated by states and non-state actors on the basis of what they consider ethical and on what translates to living a decent life.

In light of these definitions, human rights simply refer to privileges conferred on individuals by reason of being human.

Background

The end of World War II with its obvious global unrest, inspired states to seek an international consensus on which universal individual rights and liberties should be respected, how to establish mechanisms to promote adherence to these human rights obligations, and how to provide individuals with credible means for asserting claims of human rights violations to protect their expectations of enjoying these rights (Gutterman, 2022, p.7). Therefore, the first legal document to define the fundamental human rights to be universally protected was the UDHR, drafted by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt-led-team, and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948 (Gutterman, 2022, p.11) (OHCHR, p.2).

The UDHR, in addition to the two covenants - *the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights*, and *the International Covenant for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, formed the three-part International Bill of Human Rights (OHCHR, p.3) (Trinidad 2008, p.1). All human rights are inalienable, indivisible and interdependent (OHCHR, p.3-4), and the UDHR sets the tone for a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to ensure that every individual and every organ of society (arguably including businesses) strive by teaching and education to promote respect for the rights and freedoms identified and described in the UDHR (Gutterman, 2022, p.12).

What is Human Rights Advocacy?

Advocacy commits to all communication that is intended to persuade or produce a particular change in action or behaviour. It can take the form of a single meeting or a series of meetings, confidential or public

discussions, direct or indirect communication through intermediaries, written correspondence, public statements or reports, etc (Manual on Human Rights Monitoring, p.4).

Advocacy may enable and empower people to speak for themselves (Equitas, 2009), give support to a policy and persuade those with power to act in support of the policy at local, national, and international levels (Women, Law & Development International and Human Rights Watch Women's Rights Project, 1997), as well as organise efforts by citizens to influence the making and implementation of public policies by persuading and pressuring state authorities, international financial institutions, and other powerful actors (Washington Office on Latin America, 2001). Therefore, human rights advocacy appeals to relevant actions aimed at promoting justice, equality, and safeguarding fundamental human rights (Adeyemi & Jimoh, 2021).

Origins of Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a democratic, self-governing (Amnesty International, 2007) Nobel Peace Prize-winning organisation (Amnesty International USA, 2018) that campaigns for human rights. It works through researching, documenting and reporting on human rights abuses, as well as taking practical, effective action to stop these abuses (Amnesty International Handbook, 2002). Historically, Peter Benenson's newspaper appeal of 28 May, 1961, "The Forgotten Prisoners" in favour of two Portuguese students imprisoned for raising a toast to freedom became the foundations of an international campaign to protect human rights and of course, the birth of Amnesty International (Facts and Figures: The work of Amnesty International, 1999) (Amnesty International, 2011, p.1). By the year 2021, the impact of Amnesty International's presence, covering diverse human rights situations was felt in 154 countries (Amnesty International Annual Report, 2023) including Nigeria, whose engagement dates back to the military regime of Ibrahim Babangida, or earlier, during the Nigerian Civil War (Ebieri & Sheriff, 2021).

Welcome to Nigeri

Nigeria, is a country characterised by a multi-cultural landscape and a complex socio-political environment. Its exhaustive history of social mobilisation and activism, displayed through active movements to address socio-economic and political challenges reveal also the obstacles encountered in advocating for human rights (Adamaagashi, 2023). Pursuant to this fact, Amnesty International's operations in Nigeria revolve around ending all forms of torture, as well as all forms of violence against women and children, protection of child right, ensuring accountable institutions, protecting the civic space and improving the functioning platform for human right activists, assuring freedom of expression, abolishing the death penalty and ending all death sentences enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions, securing economic, social and cultural rights (Ebieri & Sheriff, 2021).

Key Campaigns

As a testament to the violation of the **Rights to Life, Education and Children's Rights**, there have been the death or injury of at least 70 teachers and over 100 schoolchildren; the burning or seriously damaging of at least 50 schools, as well as the forceful closure of more than 60 others, since the beginnings of 2012; cases of children being forced out of schools across communities in Yobe, Kaduna, Adamawa and Borno, with the latter having the most number of attacks in the northeast, and the Islamist armed group commonly known as Boko Haram claiming responsibility for some of the attacks (Amnesty International, 2013). By 2014, more than 1,776 schoolchildren had been abducted by armed groups, and an estimated 20 million children and young people were not attending school in Nigeria due to economic and socio-cultural practices that discouraged formal education according to United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Even so, of the hundreds of schoolchildren abducted by Boko Haram in previous years, 110 girls remained in captivity at the end of 2022 (Amnesty International Annual Report, 2023).

