

# Social Action Method and The #Endsars Protests in Nigeria Social Work Approach

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This paper examines the social action method and the EndSARS protest in Nigeria from a social work perspective, with the aim of recommending solutions to address the causes of the protest and police brutality in Nigeria. **Method:** The study adopts the structural-functionalist theory and utilizes a qualitative approach through survey research. Data was collected from secondary sources, including journal articles, newspapers, and online publications. **Results:** The findings reveal that the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) became notorious for its brutality and human rights abuses, with a lack of accountability for its actions. The Nigerian economy also faced significant financial losses during the protests. Furthermore, the Police Act of 1943, which grants broad discretionary powers to police officers, facilitates the abuse of power. **Novelty:** The paper highlights the global impact of the EndSARS protest, focusing on police brutality in Nigeria. It recommends a multi-stakeholder approach to reform, including engagement with civil society organizations, traditional institutions, and youth employment initiatives, to address systemic issues and foster sustainable development.

## INTRODUCTION

The End SARS is a decentralized social movement, and series of mass protests in line with the social action method against police brutality in Nigeria. The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) is a Nigeria Police Force tactical unit that was founded in 1992, to combat armed robbery, kidnapping and other violent crimes. Over the years, SARS metamorphosized and took on several other duties including financial fraud, which a lot of Nigerian youths were believed to be involved. In addition, its operational procedures became vague and included stop and search. It was generally believed that SARS changed into an oppressive force, abusing the human rights of Nigerians, especially the youths. Heavily-armed SARS officers moved around in mufti, conducting actions including extortion and extra judicial killings and intimidating the people they should be protecting [1].

The slogan calls for the disbanding of the Special Anti- Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the country police with a long record of abuses. The protests which take its name from the slogan started in 2017 as a Twitter campaign using the hashtag #EndSARS also spread to Instagram and Facebook to demand the disbanding of the unit by the Nigeria Police force because of their brutality of the Special Anti- Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the country police with a long record of abuses [2].

Basically, social action method does not confine itself to a single aspect of the social issue. Rather, it emphasizes on programmes having multi-prong aspects like social, economic, cultural, etc. (principle of manifold programmes) using Twitter, Instagram

Facebook etc., as was applied by #endsars protesters to bring out the much desired change(s) in the society. Social action is considered a method of professional social work technique or approach having characteristics like: an established process with easily recognizable stages, based on the philosophy of social work, having principles or guidelines or theories, skills of working with people which are learned and refined through professional guidance. As a method of social work, social action adheres to the philosophy of professional social work. It does not blame people for the deficiency or problem. It strongly believes in the worth and dignity of human beings [3], [4].

Social work as a profession is closely connected with social movements having originated from different traditions at the beginning of the twentieth century. Internationally, it has been established that major disruptive events such as group protest, civil conflict and politically motivated violence have been widely shown to disrupt economic growth [5]. Following this, it was not out of place to observe that demonstrators in their thousands thronged Nigerian cities from the beginning of October 2020, to demand an end to police brutality in the country and also seek justice for victims of police violence and extrajudicial killings. The EndSars protests have left memories not just on the Nigerian people but on the global community on issues of police brutality in Nigeria.

The genesis of EndSARS started in 2017 when Segun Awosanya and other activists on Twitter began to demand that the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) be scrapped. A report by Amnesty International, indicted SARS as being responsible for human rights abuse, cruelty, degrading treatment of Nigerians in their custody and other widespread torture [6]. Over the years, SARS officers have profiled young Nigerians, mostly males, based on fashion choices, tattoos and hairstyles and had these young people brutalized. They were also known to mount illegal road blocks, conduct unwarranted checks and searches, arrest and detain without warrant or trial, rape women, and extort young male Nigerians for driving exotic vehicles and using laptops and iPhones. Nigerians have shared both stories and video evidence of how officers of SARS engaged in kidnapping, murder, theft, rape, torture, unlawful arrests, humiliation, unlawful detention, extrajudicial killings and extortion of Nigerian citizens. A large section of the victims of the abuses of SARS have been young male Nigerians. Also, Amnesty International (2020) documented about 82 cases of abuses and extrajudicial killings by SARS. This figure is probably conservative at best. The objective of the campaign was to catalyze mass action against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) set up to respond to armed robberies and violent crime [7].

