

Assessing the Perceived Roles of Civil Society Organisations in Controlling Illicit Drug Proliferation in Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract

The role of the Civil Society Organisation (CSO) as the watchdog of society cannot be overemphasised. However, their roles regarding the control of illicit drugs have remained largely unexplored within the ambit of recent empirical research. This study was therefore positioned to assess the perceived role of CSOs in controlling illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. The study was based on the Collective Action Theory. The study adopted the descriptive cross-sectional survey research design, using a sample of 158 respondents who were selected through voluntary participation. Data collection involved the use of web-based survey administration through the Google Form database tool. Respondents completed a questionnaire that measured their perceptions regarding the roles of CSOs towards controlling illicit drugs within their communities, as well as their perceptions about the challenges faced by CSOs in their efforts towards controlling illicit drug proliferation. The collected data were processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software package version 26. However, data analysis involved the use of descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and simple percentages. The data analysed was presented in tables and charts. Findings of the study revealed that lobbying for policies against illicit drug proliferation was the perceived major role played by the CSOs. This is notwithstanding other important roles, including public sensitization, counselling and rehabilitation, and partnering with government agencies to fight illicit drug proliferation, among other perceived latent roles. The study also found that the perceived challenges of CSOs in the fight against illicit drug proliferation include: lack of funding and resources; lack of government support; difficulty in reaching populations at high risk of illicit drug proliferation, among others. The study therefore recommended the need for the government to work more closely with CSOs to address the problem of illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria.

Keywords: Civil Society Organization, Role, Illicit Drug, Proliferation

Introduction

The issue of illicit drug proliferation has been a topical issue for the past few decades. This is considering the fact that illicit drug proliferation does not only pose a serious public health concern but is also considered a serious crime that has the potential to fuel more criminal behaviours, particularly among the youth, who mostly fall victim to the use of these drugs. Illicit drugs refer to substances that are illegal to possess or sell and that are highly addictive and dangerous to human health. They are highly addictive and can cause severe physical and psychological harm to humans, and even death on some occasions. Examples of these drugs include heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, marijuana, fentanyl, and hallucinogens, among others (Addiction Centre, 2023).

These drugs are used by people on most occasions for different reasons, such as pleasure-seeking, escapism, that is, to numb emotional pain or to forget about stressful situations, coping with stress, trauma, or mental health issues such as depression or anxiety, enhancing physical performance or cognitive abilities that enable better engagement in criminal activities, among others. Studies have shown that illicit drugs produce negative health consequences for those who use them (Jones et al., 2011; Scent & Chukwu, 2023) and often promote engagement in criminal activities (Kwagala et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2021; Saladino, Hoelzlhammer, & Verrastro, 2020).

There is no denying that illicit drug proliferation is a prevalent phenomenon in Nigeria, particularly within Southeast Nigeria. This is evident in reports often provided by the Nigerian dailies as well as official reports from the relevant drug-control agencies in Nigeria (Ikhisemojie, 2022; Oditia, 2022). For instance, it was reported in 2022 that the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) arrested 24,458 traffickers of illicit drugs (Agency Report, 2023). This indicates that there is a serious criminal enterprise in the illicit drug business in the country. It is important to highlight that the challenge of illicit drug business in Nigeria has, over time, attracted different intervention policies from the Federal Government of Nigeria, such as the Nigeria Drug Prohibition Bill (NDPB), Narcotic Control Act (NCA), and Drug Abuse and Control Commission (DACC), as well as the establishment of centralised agencies charged with the responsibility of controlling illicit drug proliferation, such as the National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), the National Agency for Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC), and the Nigerian Customs Service (NCS), among other latent agencies. It is equally pertinent to point out that NDLEA and other control

agencies have not relented in recent years with policies and programmes to control illicit drug proliferation, yet the intensity in the illicit drug business keeps waxing stronger.

