THE THIRD SECTOR AND PUBLIC SPACE IN NIGERIA

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No where is the modern state a negation of itself than in sub-Saharan Africa! Hence, it has earned every kind of label – clientelist, prebendal, personalist, soft, neo-colonial, rentier, and predatory. Recent descriptions include failed, collapsed and collapsing. Barring the nationalistic pride, the labels accurately describe Africa’s socioeconomic and political conditions. (Sangmpam 1993) What is more important to note, then, is that they have arisen from the African state’s inability to prevent or arrest economic decay, efficiently provide services and security, foster hegemony and ensure that its authority is sacrosanct. Some have blamed the civil society for negligence in respect of its relationship with the state. Such analysts argue that the civil society is either non-existent or weak in Africa. In other words, there is little or no collective action that has been used throughout history to solve social problems by people in most other parts of the world either to get the state to live up to expectation or self-independently get things done in sub-Saharan Africa. (Ostrom 1998) The area where collective action is palpably lacking in Nigeria is sanitation. The proposed paper aims then to explore the individual response that is emerging in Nigeria to the menace of poor environmental sanitation characterized by indiscriminate dumping of refuse.

In 1984, the Buhari/Idiagbon Administration launched the War Against Indiscipline (WAI) with a cardinal focus on environmental sanitation. This was a response to the disgusting sights of Nigerian towns and cities because of indiscriminate dumping of refuse. Thus, the government required all Nigerians to spend three hours from 7a.m. to 10 a.m. last Saturday of the month to clean their surroundings. During those hours, there was to be no movement. The country was to be shut down! Any Nigerian found on the street was subjected to rough treatment or extortion or both by security agents who usually extend their command for egoistic and monetary gain in such situations. Only medical personnel and vendors; in addition to government personnel on so-called essential duty such as field workers of the inefficient government owned electricity and water supply companies; were later excluded from the restriction on movement after protest and reason so dictated. But the arrangement contained no provision for the cleaning of non-residential areas. Nor did it contain a long term objective of achieving a routine orderly disposal of refuse and by extension, clean towns and cities. Yet, the ritual of shutting down the country continued for years. The monthly order of restriction on movement became a useful opportunity for most Nigerians to stay back home and rest and if there is electricity, watch television or home videos while the cities’ outlook did not change with continued indiscriminate dumping of refuse. The military rulers were either unbothered or took no note of the futility of the monthly environmental sanitation exercise. It was a great relief to Nigerians with the artistic mind when the newly inaugurated President Olusegun Obasanjo, exercising the mandate of the Council of State, cancelled the exercise in late 1999. Some states of the federation have resumed the monthly exercise without a change in the physical outlook of their cities.

Slum is a common part of cities in many parts of the world especially the developing world. Therefore, slum’s basic feature, filth, should not strike surprise in anyone who is familiar with slums. But in Ibadan, the biggest city in Africa and a more or less slum, private orders in the individual struggle against filth are interesting to read. Of particular interest is the desperation in the latest stages of their evolution. While the dominance of Ibadan by filth may present it as a normal condition for the people who live with it, the desperation in the new response to it points to the contrary. Desperation indicates not acceptance but symptom of state failure. Thus, the individual responses to their filthy surroundings range from an appeal to the sensibilities of fellow Nigerians to threats/curses. What are these responses? How effective are they? Why is collective action desirable? What lessons can be learned from collective action from the literature on collective action for tackling the physical abuse of the environment in Nigeria. This paper intends to answer these questions and show that the problem of filth in Ibadan is a distinct evidence of the absence of collective action in Africa. In this way, it will contribute to the debate on the virility of civil society or more broadly, third sector in sub-Saharan Africa.