



## Original article

## Fuel subsidy protests in Nigeria: The promise and mirage of empowerment

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## ABSTRACT

Attempts to abolish fuel subsidy by successive governments in Nigeria have provoked serious backlash in the form of protests and violence. What maybe said to be the use of such public protests? The literature draw attention to the link between fuel subsidies and protests, but it is still unclear whether or how protests empower protesters to shape the forces that dominate their lives. This paper applies Gaventa's 'power cube' as an analytical device to explore the interactions between government and protesters as power relations, and to understand power as both domination and its resistance. This approach introduces a fresh angle to the subject, opening up the terms of the debate, which seems to have stalemated in claims and counter-claims over the nexus between protests and empowerment, often addressed in essentialist terms. Data, specifically related to the January 2012 fuel price increase and protest, from key informant interviews and secondary sources are employed to explore the question.

## 1. Introduction: fuel protests in Nigeria

Although a global phenomenon, protests against removal of fuel subsidies are 'particularly common in the global south' (Houeland, 2021: 2). There are few formal channels of dialogue between citizens and government over energy issues. When faced with a major shock such as a fuel price hike, citizens feel the only option they have to make their voices heard is protest (McCulloch, 2021). Energy protests can have significant and far-reaching impacts (Hossain et al., 2021). While the literature enlightens our understanding of how energy policies incite protests, it remains unsettled whether and how struggles over energy empower protesters to demand accountability from the government.

Trade unions play significant roles in mobilisation of energy protests (Houeland, 2018). Labour unions mobilised the biggest popular protests in Nigeria's history against subsidy removal in January 2012 (Branch and Mampilly, 2015). The protests literally shut down the country, and when the oil unions threatened to stop oil production, the government invited labour unions to the negotiation table and, two weeks later, reinstated subsidy (Houeland, 2018). The first massive anti-subsidy removal protest occurred in 1988, and almost all governments since have attempted to remove subsidy but have failed (Houeland, 2018: 14). The seeming inability of government to remove fuel subsidy underlines the power of popular resistance and labour unions' opposition.

Has the power to arm-twist successive governments translated into reorganised government-citizens relations? Do struggles over energy empower individuals or social groups to influence energy policies? Some

argue that meaningful gains in citizen power appear short-lived, dissipating without institutionalised citizen engagement. This paper applies Gaventa's 'power cube' as an analytical device to explore the relation between government and protesters as power relations, and to understand power as both domination and its resistance. The approach introduces a fresh angle to the subject, opening up the terms of the debate, which seems to have stalemated in claims and counter-claims over power and empowerment, often addressed in essentialist terms.

By energy policy, we mean the decisions through which government, or its agencies, address issues related to the growth and usage of fuel, including its production, distribution and consumption. Energy policy determines fuel availability, price and affordability. The aim of this article is to deepen our understanding of power and how or whether protests empower protesters across spaces of participation and levels of power through a case study of the 2012 protests against subsidy removal. A lot has been written about the 2012 anti-subsidy protest, but few studies have deployed Gaventa's 'power cube' to understand processes of empowerment involved, if any. The powercube framework enables analysis of the forms of power, spaces of power and levels of power and their interrelationship.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews and secondary sources, the paper addresses the link between protest and empowerment. Interviews were held with ten interviewees between 2020 and 2021, including academics, human rights lawyer, labour activists/veteran journalist, retired oil and gas expert, and civil society organisations. Respondents were selected based on their indepth knowledge about the oil industry,

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fuel subsidy protests, and/or participation in the 2012 protests. Respondents were contacted directly, and through the snowball method. Interviews took place in Abuja and Lagos.

Questions posed to the respondents included; Do protests empower protesters? How do struggles over energy access empower the powerless to hold public authorities to account? Under which conditions do struggles over energy empower the powerless to hold public authorities to account? And have popular struggles over fuel strengthened accountability for energy? The interviews were used in the analysis to tease out how citizens understood empowerment, and its relation to protests. Data were deployed in the analysis to show how respondents' views of empowerment differed from its conceptualisation in the power cube, and how the latter provides a more comprehensive understanding of empowerment.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section two discusses the concept of empowerment (Gaventa, 2006, 2007, 2021), followed by an overview of the Nigerian energy sector as a closed space. Section four focuses on efforts to open the opaque energy sector to civil society participation while section five discusses subsidy removal protest, relying on the three spaces of participation as outlined in the 'power cube'. Section six explores contending viewpoints about whether protests empower citizens, followed by the conclusion.