One aspect that has not gained significant research attention in the fight against illicit drug proliferation is the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in controlling the trend. While there seems to be relatively little research on the role of the CSOs in addressing other socio-political and cultural challenges such as sexual violence (Sule & Sambo, 2021), public health activism (Ngara, 2019), arms control (Auwal & Aluaigba, 2021), as well as the issue of illicit drug proliferation in Nigeria (Scent & Chukwu, 2023; Stephen, 2016), not much research has been conducted on the roles of the CSOs in controlling illicit drug trafficking, particularly within the context of Southeast Nigeria. Hence, this is a research gap that this present study hopes to fill. Meanwhile, civil society organisations (CSOs) are often regarded as the watchdogs of society. This means that they are often perceived to play a crucial role in monitoring and holding accountable the different institutions in society. They act as independent voices, advocating for the interests of the public and monitoring the actions of people across different strata.

Thus, exploring their perceived roles towards addressing illicit drug proliferation is key to determining areas of strength as well as challenges that need to be addressed in order to sustain their efforts towards the fight against the criminal enterprise in the form of illicit drug proliferation. The specific objectives interrogated in this study include: 1) to identify the CSOs involved and their perceived major roles in controlling illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. 2) To determine the perceived challenges faced by CSOs in their efforts towards controlling illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. 3) To suggest possible measures that can enhance the effectiveness of CSOs in controlling illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria.

Literature Review

Civil Society Organizations and its role in Controlling Illicit Drugs

McNicoll (1995), as cited in Fidelis (2015, p. 336), described CSOs as “the totality of self-initiating and self-regulating organisations, peacefully pursuing a common interest, advocating a common cause, or expressing a common passion; respecting the right of others to do the same; and maintaining their relative autonomy vis-à-vis the state, the family, the

temple, and the market.” This implies that CSOs represent non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that work to address social issues, promote human rights, and improve people's lives through voluntary and collaborative engagement.

The CSOs have been prominent in propagating a sane and all-inclusive society on a variety of issues, including human rights, environmental protection, health, education, poverty alleviation, and many others (Adebowale & Violet, 2021; Ovie & Jumudo, 2019). In performing these roles, they often use a variety of strategies and methods to achieve their goals, including advocacy, lobbying, research, education, community organising, and direct services.

Their role in controlling illicit drugs has also appeared to be significant across the globe. From the ambit of extant global literature, the CSOs help raise awareness about the dangers of drug use, provide support to those affected by drug abuse, and advocate for policies and programmes that prioritise drug prevention and rehabilitation (O’Gorman & Schatz, 2021; Vallath et al., 2017). For instance, the World Health Organisation (WHO), as one of the largest CSOs in the world, coordinates global efforts to combat the harm caused by illicit drugs. The WHO works with governments, international organisations, and non-governmental organisations to develop policies and programmes that address drug addiction and drug trafficking. The organisation provides technical support, training, and resources to help countries establish and strengthen their drug control efforts.

Another key role that CSOs play in controlling illicit drugs is advocating for evidence-based drug policies. These organisations often help to advocate for policies that prioritise education, prevention, and treatment over criminalization and incarceration. They also work to reduce stigma and discrimination against people who use drugs or have a history of drug use (Chheat, 2018). In addition, CSOs play a critical role in developing community-based drug prevention and harm reduction programs. For example, CSOs provide counselling, social support, and harm reduction services to people who use drugs, reducing the risk of HIV transmission and reducing negative health outcomes (O’Gorman & Schatz, 2021; Rigoni et al., 2022). The CSOs have also been prominent in helping to develop policies and strategies for reducing the supply of illicit drugs. This includes efforts to reduce drug production and trafficking, as well as efforts to reduce demand by raising public awareness about the dangers of drug use.

Review of Theories

A number of sociological theories are relevant in explaining the role of CSOs in the fight against illicit drug proliferation within the context of Southeast Nigeria. However, two theories are considered most relevant in providing a comprehensible insight into the theme of this study. They are collective action theory (CAT) and social control theory (SCT).