Between January and October, 2023, primary school pupils and female schoolgirls had been abducted, attacked or injured by gunmen and herders, in Nasarawa, Zamfara and Katsina states (Human Rights in

Nigeria Amnesty International, 2024, p.5). Amnesty International (2013), described these attacks on schoolchildren, teachers and school buildings as a total show of disregard for the right to life and the right to education, and called on Boko Haram and any affiliate individuals or armed groups to immediately stop all attacks on schools, teachers and pupils. It requested that the Nigerian authorities ensure that attacks were properly investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice in a fair trial, and without recourse to the death penalty, and provide better protection for schools as well as apply a range of measures including the encouragement of regular attendance at schools, reduction in dropout rates, and continual improvement in the material conditions of teachers.

Similarly, the **Freedoms of Expression, Association and Assembly** have been under attack as the civic space in Nigeria continues to shrink. The government has passed multiple bills to muzzle the dissent including the Freedom of Information Bill, the protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation bill, the Prohibition of Hate speech bill and the Cybercrimes and Anti-Terrorism Act. These violate both regional and international human rights standards and even challenges the work of human rights defenders and journalists (Human Rights Priorities, p. 13).

In its Global Impunity Index (2018), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) submitted that there were thirteen unresolved murders of journalists in Nigeria. At least 19 journalists and media practitioners suffered attack before and after the 2019 General Elections across Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2019), placing it on number 120 out of 180 in its 2019 Data of Press Freedom ranking, and rating it as 'difficult' for press freedom and net freedom (Reporters without Borders, 2019). Eventually, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) fined 25 stations over their coverage of the 2023 General Elections for allegedly breaching the broadcasting code on 14 March (Human rights in Nigeria Amnesty International, 2024, p.2). A court flogged, fined for allegedly defaming the Kano state governor in a comedy sketch, and sentenced two social media celebrities to a week's detention, in Kano city (Amnesty International Annual Report, 2023).

Matter-of-factly, Adamaagashi (2023), posit that one of the most prominent social movements in Nigeria is the #EndSARS movement, which gained global attention in 2020, and exposed the enduring issue of police brutality in the country, specifically targeting the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) known for its human rights violations including extrajudicial executions, torture, ill-treatment, rape and extortion (Amnesty International Nigeria, 2020). Amnesty International endeavoured to cross-check and verify information gathered from at least 50 photos and 20 videos it received from various sources with accounts of victims during this time in addition to eye-witness accounts from 23-year-old Miracle, arrested in February 2017, 58-year-old taxi driver arrested on a highway in Kogi State in November 2017, 29-year-old Tope Bass, a musician arrested in Lagos in May, 2018, 24-year-old Sunday Bang, an amateur boxer arrested in October, 2018, 34-year-old Kofi Bartels, a Port Harcourt based broadcast journalist arrested in June 2019, amongst others (Amnesty International Nigeria, 2020). A leaked government memo of 19 July indicated that the Lagos State Government had in its possession the bodies of 103 people killed during the #EndSARS protests in October 2020, and had approved their secret mass burial (Human Rights in Nigeria Amnesty International, 2024, p.3). Apparently, a system of flare for impunity, no accountability, ineffective oversight mechanism and failed reform promises by the Nigeria Police was realised.

Therefore, in support of the Nigerian government's resolution to reform SARS as a positive development, Amnesty International opined that only reformation was not sufficient; bold steps should be taken to protect vulnerable Nigerians from police abuses; families and victims of human rights violations should have access to justice, effective remedy and reparations, including adequate compensation (Amnesty International Nigeria, 2020).