## 2. Empowerment: what does it mean?

In contexts of power asymmetries, when and how do resistance and challenge to the status quo emerge? (Gaventa, 2021). The question resonates with debate about how people in unjust situations challenge or not their domination (Youngs, 2019). What form of protest has emerged against attempts by successive governments to reform the subsidy regime in Nigeria? How have relatively powerless groups developed capacities for agency and action against subsidy removal?

Power is usually understood in terms of *power over* and *power to*. Power over refers to an actor's control over others, and *power to* implies the ability to act (empowerment). Some see power as 'zero sum', ie for B to gain power, A must give it up (Gaventa, 2021:3). Others approach power as 'potentially positive sum, or accumulative' (Gaventa, 2021: 4). Power over and power to are, however, interrelated because 'power to, just like power over, should be understood as consisting in social relations, and, moreover, that the social relations on which power to is necessarily based are specifically relations of power over' (Pansardi, 2012). Kabeer (1994) draws attention to *power within*, which emphasises the importance of " 'conscientisation' ", or process through which oppressed groups become aware of their own power within, and develop critical understanding of the forces that shape the *power over* their lives, and the possibilities of *power to* and with others.

Power has also been approached as *power with* and *power for*. Power with emphasises social solidarities, alliances and coalitions. Power for 'refers to the combined vision, values, and demands that orient our work, and inspires strategies and alternatives that hold the seeds of the world we want to create' (Gaventa, 2021: 5). Taken together, these concepts facilitate comprehension of the forms of power as entangled or interrelated, and an understanding of power not just as domination, 'but also power as challenge to that domination' (Ibid).

Empowerment describes 'how citizens recovered a sense of their capacity to act, and how they mobilised to get their issues heard and responded to in the public agenda' (Gaventa, 2006: 24). Thus,

empowerment becomes a process through which relatively powerless groups develop a sense of *power within*, and the capacity for *power with* others, in order to challenge the *power over* their lives, and gain the *power to* determine their own futures, guided by their vision of a different world, as in *power for* (Gaventa, 2021: 108).

These processes are interactive rather than linear. Challenging *power over* may be the precursor to develop a sense of *power within* or vice versa. As people gained *power with* others, they may become target of

repression, which could weaken the *power within* or destroy the group entirely. Thus, 'without the building blocks in place of *power within* and *power with* others, the *power to* act and challenge the *power over* are likely to remain limited (Gaventa, 2021: 5).

Gaventa identifies three forms of power, or the ways in which power manifests itself, namely visible, hidden and invisible forms. Visible power focuses on who participates and predominates in decision-making. Hidden power relates to how certain issues and voices are kept out of the decision-making process through rules of the game which favours certain interests over others. Invisible power concerns how the internalisation of ideologies, norms and values keeps issues and contests from emerging, and leads to the acceptance of an unjust status quo. These forms of power operate across three spaces for participation and action, including Closed spaces or 'where decisions are made behind doors', Invited spaces, or 'where people are invited to participate in public arenas but within set boundaries', and Claimed spaces, or 'where less powerful actors claim or create their own spaces and attempt to shape their own agenda or express their own voices more autonomously' (Gaventa, 2021: 11).

Also, the powercube draws attention to 'levels of power', or the differing layers of decision-making and authority, including the *local*, *national* and *global*. It ranges from the household to the local, to the national and to the global (Gaventa, 2007). The three aspects of power (forms, spaces, levels) have to be studied separately and in their interactions (Gaventa, 2021: 8). Transformative change happens where actors 'work across all aspects of the cube, necessitating the emergence of coalitions and networks of actors, which themselves are affected by power dynamics' (Gaventa, 2021: 8).

## 3. Nigerian energy sector: closed spaces

Nigeria's oil industry emerged with the discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri, Bayelsa state, by Shell-BP in 1956. The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) was created in 1977 as 'an integrated national oil company engaged in exploration, production, processing, transportation and marketing of crude oil, gas and their derivative' (Chete et al., 2014). It is managed by a board of directors appointed by the President. The NNPC operated joint venture partnerships with multinational oil corporations. The industry is a major driver of the economy, accounting for over 95% of export earnings and about 85% of government revenue between 2011 and 2012, and contributed 14.8% and 13.8% to GDP in 2011 and 2012, respectively (Chete et al., 2014).

The NNPC has a history of resisting outside scrutiny, disclosing little about its operations and finances (Sayne et al., 2015). 'We know how much the industry sells, but we don't know how much they produce. There is a dark hole between the oilfield and the terminal' (Waziri Adio cf Fabi 2008). Attempts by other agencies of government to independently verify NNPC activities have been resisted by the latter (Okonjo-Iweala, 2018; Sayne et al., 2015). Past 'reviews show NNPC's internal oil sale data management practices as disorganized, secretive and inaccurate. Yet, NNPC 'officials have faced few consequences for mismanagement' (Ibid, 2015: 9). It has signed complex and opaque oil-for-product swap deals, and ill-suited strategic alliance agreements with opaque companies, withheld billions of dollars from oil sale, spending the money in a secretive, off-budget manner, and 'Over and over, management has addressed the corporation's chronic ailments with quick fixes characterized by secrecy, undue complexity, and an absence of oversight' (Sayne et al., 2015: 13).