CAT: The CAT is a socio-political/economic theory propounded by Mancur Olson, who believed that a group of people can be motivated to take actions towards common goals (Olson, 2009). This suggests that CSOs could serve as a catalyst or motivated group for collective actions aimed at achieving a common goal, the socio-economic development of society. According to Inyang (2020), CSOs are concerned with the promotion of public welfare by initiating and advocating for the implementation of ingenious measures to promote the enhanced livelihood of people within communities. Within the context of illicit drug proliferation, the collective action theory provides a useful framework for understanding the role of CSOs in controlling the proliferation of illicit drugs in Southeast Nigeria. It assumes that CSOs would be a key driver in the fight against illicit drugs, and their role would be to mobilise resources and community members to take action against the proliferation of illicit drugs across different communities in Southeast Nigeria.

In this light, it is assumed that the CSOs can be instrumental in raising awareness about the negative impacts of illicit drug proliferation within communities, providing counselling and rehabilitation services for victims of illicit drug proliferation, and advocating for the passage of laws and policies that would prohibit the proliferation of illicit drugs across the nation, particularly within Southeast Nigeria. Although the collective action theory sees the efforts of CSOs in controlling illicit drug proliferation as a collective action by the members of the CSOs for the overall benefit of members of the public, it recognises the fact that such efforts could be boosted through more collective efforts by stakeholders, government, communities, and members of society through greater recognition and support for their operations.

SCT: The SCT, on the other hand, is a sociological theory propounded by a number of classical sociologists, including Emile Durkheim, Robert Merton, and Talcott Parsons. The theory assumes that social control mechanisms in society, such as law enforcement, churches, and other CSOs, play an important role in maintaining social order and preventing social deviance (Lindsey & Beach, 2002). In this direction, CSOs are considered one of the

important social control mechanisms in society because they function in different capacities as the watchdogs of society in order to enforce social norms and social expectations.

Within the context of controlling illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria, CSOs can advocate for drug control policies that aim to control the proliferation of illicit drugs within communities. They can also work with communities and security agencies to monitor the activities of drug peddlers within various communities. More so, CSOs provide alternative opportunities and activities for individuals, particularly those who fall victim to illicit drug proliferation, thus reducing the likelihood that they will engage in criminal activity such as drug use and distribution. For example, CSOs can provide vocational training and employment opportunities, which can provide individuals with the skills and income necessary to support themselves and their families. This can reduce the need to engage in illegal activities to make ends meet.

In addition, CSOs can also provide social control mechanisms to deter individuals from engaging in illegal activity. For example, CSOs can work with community members and local officials to monitor illicit drug use and distribution and to report violations to appropriate authorities. They can also set up local watch groups and committees to patrol neighbourhoods and provide early warning of potentially illegal activities. They can also provide job training and education programmes, sports activities, and community clean-up projects, providing individuals with positive and constructive activities to engage in rather than engaging in criminal behaviour.

Theoretical Framework

Having espoused the assumptions of two important theories in the article, we considered the CAT to be the most relevant theoretical blueprint for this study. This is considered to capture the view that collective action is necessary to achieve common goals and that individuals are motivated to participate in such collective action when they share common values, beliefs, and interests. CSOs play a critical role in fostering collective action to address the problem of illicit drug proliferation, particularly in Southeast Nigeria, by bringing together individuals and communities with a common interest in curbing illicit drug proliferation, thereby creating a sense of collective responsibility and collective action.

Methods

This study was conducted with selected stakeholder groups in Southeast Nigeria. The selected groups include civil servants, law enforcement personnel, health professionals, members of civil society, and government officials responsible for controlling illicit drugs. These groups were considered knowledgeable and experienced enough to provide information relating to illicit drug proliferation in the study area. The study adopted the descriptive cross-sectional survey research design, which is a research design that often provides concrete data for describing the state, nature, or characteristics of a phenomenon, or the relationship among phenomena, at a specific point in time (Ihudiebube-Splendour & Chikeme, 2020). A major rationale for the choice of this research design was the consideration of its flexibility in enabling the researchers to gather data at a specific point in time from a defined population.