Further on, the **Forced Evictions and the Right to Adequate Housing Campaign** between April 2010 and December 2011 was Amnesty International's advocacy strategy to end human rights violations experienced by people living in slums and to enhance the capacity of residents to claim their rights. With a focus on Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, having more than 40 waterfront communities and facing the threat of demolition of their homes, without due process, by the Rivers State government, Amnesty International

worked in collaboration with the slum residents, and local and national organisations, to stop forced evictions and ensure that any evictions carried out comply with international and regional standards (Amnesty International, 2012). Amnesty International and partners contributed to building community capacity by providing different training opportunities for participation at different national and international lobbying and advocacy initiatives, mentoring community activists, and creating spaces that promote community mobilisation and leadership.

It also introduced a rights language that ensured the recognition of forced evictions in Port Harcourt as a human rights concern, which helped to attract media interest and solidarity from different national and international actors including key sections of Amnesty International such as Amnesty International Netherlands, Amnesty International Switzerland, Amnesty International France and Amnesty International UK, who enhanced international solidarity through signature/postcard campaigns, media work and participation in local campaign events (Amnesty International, 2012).

When in 2023, the Kaduna State Urban Planning and Development Authority, the Lagos State Government, the Federal Capital Territory Administration, and security agencies demolished structures belonging to supporters of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria; 250 houses in communities in Oworonshoki, Lagos; about 100 structures in the Dubaidna Durumi 3 village in August and security agents used tear gas, exposure which led to two children fainting; the physical assault of residents; and over 12,000 people being rendered homeless, Amnesty International appealed to government to ensure that housing were guaranteed including through international cooperation and assistance where necessary. It added that perpetrators of human rights violations be held to account (Human rights in Nigeria Amnesty International, 2024, p.4) (Amnesty International Annual Report, 2023).

Prelude to the biennial International Council Meeting of Amnesty International in Mexico in August 2003, and the launch of its worldwide campaign to **Stop Violence against Women**, it had been acknowledged that “Violence against women was the greatest human rights scandal of our times” (Amnesty International, 2004); “It was never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable” (United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, 2008). Sadly, at least one out of every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime, according to a study based on 50 surveys from around the world (Heise, Ellsberg & Gottemoeller, 1999). Consequently, more than 60 million women were “missing” from the world as a result of sexselective abortions and female infanticide, according to an estimate by Amartya Sen, the 1998 Nobel Laureate for Economics (United Nations Population Fund, 1999, p.6).

Bringing it home, the Nigerian Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development, Dame Pauline Tallen, revealed that no fewer than 3,600 cases of rape were recorded during the lockdown (Punch Newspapers, 2020), and by December 2020, data from Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARC) across Nigeria showed that a total number of 17,664 clients accessed SARC services between 2017 and 2020 (Sexual Assault Referral Centre Client Data, 2020). A six-year-old girl was raped to death in Kaduna State in May, 2021 (Daily Trust, 2021) and 24,720 cases of sexual and gender-based violence, including 975 deaths was reported in 2023 (Human rights in Nigeria Amnesty International, 2024, p.6).

Interestingly, rape cases are grossly under-reported in Nigeria (HRC, Concluding Observations, para.20), due to fear of stigmatisation and victim-blaming by law enforcement agents as well as private individuals, gender stereotypes and rape myths. Organisations that provide support for survivors are not exempt from hostility and lack of cooperation from the police. (Amnesty International Nigeria, 2021). In-view-of the systemic barriers faced by women and girls survivors of rape in accessing justice as stated above, Amnesty International recommended that Nigerian authorities repeal existing discriminatory laws and provisions on sexual violence in the Criminal and Penal codes. An intensive law reform should be taken to ensure the provisions of statutory, Islamic and customary laws are in compliance with international human rights laws. They should ensure that all reported cases of rape are appropriately, promptly and impartially investigated, perpetrators are prosecuted. That adequate human and financial provisions be made to the Nigeria Police Gender Units across the country to enhance their work in combating sexual violence as well as providing

support to survivors, and survivors of rape and other sexual violence be given access to protection, support and reparations (Amnesty International Nigeria, 2021).