Generally, on social media, a lot of young Nigerians recounted gory stories of their encounters with the squad, with some reporting cases of brutality, abduction, extortion, extrajudicial killings and false imprisonment. These stories corroborate a 2020 Amnesty International (AI) report detailing patterns of human rights violations committed by SARS. SARS in their operations are known to wear plain clothes and carrying assault weapons. On Tuesday 20th October 2020, in Jos, Plateau State, while the protest was on-

going, thugs hauled the Jos city biggest market, Terminus, where they burned cars, hauled shops and attacked unarmed EndSARS protesters.

The campaign, which adopted a mix of online and offline strategies as in social action method, was popularly known on social media as #EndSARS. Over ten thousand Nigerians signed a petition and submitted it to the National Assembly calling for the unit's disbandment, citing various abuses against Nigerian youths. The major demand of the protest was the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) due to continued extrajudicial executions and extortion by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) with a long record of abuses and demand for good and accountable governance in the country [7]. Although efforts were made by the National Assembly, the National Human Rights Commission, the Police Chief, and even the Vice President, but nothing much was achieved. Coupled with this, the Police Act, which was adopted in 1943, leaves broad discretionary powers in the hands of police officers [8].

Following the inability of government to effectively ban SARS in response to the demand of Nigerians, footage of alleged SARS officers shooting a young Nigerian and driving off in his car emerged on 3rd October 2020 on social media. This sparked a nationwide movement and a global phenomenon. Thus, by 7th of October, 2020, nationwide protests led by young Nigerians had started in several cities. The protests were peaceful but the Nigerian Police Force began throwing teargas and shooting at unarmed protesters. The outcome was serious injuries and death of some protesters in several cities across the country [9].

The reality and true significance of the #EndSARS protest has finally dawned on Nigerians and the global community - #EndSARS was not just a protest against police brutality but a desperate lashing out by the Nigerian youth against a long history of government's failures to make Nigeria a livable society generally and to achieve genuine youth development in particular. According to Omokolade, the African Department of the International Monetary Fund attributed the civil unrest in Nigeria, spiked by the peaceful #EndSARS protest to the vulnerable state of the Nigerian economy [10]. The Board blamed the civil unrest and the social instability in the Nation on the economic difficulties in the country as well as Nigeria's economy low growth prospect. IMF reiterated that the protest in the country is not just against police brutality, but also unemployment, poverty. The Department explained that the difficult event that followed since the wake of the decline in oil prices in 2015-16 in Nigeria has made economic prospects low in the country, and this dislocation has exerted pressure on standards of living, which fueled the protest.

The #EndSARS protests elicited global sympathy and support, with world leaders such as United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres and United States and the then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeting in support. Other political figures and celebrities also used the hashtag or referenced the movement to either directly support the protests or demand an end to the government crackdown on protestors. These included former United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, U.S. President Joe Biden, boxing heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua, Arsenal footballer Mesut Ozil, and

American rapper Kanye West. For several days in October, the hashtag #EndSARS was the number one trending topic on global Twitter with Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey launching a special emoji for the movement [11].

Social action, as a method of professional social work practice, is an organized effort to change or improve social and economic institutions through organization and mobilization of the community people. Every profession has a tested body of knowledge, which includes principles, techniques, methods, procedures, tools and terminology of its own. Unlike other social work methods, social action emphasizes on long-term essential changes in established social institutions. Social action covers movements of social, religious and political reform, social legislation, racial and social justice, human rights, freedom and civic liberty. Previously social action was considered as a tool within the field of community organization, but now it has been considered as a separate technique of social work and as such a fourth process [12].