The research involved the use of an online survey approach, where a sample of 158 respondents who were selected through voluntary participation were included in the final sample. The voluntary sampling approach is a seemingly novel sampling approach that involves a situation where the researcher seeks volunteers to participate in a research process, particularly based on ease of access to respondents (Marairwa, 2015). The online survey approach was adopted in this study in view of its flexibility, convenience, cost-effectiveness, ease of reaching a target population within a limited timeframe, and easy analysis of data, among others. The researchers used the Google Form survey administration software package to design questionnaire items that measured the four specific objectives that were set out to be achieved in this study. The questions were basically designed in a categorical choice format. The first part of the questionnaire contained items that were designed to elicit information on the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics. The second part contained items on the substantive issues of the research, which were divided into four distinct sub-sections.

The first sub-section contained questions that measured the types of CSOs involved in the control of illicit drugs in Southeast Nigeria and the perceived roles they play in that regard. An example of a question under this sub-section is "To the best of your knowledge, which of these CSOs is actively involved in the control of illicit drugs in your locality?" Another example of the question is, "Which of these roles do the CSOs play in controlling illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria?" The second sub-section contained items that interrogated

the challenges of CSOs in controlling illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. "An example of the question is, "How much would you agree or disagree with the view that CSOs face difficulties in reaching populations at high risk of illicit drug proliferation?" Considering that data were collected through an online survey approach, participation was made voluntary. This means that the web-based questionnaire link was forwarded to different social media groups for the target population, with the help of the groups' administrators, who helped to explain the aim of the study as well as explain to the respondents the authenticity of the questionnaire link.

A timeline of three weeks was set at the beginning of the distribution period, after which any other data entry was discarded. This implies that the respondents were given a window of three weeks to complete the questionnaire. As such, participation was made voluntary, and only the data entries within the set timeline were considered valid for the study. At the expiration of the set timeline, only 158 data entries were obtained and used for data analysis. By default, data obtained through the Google Form was stored in an Excel spreadsheet file. However, the data were extracted from the Excel spreadsheet and exported into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software package version 26, which was thereafter used in processing all the relevant statistical data. Based on the initial design and aim of this study, the analysis of the data involved only descriptive analysis, including the use of frequency counts and simple percentages. The data analysed was presented using tables and charts.

Findings

Table 1: *Socio-demographic characteristics of the Respondents*

Description of Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Males	66	41.8
Females	92	58.2
Total	158	100.0
Age Categories		
33 - 42 Years	57	36.1
43 - 52 Years	76	48.1
> 53	25	15.8
Total	158	100.0
Educational Level		
Secondary School	23	14.6
Tertiary (Diploma)	44	27.8
Tertiary (Bachelors)	60	38.0
Tertiary (Post-Graduate)	31	19.6
Total	158	100.0
Economic Status		

Low income	23	14.6
Middle Income	92	58.2
High Income	43	27.2
Total	158	100.0
Religious Affiliation		
Christianity	106	67.1
Islam	22	13.9
African Traditional Religion	17	10.8
Choose not to say	13	8.2
Total	158	100.0

The data contained in Table 1 provided insight into the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents who provided information regarding the role of the CSOs in controlling illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. With regard to the respondents' gender, the analysis showed that the sample population was relatively balanced, with females representing the higher proportion (58.2%) of respondents in the sample compared to males, who represented 41.8% of the samples. This implies that the data was relatively balanced in terms of variability in gender composition on the theme of the study.

With respect to respondents' ages, the analysis showed that a little over half (48.1%) of the respondents were between the ages of 43 and 52 years old. Those who aged between 33 and 42 years constituted 36.1% of the samples, while the least proportion (15.8%) were those who aged between 53 years and above. These data may indicate that the majority of the respondents were adults and mature enough to have experience with the role of CSOs in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria.

The analysis equally showed that the respondents have a relatively high level of education, with 38% having a bachelor's degree and 19.6% having a master's or higher degree. This may suggest that the respondents are well-educated and informed enough to respond effectively to the research questions and the themes around the topic of this present study. With respect to the analysis of respondents' economic status, the results showed that the sampled respondents have a relatively high economic status, with 58.2% belonging to the middle income range and 27.2% having a high income. Finally, the majority (67.1%) of the respondents were affiliated with Christianity, 19.1% of them were affiliated with African Traditional Religion (ATR), and the least proportion (13.9%) of them were affiliated with Islamic religion. However, a very lower proportion (8.2%) choose not to say anything about their religious affiliation.

