

GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN ENUGU STATE

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Abstract

This study examined the role of grassroots movements: town unions, market and trade associations, youth and women's groups, and faith-based community organisations in democratic consolidation in Enugu State, Nigeria. Anchored on Putnam's social capital theory, Tilly and Tarrow's social movement/contentious politics theory, and Linz and Stepan's framework of democratic consolidation, the study adopted a descriptive survey research design. A sample of 200 leader-respondents was drawn from a population of 400 registered grassroots associations across Enugu's three senatorial zones using the Taro Yamane formula and stratified random sampling. 190 questionnaires were validly returned and analysed. Data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and simple linear regression with the aid of SPSS version 25.0. Findings revealed that grassroots movements were highly involved in voter mobilisation, dispute resolution, and community-level monitoring of government projects, but were far less engaged in formal election observation and direct public-expenditure accountability demands. Politicisation and co-optation by political office holders, inadequate funding, and leadership wrangling were identified as the most severe challenges confronting these movements. Regression analysis showed a statistically significant positive relationship between grassroots movement activities and democratic consolidation ($R^2 = .34$, $F(1, 188) = 96.85$, $p < .001$). The study concludes that grassroots movements are a vital, if uneven and increasingly contested, pillar of democratic consolidation in Enugu State and recommends measures to insulate town unions and community associations from elite capture while strengthening their formal accountability role.

Keywords: grassroots movements, democratic consolidation, civil society, town unions, political participation, Enugu, Nigeria

Introduction

Democratic consolidation refers to the process by which a democracy becomes so broadly and deeply legitimate among citizens that it is unlikely to break down, such that democracy becomes, in Linz and Stepan's (1996) well-known phrase, "the only game in town" behaviourally, attitudinally, and constitutionally. Diamond (1999) elaborates this further, arguing that consolidation requires not merely the survival of democratic institutions but their deepening through habituation, the strengthening of civil society, and the cultivation of a

democratic political culture that permeates state and society alike. Within this framework, civil society and grassroots associational life are not peripheral to democracy but constitutive of it: they are the arena in which citizens learn to organise, deliberate, demand accountability, and exercise the habits of self-government between elections. This study is concerned with how one such arena, grassroots movements in Enugu State, Nigeria, contributes to, or falls short of, this consolidating function.

Nigeria's experience since the return to civil rule in 1999 illustrates both the promise and the fragility of this process. Formal electoral participation has, if anything, been declining rather than deepening. The Independent National Electoral Commission recorded a turnout of only 26.71% in the 2023 general election, down from 34.74% in 2019, with several states recording turnout below 20% (Dataphyte, 2023). Enugu State's own 2023 gubernatorial contest was itself closely fought and contested by losing candidates, underscoring that even where elections are held regularly, their legitimacy and the depth of citizen engagement with them remain works in progress. Against this backdrop of weakening formal participation, attention increasingly turns to informal and associational structures, market associations, youth and women's groups, and faith-based organisations as potential sites where democratic habits are sustained or rebuilt at the community level, even when participation in formal electoral processes wavers.

In Enugu State and the wider Igbo-speaking South-East Zone, the town union is the most prominent and historically rooted form of grassroots association, alongside age grades, market and trade associations, and cooperative societies (Ugwuanyi & Ogbuene, 2017). Town unions bring together indigenes of a community, both resident and non-resident, to deliberate on local development, resolve disputes, and mediate between the community and external authorities (Agboeze et al., 2021). Their reach is such that the Enugu State Government has formally described town unions as “the fourth tier of governance,” charging their leadership with responsibilities spanning infrastructure provision, peace-building, and grassroots administration, and has in recent years pursued structured partnerships with town unions and community-based organisations through programmes such as the Community and Social Development Agency and the Nigeria Community Action for Resilience and Economic Stimulus initiative. This deepening state–grassroots partnership is precisely what makes the democratic role of these movements both more consequential and more contested. The closer grassroots associations are drawn into government-led programming, the greater the risk that their independent, citizen-driven character is diluted by political patronage.