### **Statement of the problem**

The End SARS is a decentralized social movement, and series of mass protests in line with the social action method against police brutality in Nigeria. The slogan calls for the disbanding of the Special Anti- Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the country police with a long record of abuses. The protests which take its name from the slogan started in 2017 as a Twitter campaign using the hashtag #EndSARS to demand the disbanding of the unit by the Nigeria Police force because of their brutality of the Special Anti- Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the country police with a long record of abuses. After experiencing revitalization in October 2020 following more revelations of the abuses of the unit, mass demonstrations occurred throughout the major cities of Nigeria, accompanied by vociferous outrage on social media platforms. About 28 million tweets bearing the hashtag have been accumulated on Twitter alone. In addition, there were millions of other reactions on Instagram and facebook against the brutality of the Special Anti- Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the country police with a long record of abuses. Solidarity protests and demonstrations by Nigerians in diaspora and sympathizers occurred in many major cities of the world. The protests in line with the social action method are notable for its patronage by a demographic that is made of entirely young Nigerians. The movement has since expanded to include demands for good and accountable governance. Within a few days of renewed protests, on 11 October 2020, the Nigerian Police Force announced that it was dissolving the unit with immediate effect. The move was widely received as a triumph of the demonstrations. However, it was noted in many quarters that similar announcements had been made in recent years to pacify the public without the unit actually being disbanded, and that the government had merely planned to reassign and review SARS officers to medical centres rather than disband the unit entirely. Protests have continued accordingly, and the Nigerian government has maintained a pattern of violent repression including the killing of demonstrators. There have been international demonstrations in solidarity with those happening in the country, and the movement has also grown increasingly critical of Muhammadu Buhari's government response to the protests.

The #EndSARS protest of 2020 marked a watershed moment in Nigeria's democratic struggle, as thousands of youths mobilized through digital platforms to demand an end to police brutality, especially by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The movement gained global visibility and forced the government to announce reforms, yet it also exposed deep fractures between citizens and the state [13]. Several studies have examined the digital dimensions of #EndSARS, including the role of social media in organizing protests, shaping collective narratives, and sustaining youth activism [14]. Others have highlighted the protest's cultural significance in constructing memories of grief, resistance, and political awakening among young Nigerians [15], [16].

While these scholarly efforts provide valuable insights, they have primarily focused on the protest as a communication, political, or cultural phenomenon, leaving out the social work perspective. Specifically, little is known about how the social action method—a core approach in social work that emphasizes empowerment, alliance-building, and systemic change—was or could have been applied to the #EndSARS struggle. The social action model, as described by Zastrow, is rooted in enabling marginalized groups to confront structural inequalities by organizing collectively and engaging in advocacy to challenge oppressive systems [17]. This aligns strongly with the demands of #EndSARS, yet the intersection has not been empirically investigated.

Existing Nigerian social work literature suggests that social workers can play a critical role in bridging communication gaps between government and citizens, advocating for the welfare of disadvantaged groups, and mobilizing communities for collective action [18]. However, these studies remain largely theoretical, without concrete analysis of how social workers engaged with, or might have engaged with, the youth-driven #EndSARS protests. In particular, there is a gap in examining how social action methods could provide structured intervention in sustaining advocacy, strengthening civic engagement, and translating protest energy into institutional reforms.

Furthermore, although digital activism has been widely explored in connection to #EndSARS, there is insufficient scholarship linking such online mobilization to formal social work practice [19]. The absence of this analysis risks overlooking the potential of social workers in supporting grassroots social movements and ensuring that protest outcomes are not short-lived. Equally, while scholars acknowledge that #EndSARS stimulated political consciousness among Nigerian youths, there is limited inquiry into how social work interventions might institutionalize this awareness into long-term civic participation and social change [20]. In summary, although the #EndSARS protests have been analyzed through political, communication, and cultural lenses, there remains an urgent need to interrogate them from a social work standpoint. This study therefore addresses the gap by investigating the relevance and application of the social action method to the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, with a view to highlighting how social workers could contribute to empowering youth, sustaining advocacy, and achieving systemic reform.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Theoretical Framework