CSOs involved and the major roles they play in controlling illicit drugs proliferation in the Southeast Nigeria

The first question that was asked in relation to this theme was, 'Are you aware of any CSO that is involved in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in your locality or state?' Responses gathered in this regard were analysed and presented in Figure 1.

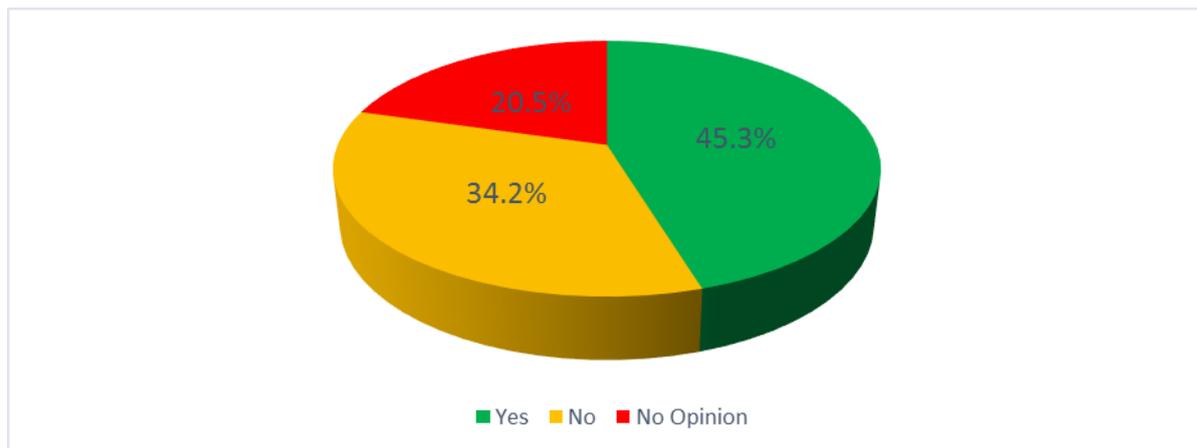


Figure 1. Respondents' awareness of involvement of CSOs in the fight against illicit drugs proliferation

The data presented in Figure 1 indicate that there was a relatively high level of awareness among the respondents about the involvement of CSOs in fighting against illicit drug proliferation in their localities, viz., Southeast Nigeria. Specifically, about 45.3% of the respondents ticked the option "yes," indicating that they are aware of CSOs' involvement in the fight against illicit drug proliferation. On the other hand, about a quarter of respondents (34.2%) responded "no," meaning that they were not aware of any CSO involved in the fight. The rest (15.5%) had "no opinion" on the question, which could be due to various factors such as lack of interest or knowledge.

This finding suggests that there are relatively few levels of awareness about the role that CSOs are playing in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. However, it also indicates that there is still potential for increasing awareness about the roles of these organisations and their efforts. This therefore suggests the need for increased awareness about the role of CSOs in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. This is important because when the citizens are aware of the efforts made by CSOs in the fight against a serious threat such as illicit drug proliferation, they will be willing to support their

efforts as well as collaborate with them to ensure success in their efforts towards controlling illicit drug proliferation in society.

The research was equally interested in getting a picture of the specific CSOs that were actively involved in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. In this regard, the proportion of respondents who were affirmative (Figure 1) was further probed with the question, 'If yes, which of these CSOs are actively involved?' Responses obtained in this regard were analysed and presented in Figure 2.