Three theoretical strands frame the present study. Putnam's (1993) social capital theory holds that dense networks of civic associations generate the trust, reciprocity, and cooperative norms that make democratic institutions function effectively, suggesting that Enugu's vibrant associational life should, in principle, be an asset for democratic governance. Tilly's (2004) and Tarrow's (2011) social movement and contentious politics theories complement this view by directing attention to how grassroots actors actually mobilise through repertoires of contention, framing processes, and the exploitation of political opportunity structures to make claims on

power-holders, reminding us that associational life is not automatically pro-democratic but depends on how and toward what ends it is mobilised. Finally, Linz and Stepan's (1996) multi-arena model of consolidation, which identifies civil society as one of five interlocking arenas (alongside political society, the rule of law, a usable state bureaucracy, and an institutionalised economic society), provides the conceptual bridge between grassroots associational activity and the broader project of democratic consolidation that this study investigates.

Empirical research on civil society and democratic consolidation in Nigeria presents a mixed but instructive picture. Igbokwe-Ibeto (2014), examining civil society organisations nationally, found that they have played an important role in checking electoral violence and advancing democratic struggle, but concluded that Nigerian civil society remains “more reactive than proactive,” hampered by weak internal democracy, limited autonomy, poor cohesion, and chronic underfunding, constraints that this study tests for relevance at the grassroots level in Enugu State. Ademoyegun (2023), reviewing civil society and social movement activism from the anti-military campaigns of the 1990s through to the #EndSARS protests of 2020, similarly found that Nigerian social movements have been instrumental in challenging authoritarianism and advancing accountability, while facing recurrent challenges of co-optation, repression, and fragmented leadership. Oluwaseun (2020) documents how the #EndSARS movement, though it began as a decentralised, youth-led protest against police brutality, illustrates both the mobilising power and the vulnerability of Nigerian grassroots activism to hijacking and demobilisation.

Closer to Enugu specifically, Ogbuabor and Onwujekwe (2018) conducted a qualitative case study of citizen participation in Enugu State's free maternal and child healthcare programme and found that, although health facility committees existed as a vehicle for community oversight, they were largely excluded from revenue generation, fund management, and spending decisions, describing community participation in that context as “just a small circle” rather than a genuine accountability mechanism. This finding is instructive for the present study because it suggests that the mere existence of grassroots structures does not guarantee their effective use for democratic accountability, their actual extent of involvement, and the barriers that limit it, must be empirically established rather than assumed. Agboeze et al. (2021), studying the role of local government in community development in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State, found that community development officers and grassroots actors were central to project implementation, but that coordination between local government and community structures was often weak. Taken together, this body of work indicates that grassroots movements in Nigeria, and in Enugu State specifically, possess real but unevenly realised democratic potential, strong in mobilisation and local dispute resolution, weaker in formal accountability and oversight functions; a pattern that existing studies have not yet tested systematically against a composite measure of democratic consolidation in Enugu State. It is this gap that the present study addresses.

Statement of the Problem

Enugu State presents an apparent paradox: associational life at the grassroots, anchored by town unions, market associations, and community-based organisations, is widely regarded as vibrant and historically embedded, yet formal indicators of healthy democratic voter turnout, perceived election credibility, and citizen trust in government responsiveness. The State Government's growing practice of formally enlisting town unions and community associations as partners in development programming raises a further concern that grassroots structures historically built on independent, citizen-driven mobilisation may be gradually repurposed as instruments of political patronage rather than vehicles of democratic accountability, echoing Igbokwe-Ibeto's (2014) national observation that Nigerian civil society is often reactive rather than proactive. At the same time, existing Enugu-specific research has tended to examine grassroots or community structures in relation to service delivery and local development outcomes (Agboeze et al., 2021; Ogbuabor&Onwujekwe, 2018; Ugwuanyi&Ogbuene, 2017) rather than their explicit contribution to democratic consolidation, understood as political participation, electoral integrity, and government accountability. Whether, and to what extent, grassroots movements in Enugu State are in practice strengthening democratic consolidation, and what constrains their capacity to do so, has therefore not been systematically established. This study was designed to address that gap.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study was to examine the relationship between grassroots movements and democratic consolidation in Enugu State. The specific objectives were to:

1. identify the forms of grassroots movements active in Enugu State;
2. determine the extent of involvement of grassroots movements in democratic processes;
3. examine the challenges confronting grassroots movements in performing their democratic role; and
4. assess the relationship between grassroots movement activities and democratic consolidation in Enugu State.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

In line with the objectives, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What forms of grassroots movements are active in Enugu State?
2. To what extent are grassroots movements involved in democratic processes in Enugu State?
3. What challenges confront grassroots movements in performing their democratic role in Enugu State?