The Petroleum Act of 1969 vested ownership of all mineral resources in the federal government, which retain responsibility for production, sale and distribution of crude oil. This right derives from the colonial era when Nigeria was owned by the British colonial government. Belief and ideology that crude exploitation signposts development kept issues from being raised and contests from emerging despite worsening environmental degradation (Agbonifo, 2018). Also, federal ownership of oil and monthly distribution of revenue kept the states from raising questions,

even when it was obvious that NNPC was not doing well. The states failed to question the *status quo* as long as they received their monthly revenue allocations. Internalisation of the idea of a ‘social contract’ wherein government is obligated to provide citizens with cheap fuel as of right is deep-rooted. To meet its obligation, the NNPC have taken several ill-advised decisions aimed at making cheap fuel available and covering up its inefficiency (Sayne et al., 2015). Availability of cheap fuel kept issues of grand corruption in NNPC and the importation of fuel, and contestation over them, from arising.

Oil revenue dominates Nigeria’s Federation Account and distribution of oil rents governs intergovernmental fiscal relations. Over-dependent on oil, the political economy is characterised by tension between oil-producing states, clamouring for greater share of oil resources, and the federal and state governments of non-oil producing regions. Local elites’ domination discounted the voices of youths and ensured that opposition did not arise in local communities despite decades of environmental degradation (Agbonifo, 2009). But all that began to change when Ken Saro-Wiwa decided to undo the culture of quiescence among the Ogoni in the early 1990s. Now, conflict defines the relationship between oil producing communities, and the State and multinational oil corporations (Agbonifo, 2009). Tensions have led to intra and inter-communal violence, contentious mobilisation, militarisation, armed resistance, killings and wanton destruction of properties (Ibid). A new revenue sharing formula, and unilateral declaration of amnesty for militants in 2009 represent efforts by the government to manage contention within the extractive industry.

#### 4. Openings in the closed energy space

In 1995, the closed energy sector came under global condemnation following the judicial murder of eight Ogoni leaders who demanded accountability and environmental responsibility from Shell and the government. Subsequent armed insurgencies against the State and oil industry brought further disrepute to the State. To mitigate fallouts of these actions, and restore state legitimacy, the new Olusegun Obasanjo administration decided to promote inclusive and accountable governance in the energy sector by joining the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI), backing it up with the Nigeria Extractive Industry and Transparency Initiative (NEITI) Act in 2007. NEITI was an invited space for civil society’s participation in the closed energy space. Civil society could demand and scrutinise information about the transactional relationship between industry and make its findings known to the public

The state, however, constrained the limit to which civil society groups could influence the energy sector. While accepting civil society groups as a partner in the governance of the sector, the state effectively constrained civil society’s influence through the instrumentality of ‘confidentiality clauses’ built into the NEITI Act. The clauses limit what civil society could do with informational data. The informational value and potential of transparency in the extractive industry may have been undermined by confidentiality clauses of the NEITI Act, 2007 (Abutudu, 2012). Section 3(d) of the Act enjoins NEITI to:

*Obtain, as may be deemed necessary, from any extractive industry company an accurate record of the costs of production and volume of sale of oil, gas or minerals extracted by the company at any period; provided that such information shall not be used in any manner prejudicial to the contractual obligation or proprietary interests of the extractive industry company (Emphasis added).*

Issues of litigation were erased through a rule of the game aimed at favouring the state and oil companies. The NEITI was set up as a democratic space for collective decision-making. Through ‘confidentiality clauses’ however, government deployed hidden power to shape not the decision-making process but the limit of democratic decision-making.

NEITI’s boundaries were set by the ideas and ideology of global EITI. EITI’s theory of change assumed that making information available to

citizens was enough to mobilise the latter to demand change. Such beliefs about change inherited from global EITI shaped NEITI operations. It failed to reckon that several intervening variables determine the movement from information to action. Hidden and invisible power at the global level were in operation in the invited NEITI space, limiting civil societies’ power to act. The agenda was set by international forces who sought to give civil society greater say in energy management. The set theory of change was however problematic. In domesticating EITI, the government enacted a law ostensibly to strengthen the body. The law, instead, provided cover for government and extractive industries.