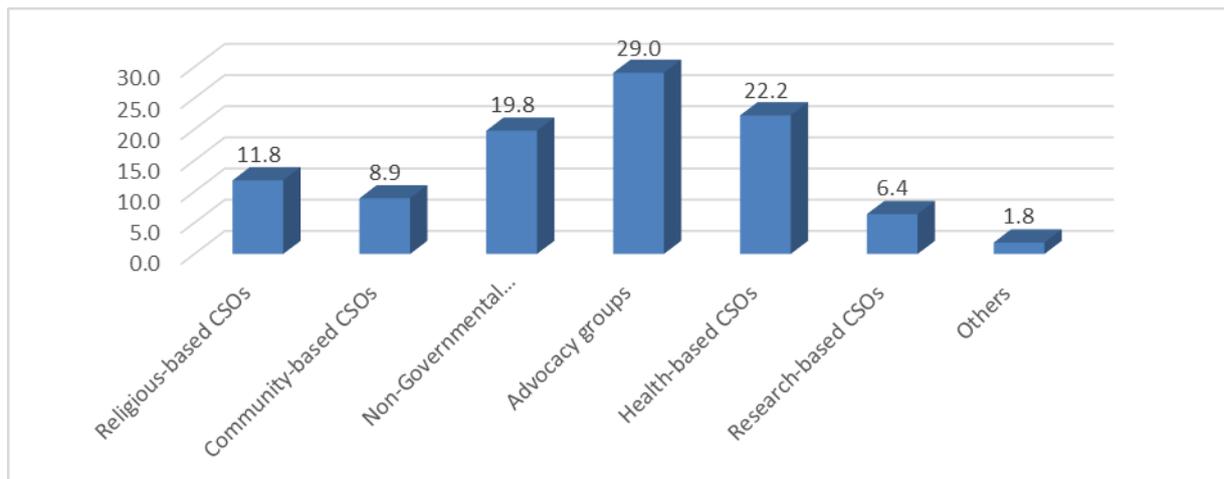


Figure 2. Respondents' Views on the CSOs actively involved in the fight against illicit drugs proliferation

The data presented in Figure 2 revealed that the highest percentage (29.0%) of respondents identified advocacy groups, followed by health-based CSOs (22.2%) as the CSOs most actively involved in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. Community-based CSOs were also identified by 8.9% of respondents, while non-governmental organizations were identified by 19.8% of respondents. Religious-based CSOs (11.8%) and research-based CSOs (6.4%) were the least identified organisations by respondents, respectively. The fact that advocacy groups were the most identified type of CSOs in this study suggests that they play the most critical role in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. This is likely true because they often engage in advocacy, awareness-raising, and lobbying efforts to advocate for policies and regulations that promote the elimination of illicit drugs in society.

However, this does not negate the important contributions of other CSOs, such as community-based CSOs, which often work directly with communities at the grassroots level

to provide educational and awareness-raising activities and services. Non-governmental organisations, religious-based CSOs, and research-based CSOs also play important roles in providing other services such as treatment and rehabilitation, harm reduction, and research on illicit drugs in Southeast Nigeria.

Furthermore, the respondents were obliged to respond to the question, “What specific role do the CSOs play in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in your locality or in Southeast Nigeria in general?” The analysis conducted on the responses in this regard is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondents’ views on the roles of CSOs in the fight against illicit drugs proliferation in the Southeast Nigeria.

Options	Frequency	Percent
Public sensitization on the dangers of illicit drugs proliferation	32	20.4
Support services such as counselling, treatment and rehabilitation to drug addicts	17	10.7
Lobbying for policies, laws and regulations against illicit drugs proliferation	43	27.5
Researching to evaluate the most effective interventions against illicit drugs proliferation	13	8.2
Networking and partnering with government/ law enforcement agencies in the fight against illicit drugs proliferation	37	23.5
Coordinating communities in the planning and implementation of interventions against illicit drugs proliferation	10	6.3
Others	5	3.4
Total	158	100

The data in Table 2 shows that CSOs play a variety of important roles in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. However, judging from the analysis, some roles appear to attract more ratings than others, as seen in Table 2. Specifically, the largest proportion (27.5%) of the respondents support the view that CSOs play the most important role in lobbying for policies, laws, and regulations against illicit drug proliferation. This finding is not surprising considering the fact that CSOs are the watchdogs of society and are often fervent in advocating for important policy adjustments. This was followed by 23.5% of the respondents who pointed to the view that CSOs perform the role of networking and partnering with the government and law enforcement agencies in the fight against illicit drug proliferation. 20.4% of the respondents equally believed that CSOs play an important role in making the public aware of the dangers of illicit drug proliferation. This implies that they are

involved in creating awareness and championing campaigns about the nature of illicit drug proliferation and its harmful effects on communities. Other latent roles include counselling, treatment, and rehabilitation (10.7%), research to evaluate intervention effectiveness (8.2%), and coordinating communities in the planning and implementation of interventions (6.3%).