#### Structural functional theory

The main principles of the theory have been adopted in this paper to analyze social action method and EndSars protest on the Nigerian society from the social work perspective. Structural functional theory was developed by Talcott Parsons (1902-79), an American Sociologist in the twentieth century. Other contributors to this theory include: Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim. According to functionalism, society is a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. For example, each of the social institutions contributes important functions for society: Family provides a context for reproducing, nurturing, and socializing children; education offers a way to transmit a society's skills, knowledge, and culture to its youth; politics provides a means of governing members of society; economics provides for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services; and religion provides moral guidance and an outlet for worship of a higher power [21], [22].

The functionalist perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of society by focusing on how each part influences and is influenced by other parts. Functionalists use the terms functional and dysfunctional to describe the effects of social elements on society. Elements of society are functional if they contribute to social stability and dysfunctional if they disrupt social stability. Some aspects of society can be both functional and dysfunctional. For example, For example, protests against government policies and programmes are dysfunctional in that they are associated with physical violence, arson, looting, destruction and loss of property and fear and even death. But according to Durkheim and other functionalists, protests are also functional for society because they lead to heightened awareness of shared moral bonds and increased social cohesion.

Functionalists posit that there is value consensus in every social reality. They believe that there is general agreement by members of a society on what is desirable, worthwhile and worthless. People share consensus on the values, norms and beliefs of a society. A high degree of consensus in a society whether it is democratic or communist binds members together to form an integrated and cohesive unit. Functionalists also assume that societies and phenomena are pervaded by stability. In as much as the theory assumes that a certain degree of order and stability is necessary for the survival of social system, it does not suggest that the society would always be conflict free.

Applying this theory to the topic under study, the Endsars protests affected not just the SARs arm of the Police but the entire Police, and Nigerians. The Police are supposed to work for the betterment of the populace but its inability to provide security for all and sundry prompted the protest. Thus, the theory explains the role the EndSars protest plays in ensuring reforms in the Nigerian police force for a better security architecture and robust economic development. From the functionalist perspective therefore, the EndSars protest which is an agitation in relation to the function of the police

as an agency is likened to a structure that contributes to smooth functioning of the well-being of Nigerians by ensuring a better police with government agencies, ministries and departments. As the body has essential organs, each with a specific function in the body, just like other institutions of the family, economy, politics, education and religion, police as an organization in the society also has its own function to perform. Its working will help maintain the smooth functioning of other institutions in the society and particularly the smooth functioning of the Nigerian society, but its failure culminated in the Endsars protests.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **History of Protests in Nigeria**

Activism is not new to Nigerians. Prior to independence, social protests were rampant as activists challenged social issues like colonialism, slavery, rising inflation, unemployment and corruption. These protests took various forms such as print, radio, music and of course, the streets. For instance, during the colonial era, the West African Pilot newspaper was a vigorous critic of the colonial regime. The reaction of the British Colonial Office was expected; they reprimanded the newspaper for supporting indigenous causes [23], [24]. Despite this, the paper had some successes. Prior to the emergence of the West African Pilot, there was IweIrohin newspaper that acted as a strong weapon against the colonial masters. in the fight to deliver Nigerians and indeed West Africans from foreign domination. Basically, the IweIrohin newspaper was already proof of the transformative power of citizen-driven protests, in the form of journalism. Decades later, during the 1929 Aba Women's Riots (as the British named it), the country witnessed 'sitting' as a major protest tactic. The female protesters would dance and sing about their grievances outside the homes of warrant chiefs and Native court officials. In some cases, they would go as far as plastering the properties with mud [25].