The broad powers conferred on NEITI by law were hardly realised due to under-funding by federal government (Olayinka, 2016). NEITI was limited where the oil companies decide not to disclose ‘true information concerning the volume of oil and gas they produce in Nigeria’ (Osuka, 2019: 5). However, NEITI exercised more power than was expected of it. NEITI claimed its own space where it could unveil the rot in the energy sector rather than limit itself to EITI’s minimum standards. EITI supported NEITI little because, as pioneer head of NEITI assert, EITI felt annoyed that NEITI looked too deep into the opacity of the oil industry rather than limit itself to minimal standards (Osuka, 2019).

Civil society participation in NEITI facilitated access to previously unavailable or concealed information concerning how the energy sector operated. NEITI brought issues and voices into the public arena. The reports produced by NEITI and the latter’s advocacy contributed significantly to the perception of pervasive corruption and climate of distrust that prevailed just before subsidy removal in 2012. For instance, NEITI argued that NNPC did know how many barrels of crude oil is produced daily. Through its activities within NEITI, despite limitations, civil society developed *power with* stakeholders, which contributed to *power to* or mobilisation of protests in January 2012.

A discourse of transparency, EITI crossed the global into the national level. The government underfunded NEITI, and, through legislation, shaped the latter in ways that provided cover for government and industry. The extractive industry exercised power over NEITI to the extent that it disclosed true information. NEITI findings were subsequently made available to the public, increasing knowledge about the workings of the opaque energy sector. Similarly, NEITI activities exceeded the expectations of EITI, which got the latter angry. The transformative potential realised in this invited space shaped creation of claimed spaces and the narratives and counter-discourses articulated within. When fuel price increase was announced, individuals took to street protests in spontaneous reaction. Groups, such as Save Nigeria, joined the protests. The swift reaction encouraged labour unions to declare a strike, which received the sympathy of the Lower House and was supported by Nigerians in diaspora.

#### 5. Subsidy removal protests: claimed and invited spaces

Governments’ decision to eliminate subsidy finds context at the global level. The IMF and World Bank have been strong advocates of subsidy reform. In 2009, the Group of 20 advanced and emerging market economies argued for a phase out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies in all countries and reiterated same in 2012. The 2012 protest against subsidy removal created spaces within which protesters countered official claims about fuel subsidy, voiced dissent and articulated counter-claims. Protesters critiqued the IMF neoliberal rationalisation of subsidy reform, and government’s taken-for-granted argument that subsidy existed. They disagreed with the view that subsidy removal was beneficial to citizens, and expressed outrage with the timing of subsidy removal and failure of government to consult extensively before its unilateral action. In reaction, the federal government, with the support of regional governors, actively conscripted agencies of government, experts, and the private sector to drum up support for its deregulation policy.

Labour and civil society groups mobilised local, including liaison with key members of the House of Representative, and translocal networks advocating for accountability and reform of the energy sector in

claimed spaces. As protesters voices resonated with ordinary citizens, the Jonathan administration invited organised labour and civil society representatives for negotiation. During talks on December 19, 2011, the anti-fuel subsidy removal team articulated a position that showed that the true cost of a litre of fuel was N34 (22 cent) as against the official price of N65 (43cent) (Social Action, 2012). On December 22, the Newspaper Proprietors' Association of Nigeria (NPAN) latched upon government disposition to negotiate with protesters by creating an invited space in the organisation of a town hall meeting between government officials and civil society representatives.

The Economic Management Team (EMT), chaired by the President, met to articulate a strategy for subsidy phase-out. There was 'a tentative understanding that January to March 2012 would be used for further debates and communication with the public, with a tentative implementation of the subsidy phaseout in April 2012' (Okonjo-Iweala, 2018: 31). Behind the Minister, however, government turned around and decided to hurriedly announce the phaseout on 1st January 2012. 'I was taken aback by the news. It made no sense in light of agreement we had reached to educate the public further before implementing the phaseout' (ibid). The governors, who formed a critical decision site within the EMT, advised the President against further delay of implementation of the subsidy phaseout (Okonjo-Iweala, 2018). The governors created a claimed space, within a closed space, that excluded the minister of Finance.

Protests erupted across the country when the fuel price increase was announced by Mr Reginald Stanley, Executive Secretary of PPPRA, on 1st January. The decision was made by the EMT, but to legitimate it and give the illusion of participation, he falsely claimed that the decision resulted from 'extensive consultation' with stakeholders (Lakemfa, 2015). Protesters reclaimed the streets and repurposed them for mass mobilisation. Public places became politically charged spaces where citizens voiced dissent to the deregulation policy of government, and entertainers treated protesters to revolutionary music. Through such repertoires of collective action, protesters developed greater awareness of *power within* and the forces that shaped their lives. Public-spirited individuals distributed food and water to protesters freely, and reflective of new prefigurative possibilities, members of one religious group prayed while adherents of other religions formed a security shield around them (Social Action, 2012). Protesters emphasised a collective vision and value, the seeds of an envisioned world, where Nigerians were united regardless of religion or ethnicity.