Challenges faced by CSOs in their efforts towards controlling illicit drugs proliferation in the Southeast Nigeria

Table 3: *Distribution of Respondents on the Challenges of CSOs in the fight against illicit drugs proliferation*

Description of Items	Options	Frequency	Percent
How much would you agree or disagree with the view that CSOs face difficulties in reaching populations at high risk of illicit drugs proliferation?	Strongly Agree	32	20.2
	Agree	48	30.4
	Undecided	37	23.5
	Disagree	25	15.6
	Strongly Disagree	16	10.3
	Total		158
Would you say that inadequate funding or resources is a major challenge for CSOs in their fight against illicit drugs proliferation in the Southeast Nigeria?	Certainly	48	30.4
	Not at all	40	25.2
	Can't say	70	44.4
	Total		158
Do you feel that CSOs are faced with regulatory or legal challenges when operating in hot spot areas of illicit drugs proliferation?	Yes	101	64.2
	No	24	15.5
	Don't Know	32	20.3
	Total		158
Do you consider safety or security concerns as a major challenge facing members of CSOs in their fight against illicit drugs proliferation in the Southeast Nigeria?	Certainly	114	72.1
	Not at all	16	10.4
	Not Certain	28	17.5
	Total		158
How much do you agree that CSOs are faced with the challenge of lack of governmental support in the fight against illicit drugs proliferation?	Strongly agree	57	36.2
	Agree	45	28.4
	Undecided	23	14.3
	Disagree	20	12.6
	Strongly Disagree	13	8.5
	Total		158

Table 3 contains a composite analysis of items that were used to analyse the responses obtained in relation to the challenges of CSOs in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. With regard to the view that civil society organisations face difficulties in reaching populations at high risk of illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria, there seemed to be somewhat divisive responses among respondents. The largest percentage of respondents (20.2% and 30.4%, respectively) agree or strongly agree with the statement. This suggests that they believe that CSOs do face difficulties in reaching populations at high risk

of illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. The next largest percentage of respondents (23.5%) are undecided on the matter, indicating that they are not sure whether CSOs face difficulties in reaching these populations or not. The smallest percentage of respondents (15.6% and 10.3%, respectively) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. This suggests that they did not believe that CSOs face difficulties in reaching populations at high risk of illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria.

On the second item in Table 3, there seems to be some uncertainty about whether inadequate funding or resources are a major challenge for civil society organisations in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. This is evident in the data, as the largest percentage (44.4%) of respondents were undecided on the matter, which suggests that they were not sure whether inadequate funding or resources are a major challenge for CSOs in this fight or not. However, another significant proportion (30.4%) of the respondents strongly agree' with the statement, indicating that they believed that inadequate funding or resources is a major challenge for CSOs in this fight. A slightly smaller percentage (25.2%) of the respondents strongly disagree with the statement', indicating that they believe that it is not a major challenge for CSOs in this fight.

The majority of respondents (64.2%) feel that civil society organisations are faced with regulatory or legal challenges when operating in hotspot areas of illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. This indicates that there is a significant degree of recognition among respondents that CSOs face regulatory or legal challenges when operating in these hot spots. On the other hand, a smaller proportion of respondents (15.5%) do not feel that CSOs face such challenges, suggesting that they do not perceive regulatory or legal barriers as an impediment to the activities of CSOs in this context. A relatively high percentage of respondents (20.3%) were undecided on the matter, indicating that they may not have sufficient information or knowledge to make a definitive judgement.