These protests relied heavily on the persistence of the Aba women, knowledge of their culture and a commitment to non-violence, at least on the part of the women. These riots were not in vain, and are remembered as significant markers of women-led protests in the country. They led to significant successes against the British government; include reducing taxes and the resignation of a number of local stooges appointed by colonial authorities. Noticeably, IweIrohin and the Aba Women's Riots are known as effective and non-violent protests. In the case of Aba, the police, unfortunately, killed over 50 women despite their peaceful approach. Still, what these two events showed was that peaceful protesters attract more sympathy from audiences because they do not carry the collateral damage that goes with the violent protests we have seen in Nigeria's history [26], [27].

### **What is #EndSARS?**

#EndSARS started as a call for the disbandment of Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigerian Police Force that has earned notoriety for its brutality and human rights violations. The hashtag was first used in 2018 to raise awareness of allegations of violence and exploitation by SARS officials. The government announced structural changes to SARS, but the alleged human rights violations and

exploitation continued. In the middle of this, reports of an unprovoked shooting of a boy in the streets of Delta State by SARS operatives were shared on social media. Although the Nigerian Police denied the shooting in this particular case, it was not enough to quell public anger as more videos of police shootings were shared across social media platforms. Celebrities and activists rallied for support on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook and, in a matter of days, protesters lined the streets of Lagos and Abuja demanding an end to SARS. Pressured by the publicity that the protests had generated, the Nigerian government swiftly announced the disbandment of SARS. This move, however, was not enough to appease the protesters in light of similar pronouncements made previously by the government. For instance, in December 2017, the Inspector General of Police (IGP) announced that SARS had been banned from conducting stop and search operations following several reports of harassment. This ban was publicly re-announced by the IGP in 2018 and 2020, reflecting the ineffectiveness of previous orders. Similarly, in 2018, Nigeria's acting president announced an overhaul of SARS, stating that the National Human Rights Commission would investigate cases of abuse. This statement was followed shortly by the announcement of a centralized FSARS (Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad) which would come under the supervision of the Inspector General of Police as opposed to the previous version which was under state Commissioners of Police. Mere weeks later, the IGP announced the disbandment of FSARS, stating that the unit would go back to being decentralized and under the command of state commissioners. In light of past practices and disappointments, protestors added to their list of demands, calling for compensation of victims of SARS brutality, retraining of police officers, and trials of indicted SARS officials.

### **Social action as a Method of Social Work**

Social action was first coined by Mary E. Richmond in 1922, and it is the mass betterment through propaganda and social legislation. Social action is a new introduction in the professional social work practice. Though its relevance is often felt in the field situations, social workers do not practice this method quite frequently. The inherent theme behind social action is re-adjustment of the social institutions and redistribution of power and resources for social justice and empowerment of the community. As a method of social work, social action mobilizes the general population to bring about structural changes in the social system. Also the relation of social action with other methods of social work is very important to understand. Social action process heavily rests on other social work methods like group work and community organization. In fact social action comes into the picture when people's needs and problems remain unmet and unsettled through other methods of social work. Social action seems to be a step forward to community organization.

Social action entails confrontation with authorities and sometimes involves taking difficult positions. Social action as different from other methods of social work employs certain strategies and tactics as tools to attain its goals. They are negotiation, persuasion, competition, disruption, collaboration, bargain, boycotts; sit-ins, strikes, marches, fraternization, tax-refusal, picketing, etc. It could be said to be a form of radical social

work. The main focus is to increase political pressure on decision making processes so that oppressed groups can receive equitable services resources and power. However, it is not employed by social workers frequently. It aims at desirable social action and social progress and it is used to tackle controversial issues aimed at bringing about structural changes in the social system or to prevent adverse changes.

As a method of social work, it adheres to the philosophy of professional social work which does not blame people for deficiency or problem; believes in the dignity and worth of human beings; rejects the doctrine of laissez-faire and survival of the fittest; adopts a commitment to the capacity of all people to take action through a non-elitist highly skilled process; and facilitate members to make choices and take action for themselves. This calls for skills used in combination with professional social work ethics and principles.