The following null hypothesis was tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H01: There is no statistically significant relationship between grassroots movement activities and democratic consolidation in Enugu State.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are expected to benefit several groups of stakeholders. Town union and community association leaders stand to gain an evidence-based understanding of which of their activities most strongly support democratic consolidation, and which require strengthening. The Enugu State Ministry of Chieftaincy Matters, local government councils, and the Independent National Electoral Commission may draw on the findings to design partnership frameworks that harness grassroots structures for civic mobilisation without compromising their independence. Civil society support organisations and donor agencies may find the results useful in targeting capacity-building interventions, particularly around funding diversification and accountability advocacy. Finally, the study contributes to the scholarly literature on civil society and democratic consolidation in Nigeria's South-East, complementing existing Enugu-focused work that has concentrated on service delivery and community development rather than democratic consolidation as such.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for systematically describing the characteristics of a population and the relationships among variables as they naturally exist. The study was conducted across Enugu State's three senatorial zones--Enugu East, Enugu West, and Enugu North--to ensure adequate representation of both urban and semi-rural grassroots associations.

The population of the study comprised 400 grassroots associations (town unions, market and trade associations, youth groups, women's groups, and faith-based community development associations) registered with the Enugu State Ministry of Chieftaincy Matters and Community Affairs across the three senatorial zones at the time of the study. Using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula, $n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$, with a population of 400 and a 5% margin of error, a

sample size of 200 was determined. One executive leader (president-general, secretary, or other principal officer) was selected from each sampled association using stratified random sampling, with the three senatorial zones serving as strata and proportionate allocation within each stratum.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled the Grassroots Movements and Democratic Consolidation Questionnaire (GMDCQ), divided into four sections: Section A captured respondent and association demographic information; Section B measured the extent of involvement of grassroots movements in eight democratic-process activities on a four-point scale (Strongly Agree = 4 to Strongly Disagree = 1); Section C measured the severity of seven challenges confronting grassroots movements on the same four-point scale; and Section D measured a composite democratic consolidation index based on respondents' perceptions of political participation, electoral integrity, and government accountability within their communities. The instrument's face and content validity were established through review by three lecturers in the Department of Political Science, Institute of Management Technology, Enugu, while its reliability was confirmed through a pilot test of 25 association leaders outside the main sample, which yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Of the 200 copies of the questionnaire administered, 190 were correctly completed and returned, representing a 95.0% response rate, and these formed the basis for analysis. Data were analysed using frequencies and percentages for demographic data, mean and standard deviation for the extent of involvement and the severity of challenges (with a benchmark mean of 2.50 used to classify items as high or low extent/severity), and simple linear regression analysis to test the hypothesis, all computed with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25.0, at the 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Table 1 presents the demographic and organisational profile of the 190 grassroots association leaders who participated in the study.

Table 1

Demographic and Organisational Characteristics of Respondents (N = 190)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	124	65.3
	Female	66	34.7
Age (years)	25–35	31	16.3

	36–45	64	33.7
	46–55	65	34.2
	56 and above	30	15.8
Educational Qualification	SSCE	38	20.0
	OND/NCE	52	27.4
	HND/B.Sc.	79	41.6
	Postgraduate	21	11.1
Type of Grassroots Organisation	Town Union	71	37.4
	Market/Trade Association	46	24.2
	Youth Group	33	17.4
	Women's Group	26	13.7
	Faith-Based/Community Association	14	7.4
Position Held	President-General/Chairman	58	30.5
	Secretary	49	25.8
	Other Executive Member	83	43.7
Years of Organisational Existence	Less than 10	41	21.6
	10–20	76	40.0
	21–30	49	25.8
	Above 30	24	12.6

Note. N = sample size; percentages are computed within each demographic variable and rounded to one decimal place.

As shown in Table 1, male respondents (65.3%) outnumbered female respondents, and most leaders (34.2%) were aged between 46 and 55 years, consistent with the seniority typically required for executive office in town unions. The majority held a Higher National Diploma or Bachelor's degree (41.6%), and town unions constituted the largest organisational category (37.4%), followed by market/trade associations (24.2%). Most associations had existed for 10 to 20 years (40.0%), reflecting the long-standing institutional character of grassroots organisation in Enugu State.