The claimed spaces of protest assumed a trans-local dimension as protests by diaspora Nigerians took place in the UK, USA, Canada, Ghana, and South Africa. Protesters and supporters transformed the internet into a safe space for massive mobilisation and coordination of protesters in and outside Nigeria (Akanle et al., 2014). Within such local and translocal spaces, protesters developed awareness of the power they wielded and believed that they could force change and transform society in the desired direction. Extensive coverage of activities before and during the protests by independent media further enabled citizens to voice their anger. The consciousness that citizens could transform the society quickly spread as dissent with the fuel subsidy phase out soon encompassed a demand that the President resigned or be impeached (Ngozi Iweala, 2018).

When labour unions announced that street protests will begin Monday January 9, 2012, government attempted to shut down in vain the planned mass action. The Presidency quickly announced importation of 1600 buses to cushion the anticipated negative effects of subsidy removal. The idea and practice of palliatives has been associated with subsidy reforms to the end of normalising the latter. Labour disrupted the practice, arguing that it amounted to a drop in the ocean. The government sought to enter and shut down the claimed spaces of protests, using the coercive force of law. By nightfall on Friday 6th January, National Television Authority (NTA) announced that an Industrial Court had barred labour from organizing street protests. The timing aimed at denying labour the opportunity to challenge the ruling as courts do not

seat on weekends. Again, civil society and labour disrupted visible and hidden power by questioning the timing and legitimacy of the judgement and subsequently ignoring it.

In a national broadcast the following day, the President appealed for support for government's efforts to cushion effects of subsidy removal. Government's push suffered a set-back when on Sunday 8th January 2012, the House of Representatives suspended its recess and in a special emergency session, passed a resolution asking the President to suspend subsidy removal and resume consultations with Labour and civil society. The resolution was asking the executive to keep open the invited space for negotiation with labour and civil society. The House further constituted a 10-member ad-hoc committee to probe management of oil subsidy.

Later, the Legislature convened an invited space to broker negotiation between the Executive arm of government and Labour. A meeting between Labour leaders and government delegation held on 11 January 2012. Secretary to the Government, Anyim Pius Anyim, threatened 'Government will not discuss with labour unless the strikes and protests were called off' (Lakemfa, 2015: 157). The Labour Minister charged that mobs had taken over the protests to cause mayhem. Labour leaders responded to the position of government delegation and a heated argument ensued (ibid). Thereafter, the Presidency threatened to wield the big stick against anyone involved in acts that threatened national peace and stability (Ibid). The legislators present lost control over the invited space and could only attempt to mediate the altercation.

Protesters continued to resist and express their own voices more autonomously within claimed, and constricting boundaries. The ideas and practices associated with closed spaces seeped into the invited spaces for negotiation as government attempted to force acceptance of official position rather than allow labour alter its own position. The invited space for negotiation became a space of threat and intimidation for a recalcitrant labour. But if government 'thought it could intimidate the Labour Movement or the people, it was grossly mistaken. The mass action continued across the country' (Lakemfa, 2015: 158). On Thursday 12 January 2012, the Presidency met with labour leaders again. The meeting ended in a deadlock (Lakemfa, 2015). Invited spaces of participation and negotiation held little promise of change, but for the strong mobilisation in claimed spaces.

## 6. Do protests empower protesters? Contending viewpoints

(E)ven in cases of extreme inequalities of power, dominated groups have found ways to exert their agency, pushing back and constantly challenging such power. In so doing, they use multiple strategies - resistance from the outside through claiming their own spaces, engagement within invited spaces, challenging dominant discourses and articulating new prefigurative possibilities for change, and more, each of which may be reinforcing the other (Gaventa, 2021: 16)..

If the state does not exercise complete domination over protest movements, how may we understand the relationship between government and protesters over fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria?

When the government needs something from you, you can demand accountability from that government and the powerless are often in the position where the government does not need anything from them. They really have maybe zero political and economic value to the government of the day (Russo 2020, interv).

Ivie (2020 interv) corroborates Russo's position, making a number of claims during an interview with the author:

Researcher: Do you think that protest over fuel subsidy empowers the powerless to hold public authorities to account?

Ivie: No, it doesn't. Who is going to hold who accountable? If government says that they are not going to be accountable, what can we (citizens) do about it?