With respect to the last item in Table 3, the findings showed that, summatively, a majority (64.6%) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that CSOs are faced with the challenge of a lack of government support. This suggests that the study participants acknowledged that civil society organisations play an important role in the fight against illicit drugs but that a lack of government support is a significant challenge for these organizations. On the other hand, about a quarter of the respondents (35.4%) either disagree or strongly disagree with the notion that civil society organisations are faced with the challenge of a lack

of government support. Meanwhile, 14.3% of the respondents were undecided in that regard. This suggests that some of the respondents may not be aware that lack of government support is a major challenge facing CSOs in their fight to combat illicit drug proliferation within Southeast Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

This study assessed the roles of CSOs in controlling illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. This research is particularly important because the proliferation of illicit drugs poses a significant threat to the health, safety, and social security of individuals and communities in Nigeria, particularly within the Southeast region. The findings of this research suggest that CSOs in Southeast Nigeria are playing a critical role in controlling the proliferation of illicit drugs, with advocacy roles against illicit drug proliferation being the major role they play. However, some CSOs are also engaged in awareness campaigns, drug-abuse prevention and rehabilitation programmes, and lobbying for stronger drug enforcement policies. Although there appears to be prior research documenting the advocacy role of CSOs within other contexts (Auwal & Aluaigba, 2021; Ngara, 2019; Sule & Sambo, 2021), there appears to be a dearth of empirical research supporting that CSOs perform advocacy roles regarding controlling the proliferation of illicit drugs in Southeast Nigeria. Perhaps this finding is a new contribution to research, which equally points to the need for further research on the theme.

The results of this study also revealed that the CSOs are faced with different challenges in their fight against illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. These challenges include difficulties in reaching populations at-risk of illicit drug proliferation, limited funds and resources, regulatory challenges, safety concerns, a lack of government support, and the presence of powerful criminal networks that are involved in drug trafficking. These findings are supported by prior research, which has also reported funding as a major challenge affecting the optimal performance of CSOs (Akindele, Ayoola, & Ameen, 2017). Lack of funding is a significant challenge for the CSOs, which limits not only the ability of the organisations to hire and train their staff but also their capacity to conduct training programmes for community members in relation to educating them about the dangers of illicit drug proliferation. Lack of recognition by the government is another major challenge, which is also associated with their difficulty accessing the funds and resources required for optimal service delivery. Prior studies have equally reported lack of government support as a major challenge for CSOs (Azu, 2017; European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017).

In line with the assumption of the Collective Action Theory, which is the theoretical framework for this study, it is clear that the role of CSOs in controlling illicit drug proliferation is a collective action by members of CSOs for the promotion of the sanity and well-being of members of society. However, it is also important to highlight that the challenges they face in performing their roles require collective actions by stakeholders, including the government, community leaders, and the entire society. By building greater recognition and support for the CSOs in their efforts towards controlling illicit drug proliferation, particularly within Southeast Nigeria, they would have a more favourable environment to double their efforts in the fight against illicit drug proliferation.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The aim of this study was to highlight the role of CSOs in the fight against illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria. This study was premised on the view that the roles of these organisations in relation to the control of illicit drug proliferation have remained largely unexplored within the ambit of recent empirical research in the area of illicit drug prevention, despite their critical roles. This present study has therefore presented important findings that give weight to the view that the role of CSOs in controlling illicit drug proliferation in Southeast Nigeria cannot be overemphasised. However, the CSOs are not immune to a myriad of challenges in their fight against illicit drug proliferation. Hence, while recognising the complexity of the illicit drug proliferation within Southeast Nigeria, it is important that a multifaceted approach that involves collaboration between CSOs and other stakeholders be applied for optimal results.

In light of the findings generated in this study, the following are recommended:

1. **CSO-Governmental Collaboration:** The government should work more closely with CSOs to address the problem of illicit drug proliferation. This can be done by providing financial support, technical assistance, and training to CSOs and by jointly designing and implementing drug control policies that support drug prevention and rehabilitation programmes.
2. **Promoting community engagement:** There is equally a need for CSOs to engage community members in the illicit drug proliferation efforts through forming community-based drug control committees, providing training on drug control issues, and involving community members in drug control advocacy and mobilisation efforts.

3. Capacity Building: There is a need for CSOs to enhance their capacity through improved human capacity, including technologists, researchers, private detectives, and other important human resources, as well as intensive training in advocacy, community mobilisation, and project management.

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