Table 2 shows the mean ratings of the extent to which grassroots movements in Enugu State are involved in specific democratic-process activities.

Table 2

Mean Ratings of the Extent of Involvement of Grassroots Movements in Democratic Processes in Enugu State

S/N	Democratic-Process Activity	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Voter mobilisation/sensitisation before elections	3.52	0.55	High Extent
2	Resolution of communal/electoral disputes to maintain peace	3.40	0.61	High Extent
3	Community-level monitoring of government projects/policies	3.05	0.68	High Extent
4	Advocacy/representation of community interests to government officials	2.92	0.71	High Extent
5	Mobilisation for civic registration (voter/national ID drives)	2.74	0.76	High Extent
6	Town hall/community meetings on government performance	2.58	0.79	High Extent
7	Formal partnership with INEC/civil society election observation	2.10	0.85	Low Extent
8	Direct demand for accountability/public expenditure tracking	1.96	0.88	Low Extent

	Grand Mean	2.78		High Extent
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Note. Decision rule: Mean ≥ 2.50 = High Extent; Mean < 2.50 = Low Extent. Scale: Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1.

Data in Table 2 indicate that voter mobilisation/sensitisation had the highest mean rating (M = 3.52, SD = 0.55), followed by dispute resolution to maintain peace (M = 3.40, SD = 0.61) and community-level monitoring of government projects (M = 3.05, SD = 0.68), all exceeding the benchmark mean of 2.50 and therefore rated as high-extent activities. By contrast, formal partnership with INEC/civil society election observation (M = 2.10, SD = 0.85) and direct accountability/public expenditure tracking (M = 1.96, SD = 0.88) recorded the lowest mean ratings, falling below the benchmark. The grand mean of 2.78 suggests that grassroots movements are involved in democratic processes to a moderately high extent overall, but their involvement is concentrated in mobilisation and peacekeeping functions rather than in the more formal oversight and accountability functions associated with deeper democratic consolidation.

Table 3 presents the mean ratings of the challenges confronting grassroots movements in performing their democratic role in Enugu State.

Table 3

Mean Ratings of Challenges Confronting Grassroots Movements in Enugu State

S/N	Challenge	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Politicisation/co-optation by political office holders	3.61	0.51	High Extent
2	Inadequate funding/over-reliance on member levies	3.48	0.59	High Extent
3	Leadership wrangling/succession disputes	3.30	0.66	High Extent
4	Weak coordination/networking among different grassroots groups	3.12	0.70	High Extent
5	Low youth participation/membership apathy	2.95	0.74	High Extent

6	Limited legal/institutional recognition by government	2.81	0.78	High Extent
7	Intimidation/threats during advocacy on sensitive issues	2.69	0.83	High Extent
	Grand Mean	3.14		High Extent

Note. Decision rule: Mean ≥ 2.50 = High Extent (severe); Mean < 2.50 = Low Extent. Scale: Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1.

As shown in Table 3, politicisation and co-optation by political office holders was rated the most severe challenge ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.51$), followed by inadequate funding ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.59$) and leadership wrangling ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.66$). All seven listed challenges recorded mean scores above the 2.50 benchmark, with a grand mean of 3.14, indicating that respondents perceived the entire range of challenges as severe rather than isolated to one or two factors.

To test the hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between grassroots movement activities and democratic consolidation, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted, with the composite extent-of-involvement score as the predictor and the democratic consolidation index as the criterion variable. The results are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4

Summary of Simple Linear Regression Analysis of Grassroots Movement Activities and Democratic Consolidation

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	15.67	2.30		6.81	<.001
Grassroots Movement Activities	0.52	0.053	.58	9.84	<.001

Note. $R = .58$, $R^2 = .34$, Adjusted $R^2 = .33$, $F(1, 188) = 96.85$, $p < .001$. Dependent variable: Democratic consolidation index.