Correspondingly, in its attempt to seek redress for **Internally Displaced People, Refugees and Migrants**, Amnesty International has documented war crimes and other human rights abuses by Boko Haram and serious violations of **International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law** (Amnesty International Public Statement, 2019, p.2). Notably, the government of Nigeria had failed in its responsibility to protect people from various abuses committed by Boko Haram and ISWAP as well as unknown gunmen, so that by the end of 2022, at least 6,907 people were killed, 6,157 abducted and 2,000 forcibly transferred or internally displaced, whilst similar attacks spread to some states in north-central and north-western Nigeria (Amnesty International Annual Report, 2023). By the end of 2023, more than 2.4 million people remained internally displaced in the north-east (Human rights in Nigeria Amnesty International, 2024, p.7) and 87,000 Cambodians were refugees in Nigeria (Amnesty International Annual Report, 2023).

On a positive note, Amnesty International Annual Report (2023) announced that, parties to armed conflicts must protect civilians by ending deliberate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, and indiscriminate attacks, including facilitating safe and unhindered access to humanitarian assistance for populations at risk. National governments were urged to ensure those fleeing persecution have access to safety and international protection and end double standards in the treatment of people seeking protection.

Challenges and the way forward

Conversely, Adamaagashi (2023) rightly puts that, **weak implementation** which is a result of the duel between the theoretical strength of Nigeria's legal system and the practical application of human rights advocacy dynamics makes for abuses to go unpunished and victims to suffer without proper protection. For Amnesty International and other international human right groups, this retards progress as they have no authoritative capacities other than only drawing the attention of both national and international communities to issues of human rights abuses (Ebieri & Sheriff, 2021). To bolster Nigeria's commitment to upholding the tenets of the UDHR, intensive enforcement mechanisms should be established to monitor and enforce human rights standards, ensuring that laws and policies protecting human rights are effectively implemented at all levels (Adamaagashi, 2023).

In what Deji Ajare (2021) has to say, "Judicial system is terribly marred by systemic problems that make it very difficult for people to get justice." Whereas, Fundamental Rights (Enforcement Procedure) Rules (Nigeria, Fundamental Rights Rules, 2009) require that the "court shall in a manner calculated to advance Nigerian democracy, good governance, human rights and culture, pursue the speedy and efficient enforcement and realization of human rights" (Nigeria, Fundamental Rights Rules, 2009). **Delayed legal procedures** are increasingly challenging to human rights advocacy in Nigeria. Nevertheless, advises from the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Bukky Shonibare, founder of Invictus Africa, provide that prosecutions of rape cases should be pursued without undue delay (Amnesty International Nigeria, 2021). The same should go for all other cases of human rights violations.

Indeed, **the climate of corruption and impunity** in Nigeria continues to undermine the rule of law. It impedes socio-economic development as well as proliferate human rights violations throughout the country, causing a wane in the public's trust of institutions meant to protect them against human rights violations (Smith, 2021). Therefore, it is important that the Nigerian government and society prioritize anti-corruption and disciplinary regulations reforms and strengthen institutions responsible for upholding the rule of law. Additionally, holding human rights violators to justice is essential. These measures will rebuild public trust, enhance accountability, and establish a climate where the rule of law prevails over corruption and impunity (Amnesty International Nigeria, 2020) (Smith, 2021).

Human rights advocacy is stalled when there are **existing gaps in training of law enforcement officers** who should work closely to relieve and support victims/survivors of human rights violations and their defenders.

The testimonies of people interviewed by Amnesty International reveal that law enforcement officers employ gender stereotypes, rape myths, victim blaming, stigmatisation, lack of gender sensitivity and further violence (Amnesty International Nigeria, 2021). Corrective measures demand that police officers receive training and re-training (where applicable) on human rights compliant practices. This is to enhance their understanding of acts such as arbitrary arrests and detention, deaths in custody, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, as well as excessive use of force, as violations of human rights and the need to prohibit them. For mid and senior-level officers, training on monitoring the use of force and firearms by subordinates, such as are based on a policy of thorough investigation of alleged human rights violations should be provided (Amnesty International Nigeria, 2020).

CONCLUSION

In closing, the establishment of mechanisms to advance human rights advocacy would make a lot of sense when local peoples are much aware of their inalienable human rights and put in their best efforts to seek redress and justice. The government alone cannot impartially and without delay give justice to all victims/survivors of human rights violations. This is why both individuals and civil organisations should invest in relationship building that would foster the realisation of the UDHR. Ultimately, regardless of national and regional challenges and criticism meted on Amnesty International, it stands as the most enduring institution and global leader in human rights advocacy and protection.

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