Researcher: Why does the government foot-drag on removal of fuel

subsidy. Could this be the result of the fear of possible citizens' protest against the action?

Ivie: The government is not scared about protest. The government does whatever it wants, whenever they want, however they want. They know how they get into power. They have their grass root network. If they want to dismantle a protest, they know who to pay and what to do to get a protest to be quietened up. So, unfortunately, Nigerian citizens do not have power and do not have leverage to push the government in any direction.

Russo and Ivie argue a dualism of a powerful government and powerless citizens, which reiterate the notion of power as a zero sum, rather than power relations. They echo popular ideas about the government as impregnable and above citizens influence, which gets internalised as the natural order of things. The claim that citizens are powerless and cannot influence government, however, belie empirical reality. Government has attempted to remove fuel subsidy severally to little effect because ordinary citizens mobilised opposition, exercising *power to*. Government has been forced to back track in most instances of subsidy reform because of citizens' opposition and mobilisation. However, 'without the building blocks in place of *power within* and *power with* others, the *power to* act and challenge the *power over* are likely to remain limited' (Gaventa, 2021: 5).

The respondents fail to reckon that mobilising a protest and sustaining it, *power to*, is not a given. Protesters overcame intimidation, threats, fear and beliefs to overcome quiescence in the face of deregulation. They created claimed spaces where they developed awareness about sleaze in the petroleum industry, those responsible, and what citizens could achieve through collective action. Protesters initiated translocal mobilisation, liaising with labour unions, market women and other actors within and outside Nigeria. They evinced a vision of a transparent and accountable society where the humanity of everyone was placed above religion, ethnicity and other divides. Severally, they were invited for negotiations by government. Within claimed and invited spaces, protesters interrogated official claims and logics, made counter-claims and resisted offers from the government.

Like Russo and Ivie, Meierding (2011) argues that citizens are unable to enforce redistribution of resource revenue, and limited to raising only issues that do not question the core imperative of the state (Meierding, 2011). This limitation may point to invisible power, reflecting citizens' low expectations, or belief about impossibility of forcing change in the energy sector. Civil society, however, constitutes a critical component of the NEITI, to the end of holding government and oil companies accountable. Although the influence of civil society groups within NEITI was constrained through the instrumentality of 'confidentiality clauses', NEITI manoeuvred to publicly expose deep levels of corruption in the energy sector. NEITI's publications and activities increased public awareness about the sector, which contributed to public demand for reform.

The Economic Management Team hurriedly remove subsidy in a move at variance with previous decision. When she heard about it, Okonjo-Iweala's attempts to reach the President were frustrated (Okonjo-Iweala, 2018). Within the closed EMT, hidden power served to exclude the Minister and some others from a decision favoured by the Governors. The PPPRA was an invited space for civil society groups to participate in determining fuel prices. Prices of fuel were, however, hardly discussed at Board meetings. Often, 'government just decide on a price and make public announcement. The challenge has always been too little consultations' (Sankara 2020, interv). By ensuring that the PPPRA seldom met, it was possible to keep certain issues and voices critical to citizens out of the decision-making process (Sankara 2020, interv). The invited space simply became a tool to legitimate decisions that have been made elsewhere, or to give the illusion of participation

To Sankara (2020, interv), the PPPRA could not function to regulate the oil sector because,

Subtle interference soon crept into the operation of the body. For instance, under Obasanjo government, the PPPRA was reporting directly

to the Presidency. But when Jonathan came into office, PPPRA was removed from the Presidency and placed under the Minister of Petroleum. At that point, all appointment into the PPPRA was subject to the Minister, resulting in interference in the running of the organisation. The PPPRA then could not do its job as it was not independent.

With the relocation of the PPPRA from the Presidency to the Ministry, the Minister of Petroleum gain power to shape who was appointed into the body. Being in control of who was hired, and actual appointment of clients, the Minister ensured that appointees into the Board did the bidding of the government. Thus, government exercised visible and invisible powers within the invited space of PPPRA.

Russo (2020, interv) observes that street protests do not create conditions that make the government more accountable. The set of factors that can make a government accountable are completely different from street-level struggles (Russo 2020, interv). Russo underestimates the extent to which street protests disrupt economic and political stability. Government needs political stability, and depends on the cooperation of protesters to achieve it. That explains why the government created invited spaces and engaged in several negotiations with labour leaders. Josun (2020, interv) emphasises that while 'protests signal a challenge to the government and the country, citizens are powerless to stop the government in its drive to deregulate the oil sector.' If citizens have not been able to stop the government, neither has the government been able to deregulate fuel prices. The struggle has often forced a compromise between government and citizens (Tope, 2020 interview). The continuation of fuel subsidy indicates that protesters exercised forms of power to constrain the government from going ahead to implement its deregulation plans.