Based on this, there five methods of social action. The first is the principle of credibility building which means that the community people must have faith and confidence in the social worker. Secondly, there is the legitimization; this refers to that the social worker ensuring that the people believe in their actions to achieve legitimate set goals. Thirdly, dramatization involves strategies like slogans, emotionally powerful speeches, and rallies to create dramatic effects. In addition, there is the dual approach. This is a combination of confrontation and constructive developmental activities. Besides this, there are the multiple strategies involving use of different ways and means. The last, but not the least is manifold programmes aimed at tackling social, economic, cultural issues, among others (Siddiqui, 1984; Moorthy, 1966; Mishra, 1992; Antony & Kaushik, n.d.).

Social workers practicing social action are versed in skills of rapport building (relational); objective analysis of social situations and problems (analytical and research); ability to use other methods of social work like case work, group work, social welfare administration adequately and appropriately (intervention); knowledge to handle organizations, coordinate and collaborate with various groups and local leaders (managerial); effective verbal communication (communication); and be able to train local leaders for mass mobilization and confrontation with the authorities (training).

Social action is employed by groups and organizations which seek to alter institutional policies or to make changes in the distribution of power. It is an organized effort to change or improve social and economic conditions. The objective of social action is the proper shaping and development of the socio-cultural environment in which a richer and fuller life may be possible for all citizens [28], [29]. Its goals are prevention of needs; solution of mass problems; improvement in mass conditions; influencing institutions, policies, and practices; introduction of new mechanisms or programmes; redistribution of power and resources (human, material and moral), decision-making, effect on thought and action structure and improvement in health, education and welfare policies [23]. This calls for skills used in combination with professional social work ethics and principles.

Social action rejects the doctrine of laissez-faire and survival of the fittest. The unfit person has the same fundamental rights as do the more fit, and the rich or powerful is not necessarily fit, and nor a poor or weak is indeed unfit. It adopts a commitment to the capacity of all the people to take action to improve their life circumstances. It grounds this action on a process of open participation in which people, preferably collectively, explore the underlying social issues of their life situations as the foundation for action. Practitioners do not lead, but, through a non-elitist, highly skilled process, they facilitate members in making choices and taking action for themselves.

Like any other method of professional social work, social action does have certain principles, details of which are given in the previous unit. These principles are mentioned here. Firstly, the community people must have faith and confidence in the social worker (principle of credibility building). The social actionist or social worker should make the people believe that their actions to achieve the set goals are legitimate (principle of legitimization). Certain strategies adopted like slogans, emotional powerful speeches, rallies that create dramatic effects in social action (principle of dramatization). Social action does not depend on a single strategy; rather it adopts many different ways and means to achieve the goal (principle of multiple strategies). Social action must not rest only on conflictual activities with authorities. It should also concentrate on constructive developmental activities along with confrontation (principle of dual approach). Social action does not confine itself to a single aspect of the social issue. Rather, it emphasizes on programmes having multi-prong aspects like social, economic, cultural, etc. (principle of manifold programmes). The necessity of the social action is premised on the fact that figures from the National Bureau of Statistics indicate that there are between 40 million and 135 million unemployed, underemployed or disenchanted youths in Nigeria who are either high or semi-skilled with a significant number of them uneducated and unskilled.

Social work is an organized profession that extends helping hands to an individual, group and community, for their betterment as well as sustaining them to help themselves by adopting various professional strategies. Disadvantaged sections of the society like: down-trodden, unemployed Nigerian youths who embarked upon the endsars protests etc. are considered to be needy of the profession; Social worker can provide psychological counseling, guidance and assistance in the form of helping the people to help themselves. The codes of ethics of the U.S.-based National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) affirm the profession's responsibility is to pursue social change and human rights, particularly on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed people, and toward the liberation of all people [24]. Similarly, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting body for social work programs in the United States maintains that "the purpose of social work purpose is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons, locally and globally" [13].

