

## **Keynote Address: Breaking the Cycle – Rethinking Development in Humanitarian Action and Governance in Nigeria**

**By Dr. Hussaini Abdu**

**Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is with a deep sense of purpose and responsibility that I address you today on the urgent and timely theme: “Breaking the Cycle: Rethinking Development in Humanitarian Action and Governance in Nigeria.” This moment calls for more than reflection it demands a critical interrogation of Nigeria’s political economy, governance architecture, and development paradigms, particularly in the context of rising humanitarian challenges and the retreat of the state from its core obligations.

In this keynote, I will unpack the contradictions of Nigeria’s democratic journey since 1999, interrogate systemic failures in governance and development, and explore the recalibration of humanitarian and civil society engagement to meet the realities of protracted crises. More importantly, I will propose a new governance-development nexus rooted in institutional accountability, citizen agency, economic justice, and structural transformation.

### **Introduction**

Nigeria’s return to democracy in 1999 was marked by great anticipation and optimism. Many Nigerians, including those of us who actively resisted decades of military dictatorship, believed that the collapse of authoritarian rule would herald an era of responsive governance, participatory development, and inclusive prosperity. Our struggle was not merely for the right to vote every four years, but for the emergence of a state that would be both legitimate and capable an institution grounded in justice, service delivery, and economic transformation.

However, over two decades into this democratic dispensation, the gap between expectation and reality remains vast. Democratic structures have been established, but the dividends of democracy security, opportunity, infrastructure, and justice remain elusive for the vast majority of citizens. Today, Nigeria is trapped in a governance crisis that intersects with economic hardship, rising insecurity, and an expanding humanitarian emergency. This context demands not only a critique of prevailing policy paradigms but a radical re-imagination of the development architecture and the role of the state.

### **Governance in Crisis**

The nature of Nigeria’s governance failure is both structural and systemic. It cannot be reduced to episodic scandals or isolated policy lapses. Rather, it reflects the hollowing out of state institutions, the erosion of public trust, and the capture of public office by private interests. Corruption has

transcended the realm of financial misconduct to become a system of governance unto itself one in which public goods are commodified, contracts are inflated, and oversight institutions are rendered impotent. This corruption is not just administrative; it is political, cultural, and ideological, distorting incentives across all levels of public life.

In tandem with this, service delivery has collapsed. Despite successive budgets allocating trillions of naira to sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure, the outcomes remain bleak. Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children globally. Its maternal and infant mortality rates rank among the worst in the world. Access to potable water, sanitation, electricity, and quality public education remains limited. The state appears increasingly unable or unwilling to fulfill its basic responsibilities, particularly to its most vulnerable populations.

Further exacerbating the situation is the exponential rise in insecurity. From Boko Haram insurgency in the North East to banditry and mass kidnappings in the North West, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, and separatist agitations in the South East, Nigeria is undergoing a security crisis of unprecedented scale. In many rural communities, the state has effectively ceded control to violent non-state actors. These are not “ungoverned spaces” in the traditional sense, but territories re-governed through coercion, extortion, and fear.

Compounding this insecurity is an economic crisis that has marginalized millions. While headline economic indicators may occasionally show growth, the nature of this growth is neither inclusive nor equitable. Over 133 million Nigerians now live in conditions of multidimensional poverty, characterized by lack of access to health, education, and livelihoods. Youth unemployment has soared, inflation continues to rise, and economic policies often shaped by external financial institutions fail to address the needs of Nigeria’s informal sector and rural economy. The result is a society marked by exclusion, frustration, and disillusionment.

### **Humanitarian Action in a Collapsing State**

In response to these intersecting crises, civil society organizations and humanitarian actors have emerged as critical agents of relief and resilience. They provide food assistance, education, psychosocial support, health services, and vocational training in regions abandoned by the state. Organizations such as the Africa Youth Growth Foundation (AYGF) exemplify this proactive engagement, having implemented innovative programs that support returnees, empower youth and women, and strengthen livelihoods in conflict-affected communities.

However, while the contributions of civil society are laudable, they are inherently limited in scope and sustainability. Most interventions are project-based, donor-dependent, and time-bound. They operate in an environment of fragmented coordination, often duplicating services or working at cross-purposes due to the absence of a centralized national framework for humanitarian governance. Moreover, by stepping into roles that rightly belong to the state, humanitarian actors

risk normalizing state failure and entrenching a parallel system of service delivery that lacks accountability and permanence.

What is urgently needed, therefore, is a shift from charity to justice from emergency response to systemic transformation. Humanitarian interventions must be accompanied by political advocacy, institutional reform, and citizen empowerment aimed at rebuilding state capacity and legitimacy. Civil society cannot content itself with filling gaps; it must engage in the political project of reshaping the state itself.

### **Reimagining the Governance-Development Nexus**

To overcome Nigeria's protracted crises, a new governance-development compact must be forged. This requires a multidimensional strategy anchored in democratic renewal, economic justice, and institutional integrity. First, democracy must be reclaimed as a participatory and accountable process. Elections, while important, are insufficient. There must be judicial independence, freedom of expression, vibrant civic space, and mechanisms for inclusive governance. Citizens must be able not only to choose their leaders but to influence decisions and hold public officials accountable in real time.

Second, Nigeria must build a developmental state one that actively drives economic transformation through strategic investments, industrial policy, and social protection. The state must prioritize sectors that create jobs, foster innovation, and reduce inequality. It must support youth and women through targeted empowerment programs and invest in public goods that serve the collective interest. The private sector, while vital, cannot substitute for the regulatory and redistributive role of the state.

Third, Nigeria must assert economic sovereignty and rethink its development model. Rather than adopting one-size-fits-all neoliberal prescriptions, the country must pursue policies rooted in its historical realities and economic potential. This means supporting local production, protecting smallholder farmers, investing in energy infrastructure, and harnessing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to grow domestic industries and regional value chains.

Fourth, the culture of impunity must be dismantled. Accountability should be institutionalized through transparent procurement systems, digitized public services, and independent oversight agencies with real enforcement powers. Anti-corruption efforts must be systemic, not selective, and should involve both preventive and punitive measures.

### **The Strategic Role of Civil Society**

As we build toward this vision, civil society must evolve from a service-oriented actor to a transformative force. NGOs should engage in systemic advocacy, coalition-building, civic

education, and legislative reform. They must empower citizens to demand rights, challenge injustice, and organize for change. Rather than only reacting to crises, civil society should shape the political discourse, influence public policy, and act as custodians of democratic values.

## **Conclusion**

The Nigerian state is at a crossroads. Its current path characterized by weak institutions, elite capture, and humanitarian dependency is unsustainable. Yet there remains a window of opportunity to reimagine a future anchored in inclusion, equity, and justice. This requires courage, clarity, and collective action. It demands that we rebuild public institutions, invest in people, and reestablish the social contract between governments and governed.

To Africa Youth Growth Foundation and all its partners, I extend my deepest admiration. Your two decades of work in humanitarian action, development programming, and civic engagement are testament to the possibility of transformation. But let this anniversary not only be a moment of reflection let it be a call to action.

May we, together, break the cycle of dysfunction and build a Nigeria where governance serves the people, and development is a right not a privilege.