Sogo (2020, interv), and Michael (2020 interv) assert that protests empower citizens. Protests give the feeling that citizens can ground the economy and make government back-pedal on its policies, or *power within*. The capacity to hurt the government through strike and constrain the government from achieving its predetermined objective resonates with 'power to', 'power with' and 'power within' as dimensions of empowerment (Gaventa, 2021). There are indications that protests led to reforms in the system (Blaze 2020, interv). Reforms, however, easily collapse because there is no consistent demand by citizens (Michael 2020, interview). The collapse of reforms may well be the outcome of accumulative *power over*, or attrition of *power for* (Gaventa, 2021). Power over and resistance are intertwined. The *power to*, push for reform, is subject to roll back from *power over*, and vice versa.

Governments rationalised subsidy removal in attempts to make citizens embrace the policy. The efforts have consistently met with a brickwall. Citizens' opposition constrained the power of government to implement deregulation as it wishes. In effect, it appears citizens can achieve 'something' when they say 'No' through public protest (Josun 2020, interv).

What we are doing partly is putting roadblocks on the road so that government will not be able to ride roughshod over the people. They have bumps and roadblocks to contend with. So, it is more or less inevitable outcome but what labour has tried to do is to ensure that it is not something that happens suddenly, but to slow down the government and let people know that they can challenge it (Josun 2020, interv).

Protests seek to prevent government from riding roughshod over citizens. While it is inevitable that deregulation will be implemented, it will not happen when and at the pace the government desires, inflicting grave human costs. Erecting 'roadblocks' involve mobilising labour, co-organising with civil society groups, embarking on public protest, countering government's claim and making a demand on government.

The government exercised both 'power over' and 'power to' in its encounter with trade unions and protesters. Government announced implementation of deregulation on 1st January even when it was yet to reach any agreement with civil society groups on the issue. It would not reconsider its decision in the face of spontaneous protests, and threat of

a nationwide strike by labour unions. The House of Representatives urged the Executive to rescind its decision and continue with dialogue to no avail. The government exercised 'power to' by constraining the possibilities of protests. It aimed to weaken citizens and trade unions' resolve to embark on protests through various means. The idea was to stop or at least weaken the protest by limiting or constraining opportunities and resources available to citizens for the planned protest.

Protesters worked in concert with other groups, building social solidarity and coalition to press the demand for reversal of fuel price increases. Solidarity rested on awareness of labour's structural position in the market and capacity to mobilise the society as well as its institutional access to influence over state actors (Houeland, 2018). Government appeared unruffled when the NLC and TUC and civil society groups embarked on protest. However, when the influential Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) threatened to join the protests and halt oil production, the government quickly called for negotiation (Houeland, 2020). Both the government and protesters knew that involvement of PENGASSAN could cripple the economy and threaten political stability.

The 'accumulating resources of challenge' of subsidy removal (Gaventa, 2021: 16) was transferred to another issue as a part of the protest movement began to demand the sack of the Jonathan government. But labour leaders opposed any change of government (Lakemfa, 2015). Similarly, protesters threatened labour leaders with negative consequences if they compromised at negotiation. The leaders 'seemed reluctant-even-frightened-to negotiate or appear to give in to any government demands' because they had been threatened with harm if they called off the protest (Okonjo-Iweala, 2018: 33). The government countered citizens' threat by reassuring the labour that it would be protected from any possible backlash. It was against that backdrop that a compromise was reached, and the protest was called off on 16 January 2012 (Ibid).

The Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria organised a town hall meeting for pro and anti-subsidy removal forces on 22 December 2011. High-ranking government technocrats, including Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (Minister of Finance), Lamido Sanusi (Governor of Central Bank), and Allison Madueke (Minister of Petroleum Resources) accepted civil society's invitation to the debate. The government team composition suggests that only technocrats have the requisite knowledge to operate the energy sector and participate in decision-making. Although unable to convince citizens on why subsidy should be removed, the team displayed raw power by insisting; 'There is no going back on subsidy removal' (Social Action, 2012: 19), an assertion reflecting decisions made behind closed doors being pushed in a claimed space.