The IFSW, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) proposed that in order to work toward this collective mission, social work as a profession and educational structure should “advocate for a new world order which makes a reality of respect for human rights and dignity and a different structure of human relationships” [16]. The values implicit and explicit in these statements make it clear that, as one of the most critical human rights issues of this era, human trafficking should be of central concern to the profession and to social work education transnational.

### **Causes of EndSars Protest in Nigeria**

In their study of world protests between 2006 and 2013, for example, Ortiz, Saenz, Burke, and Berrada found out that a significant percentage of world protests, especially in Third World countries in the past decade have been against neo-liberal reforms, including the privatization of public enterprises, full-scale deregulation of public utilities and the implementation of various forms of austerity measures [17]. According to Rao the protesters in the Third World countries against neo-liberal reforms seemed desirous of a state that was robust enough to be able to stand up to, and refuse, the dictates of powerful international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, whose structural adjustment prescriptions had stripped away the minimalist safety nets of overwhelmed but aspiring welfare states. The protests against neo-liberal reforms according to Ortiz et al demanded reforms such as increased government funding of social services, public utilities and reduction in corruption especially in the petroleum industry controlled by shylock and oligarchic marketers [2].

Thus, protest serves as a way of reminding those in power about the inconsistencies and horrors in the lives of marginalized groups. Several causes have been attributed to the emergence of the Endsars protest, noting also that while SARS is notorious for its brutality, human rights abuses by security forces are not confined to the NPF. In 2015, Amnesty International published a report which detailed a series of atrocities committed by the Nigerian military. Human rights violations by security forces date back to Nigeria’s military dictatorships, when security agencies such as the police were established to safeguard military regimes rather than to protect and serve communities. Notwithstanding the advent of democratic rule in 1999, this mindset remains deeply ingrained. Police officers and military personnel have been deployed to intimidate peaceful protesters as well as arrest journalists and other critics of government [5].

Another major driver of the EndSars protests is the human rights abuses committed by SARS and other security operatives which is the lack of accountability for their actions. In many situations, security operatives who violate human rights are shielded by the police hierarchy; victims are afraid to speak out for fear of being targeted again. A June 2020 Amnesty report stated that the government has failed to prosecute a single SARS operative since the National Assembly passed the Anti-Torture Act of 2017 [8]. Also, the enabling legislation for the NPF, the Police Act, is obsolete. The act, which was adopted in 1943, leaves broad discretionary powers in the hands of police officers.

These allow officers to perform warrantless searches and make arrests based on mere suspicion of guilt or even intent to commit an offence. This is the crux of many allegations against SARS: victims' phones have been seized without a warrant, while others have been arrested for their tattoos or dread-locks.

Scholars have argued that social media has become central to many protests that have occurred in the past decade [5]. Social media can play a key role in mobilization because it facilitates access to large amounts of contacts, generates collective identities, and serves as a site for information distributions (Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman, 2012). Scholars are, however, quick to point out that social media does not necessarily create new forms of protest or alter traditional organizing in fundamental ways. As Valenzuela et al contend that activism should not be restricted to the online space. In other words, social media tends to support or facilitate traditional protest forms [10]. In addition to using Twitter and Facebook to coordinate protests and to denounce police violence, protests used social media as an alternative information source, a space to publish a counter-narrative to the version being portrayed in pro-government propaganda channels.

### **The Government's Response**

In response to the #EndSARS protests, the government swiftly announced that it was disbanding SARS and replacing it with a new Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team. This announcement further provoked protestors who were concerned that SARS personnel would simply be drafted into the new SWAT team. Rather than ending the protests, the announcement intensified public demonstrations across several states in Nigeria. On October 20, 2020, the Nigerian government cracked down on the protesters. The crackdown was preceded by the declaration of curfews in nine states across the country. One of these states was Lagos, the commercial hub of Nigeria. At nightfall, the Nigerian army opened fire on peaceful protesters at Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos, the symbolic centre of the protest. Videos of soldiers shooting and protesters trying to revive fallen compatriots were broadcast on Instagram Live and viewed in real time by hundreds of thousands. Forty-nine persons were reported to have died in clashes across the country [21].