The regression model was statistically significant, $R = .58$, $R^2 = .34$, $F(1, 188) = 96.85$, $p < .001$, indicating that grassroots movement activities accounted for approximately 34% of the variance in democratic consolidation. The standardised coefficient ($\beta = .58$, $t = 9.84$, $p < .001$) confirms a positive and significant relationship: communities whose grassroots associations were more extensively involved in democratic-process activities reported correspondingly

higher levels of democratic consolidation. Consequently, the null hypothesis (H01) was rejected, and the alternate hypothesis that grassroots movement activities significantly relate to democratic consolidation in Enugu State was accepted.

Discussion of Findings

The finding that grassroots movements in Enugu State are most active in voter mobilisation and dispute resolution, but comparatively disengaged from formal election observation and accountability tracking, lends empirical support to Igbokwe-Ibeto's (2014) characterisation of Nigerian civil society as “more reactive than proactive,” constrained by limited autonomy and capacity. It also resonates closely with Ogbuabor and Onwujekwe's (2018) Enugu-specific finding that community participation structures, even where they formally exist, are frequently excluded from the substantive decision-making and financial oversight that would constitute genuine accountability: what they memorably termed “a small circle” of participation. Read together with Putnam's (1993) social capital theory, the results suggest that Enugu's dense associational life generates real civic capital—trust, organisation, and mobilising capacity—but that this capital is not yet being systematically converted into the oversight and accountability functions that deeper democratic consolidation requires.

The identification of politicisation and co-optation by political office holders as the most severe challenge is particularly significant in light of the Enugu State Government's deepening formal partnership with town unions through chieftaincy and community development structures. This finding echoes Tilly's (2004) and Tarrow's (2011) caution that the relationship between associational actors and the state is rarely neutral: as grassroots structures are drawn closer to government programming and patronage, their capacity for independent, citizen-driven contention; the very quality that makes them democratically valuable can be eroded. The high severity ratings for inadequate funding and leadership wrangling further mirror Igbokwe-Ibeto's (2014) national findings regarding civil society's internal democracy and resource constraints, suggesting these are structural rather than Enugu-specific weaknesses.

Finally, the significant positive relationship found between grassroots movement activities and democratic consolidation reinforces Linz and Stepan's (1996) theoretical claim that civil society functions as one of the essential arenas through which democracy is consolidated, while also validating Ademoyegun's (2023) and Oluwaseun's (2020) broader observation that, notwithstanding their limitations, Nigerian civil society and social movement actors remain consequential drivers of democratic practice. The magnitude of the relationship recorded here ($R^2 = .34$) indicates that grassroots movement activity is a meaningful, though not sole, determinant of democratic consolidation in Enugu State, leaving room for other factors such as the conduct of electoral institutions, party competition, and the broader political culture to account for the remaining variance.

Conclusion

This study examined the forms of grassroots movements active in Enugu State, the extent of their involvement in democratic processes, the challenges confronting them, and the relationship between their activities and democratic consolidation. The findings show that town unions, market associations, and other community-based organisations remain a vibrant feature of Enugu's political landscape, performing voter mobilisation and conflict resolution functions to a high extent, while engaging far less in formal election observation and direct accountability advocacy. Politicisation and co-optation by political office holders, inadequate funding, and leadership wrangling were found to significantly constrain their democratic role. Despite these constraints, grassroots movement activity was found to bear a statistically significant, positive relationship with democratic consolidation, underscoring the continued relevance of associational life as a pillar of Nigeria's democratic project even amid declining formal electoral participation. The study concludes that safeguarding the independence of grassroots associations, while deliberately strengthening their accountability and oversight capacity, offers the most promising route to deepening democratic consolidation in Enugu State.

Recommendations

1. The Enugu State Government should formalise clear guidelines distinguishing legitimate state–town union partnership for development programming from political co-optation, to preserve the independence and credibility of grassroots associations.
2. Town unions and community-based organisations should diversify their funding base beyond member levies, including through transparent partnerships with development agencies, to reduce vulnerability to political and financial capture.
3. The Independent National Electoral Commission and civil society support organisations should deliberately recruit and train grassroots association leaders as accredited election observers, building on their existing mobilisation strength to extend their role into formal democratic oversight.
4. Grassroots associations should adopt clear, time-bound leadership succession rules to reduce the leadership wrangling identified as a major internal constraint on their effectiveness.
5. Civil society capacity-building programmes should specifically target youth participation within town unions and community associations, given the comparatively senior age profile of current leadership and the risk this poses to long-term organisational renewal.

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