Governments framed importation of fuel and subsidy payment as attempts to meet domestic shortfall and protect citizens from paying international prices of fuel. It legitimised the framing through deployment of official statistics. Government made the subtle suggestion that there was credible alternative to fuel importation, thus, keeping key issues from arising and alternative choices from being considered. Having internalised the belief that government paid increasing sums in fuel subsidy, citizens' entitlement to cheap fuel was often protesters' response to rationalisations of subsidy removal. This time, however, protesters interrogated and countered the force of statistics, arguing that the \$8.6b subsidy figure for 2011 was arrived at fraudulently. The anti-fuel subsidy removal group argued that the true cost of a litre of fuel was N34 (22 cent) and not the official price of N65 (43 cent). By problematising fuel price and subsidy mathematics, citizens questioned the taken-for-granted official scientific authority over subsidy statistics. Thus, protesters countered hidden power and discredited government officials behind the mathematics.

The belief in official statistics and settled nature of official figures received further dent when the Senate set up an ad-hoc committee under Senator Magnus Abe to verify government claims and find out whether there was indeed subsidy on petrol. Legislative inquiries revealed inconsistencies among government agencies on how much was actually

expended as subsidy (Social Action, 2012). The Minister of Petroleum Resources indicated that Nigerians consumed 35 million litres of fuel daily. The figure was contradicted by Executive Secretary of PPPRA who claimed 59 million litres per day. The implication was that unaccounted for 24 million litres per day that Nigerians did not consume was being subsidised (Ibid).

Ivie (2020 interv) argues that the value of the protests lay in the fact that citizens are more sensitized. Deploying visible power, civil society groups began to construct new narratives and critical consciousness in claimed spaces. They argued that the government had been subsidising corruption and not fuel as people were made to believe. Civil society questioned why government focused entirely on deregulation rather than sanction those found to be involved in the subsidy scam. In contrast to the use of the actor-less and faceless word 'cabal' to describe those involved in short-changing the economy, civil society groups argued that the 'oil cabal', was known to government because the same government granted them licenses. Thus, they displayed awareness of 'the forces that shape the power over their lives' (Gaventa, 2021: 4), and urged that government should fix the four refineries and halt importation of refined petroleum products through their crooked friends who were camouflaged as 'cabal' (Nana 2020, interv).

## 7. Conclusion

The January 2012 protests empowered civil society to influence subsidy reform. The protests enabled relatively powerless protest groups to develop a sense of *power within*, and *power with* others, which enabled them to challenge the *power over* their lives, and in the process gained the *power to* determine their own future, shaped by their vision of a desired alternative world, or *power for*. Government exercised *power over*, within the interactive context of the energy sector, through legal provisions, but encountered resistance, or *power to*, from civil society.

Closed, invited and claimed spaces of power shaped the energy sector. Visible, hidden and invisible forms of power operated across these spaces of power. The government exercised visible power through exclusive control over the opaque energy sector, utilising legal provisions and force to maintain control, often in collaboration with multinational oil corporations. It sought to impose subsidy reform, a discourse promoted by global actors. In response to visible power, both in invited and claimed spaces, citizens resisted subsidy reform, and its imposition without consultations. They created claimed spaces where grievances, and alternative vision of society were articulated. The government countered civil society's *power to* and sought to shape claimed spaces by resorting to the court, militarising civil society and issuing threats.

Anti-subsidy removal protesters questioned existing beliefs and claims about the energy sector, seeking to participate and predominate in the latter. Taken-for-granted beliefs, such as the existence of subsidy, were questioned, allowing civil society to articulate autonomous beliefs and views, which resulted in protest mobilisation. Threatened, government created invited spaces for negotiation. Within that space, it attempted domination of opposition through threats. Citizens sustained their autonomy, refusing to yield to domination. Even within invited spaces in the closed energy sector, government deployed hidden power through legal provisions and irregular meetings in the attempt to maintain domination.

Civil society exercised *power with* negotiating with government in invited spaces and resisting threats, promises and arguments flowing from closed spaces, especially when they were at variance with positions articulated in claimed spaces. It worked across levels of power interacting with the legislature, the public, diaspora Nigerians, and blaming the government, and neo-liberal ideas of the IMF and World Bank for subsidy reforms.

Subsidy reform protesters believed they could achieve something when they say 'No' to government through protests. They created claimed spaces, identified actors behind *power over* that shaped their

lives, and articulated a counter position. Civil society and labour unions developed power with other actors in pursuit of their autonomous vision of a different world. These processes resulted in street protests against imposition of subsidy reforms, and citizens' articulation of a desired future where citizens shape energy related matters. Respondents hardly engaged with these forms of empowerment emerging from protests.

Some have argued that protests do not empower protesters because the reforms that emerged on the heels of the protest easily collapsed. Such outcome may have less to do with *power to* or *power over*. Gaventa shows that where we fail to focus on all forms of power and link them together simultaneously, the *power to* act and challenge the *power over* are likely to remain limited. In effect, the limitation of the 2012 protests that some respondents underlined hardly connotes the absence of empowerment.

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