### **Immediate aftermath**

The police crackdown was followed by riots in Lagos with government structures razed and shops looted. The violence and looting soon spread to other parts of the country, causing several states to declare curfews. Media outlets reported that "hoodlums" had hijacked the protests and were looting stores and malls. Several warehouses across the country housing COVID-19 relief materials were raided. The looting of stores for food again brought to the forefront the economic plight of many Nigerians – in 2018, Nigeria was reported to have overtaken India as the poverty capital of the world with an estimated 90 million people (about 50% of the population) living in extreme poverty, i.e. on less than \$1.90 a day. Critics faulted the government for simply storing relief materials and failing to distribute them to the needy.

## **A Human Rights Solution**

#EndSARS has morphed from a protest against police brutality to a movement for social justice and government reforms. Indeed, the protests have been described as a “vector” for broader dissatisfaction with Nigeria’s political class. Protests and riots have continued unabated for weeks. The important issue moving forward is how to adequately address the issues raised by the protesters as well as those that have unravelled during the protests. The disbandment of SARS and restitution of victims are necessary starting points. The people, as shown through their dissatisfaction with the mere disbandment of SARS, are calling for more. The government needs to develop a human rights policy approach to addressing these issues. Firstly, there is the need to address the systemic abuse of civil and political rights by the police and other government agencies. The government needs to commence intensive human rights training for all law enforcement officers. Officers should also be regularly appraised on their human rights compliance and erring officers prosecuted. In order to effectively protect the rights to life and freedom from torture, the government must ensure that it treats reports of violence, torture, and extrajudicial killings with the gravity they deserve. Such reports must be duly investigated through transparent means such as public inquiries and inquests, and victims should be adequately compensated. On the right to fair trial, the government must also initiate reforms to ensure that suspects are not detained without trial. The right to privacy can also be better protected by the government taking a clear stand on routine stop and search operations which appear to be an avenue for extortion by the police.

This human rights approach may also be extended to address calls for social justice that has trailed the protests, especially in the aftermath of massive lootings across the country. The Nigerian government can respond to these calls by working to protect basic socioeconomic rights. As things stand, the oil-rich Nigerian state is shielded from any form of judicial accountability by the provision in Chapter II of the country’s constitution which states that socioeconomic rights are mere “objectives” and “directive principles.” Indeed the Nigerian Court of Appeal has interpreted this provision as meaning that socioeconomic rights are not legally enforceable and that the “arbiter” for any breach would be the legislature or the electorate. It has been suggested in the aftermath of the protests that the government prioritizes “pro-poor policies” such as investments in education and youth empowerment to engage the country’s teeming youths (aged below 30 years) that account for 70% of the total population. #EndSars was birthed by gross human rights violations and sheer disregard for human life. It is only reasonable that future policies make room for effective human rights protection to address the many problems the campaign has highlighted.

## **CONCLUSION**

**Fundamental Finding :** This study reveals that the EndSARS protest, initially peaceful, was a reaction to systemic police brutality, specifically by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), and while it led to the disbandment of SARS, it also brought

global attention to issues of police brutality, unemployment, and poverty in Nigeria. The protest demonstrated significant non-institutional outcomes, including heightened public concern for good governance and accountability. **Implication** : The study implies that systemic reforms, including police and justice system reforms, as well as addressing youth unemployment through small-scale business promotion, are essential for sustainable development and improving the overall socio-political climate in Nigeria. **Limitation** : The study primarily relies on secondary sources and reports, which may not fully capture the lived experiences of protesters or the detailed processes of governmental response. Additionally, the scope of the research does not explore the long-term effects of the protest on policy changes or economic outcomes. **Future Research** : Future studies could examine the long-term impact of the EndSARS protest on Nigerian governance, focusing on the effectiveness of implemented reforms and the role of civil society in ensuring accountability. Further research could also explore the broader economic implications, including the potential for small-scale business promotion to address unemployment and poverty.

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