



## ASSESSMENT OF THE USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN ADVOCATING FOR THE RIGHTS OF VULNERABLE GROUPS IN OWERRI METROPOLIS

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### ABSTRACT

Advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups in Nigeria is crucial given the numerous human rights violations and social injustices faced by marginalized communities in the country. This study aims to assess the effectiveness of using digital technologies in advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups in southeast Nigeria. The theoretical framework for this study was drawn on the concept of digital advocacy. This study adopted the survey research method, with the tools of questionnaire, employing the multistage sampling technique. Findings from the study revealed that to fully harness the potential of digital advocacy in Nigeria, it is essential to address the challenges identified in this study, requiring a multi-faceted approach that involves government, civil society, and the private sector, it recommends that encouraging collaboration and partnerships between civil society, government, and the private sector in order to optimize the digital platform usage for advocacy.

**Keywords:** Digital technologies, advocacy, rights of vulnerable groups, south east Nigeria

### Introduction

Advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups in Southeast Nigeria has been a pressing issue for many years and these groups, which include women, children, and minority ethnic communities (Nwozor et al, 2022; Onwuegbuna et al, 2022; Aladi et al., 2022), often face systemic discrimination and human rights abuses.

In recent years, digital technologies have emerged as a powerful tool for advocacy and raising awareness about the challenges faced by vulnerable groups in the region, with the ability to reach a wider audience and amplify their voices (Sadiq et al, 2022), Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram have enabled advocacy organizations to connect with supporters, share powerful stories and images, and mobilize public opinion on important human rights issues, helping to raise awareness about the challenges faced by vulnerable groups and push for policy changes that protect their rights (Nwachukwu, & Umejiesi, 2018).

Technology has the potential to amplify the voices of marginalized communities, provide a platform for advocacy, and facilitate communication and coordination among activists and organizations, as Ozo and Nwafor (2019), revealed that digital advocacy campaigns were effective in raising awareness about the rights of vulnerable groups in Nigeria, analyzing the impact of a social media campaign launched by a local NGO to raise awareness about the rights of women and girls in rural communities, using hashtags, images, and personal stories to engage with followers and spark conversations about gender equality and women's rights, findings showed that the campaign reached a wide audience, generated significant media coverage, and sparked public debate about the need for greater protections for women and girls in Nigeria.

Nwachukwu and Umejiesi (2018) focused on the use of digital technologies in advocating for the rights of minority ethnic communities in Southeast Nigeria revealed that social media platforms were effective in mobilizing support for these groups and raising awareness about their struggles and by sharing personal stories, videos, and images, advocacy organizations were able to humanize the experiences of

minority ethnic communities and galvanize public support for their rights which in turn, put pressure on policymakers to take action and address the systemic discrimination faced by these groups.

The use of digital technologies in advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups in Southeast Nigeria has the potential to be a powerful tool for positive change as some many groups such as Christian Fellowship and care foundation, Foundation For Environmental Rights, Advocacy & Development(FENRAD), Women and Children Development Initiative, Habitat Care and Protection Initiative, Centre for Development & Civic Education (CDCE), Better Community Life Initiative (BECOLIN), Human Rights & Conflict Resolution Centre (HRCRC),Development & Integrity Intervention Goal Foundation (DIG Nig), New Century Initiative, Development Impact Pathfinders initiative (Devimpath) and soon have adopted these digital tools as past studies have shown that digital advocacy campaigns can raise awareness, mobilize support, and influence policy decisions that protect the rights and well-being of vulnerable populations in the region.

However, there are also challenges and limitations to consider, such as digital literacy and the credibility of information shared online. Moving forward, it will be important for advocacy organizations to continue to leverage digital technologies strategically and responsibly to amplify the voices of vulnerable groups and drive meaningful social change. This study aims to assess the effectiveness of using digital technologies in advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups in southeast Nigeria.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Assess impact of digital advocacy on the visibility and effectiveness of advocacy efforts for vulnerable groups in southeast Nigeria.
2. Identify challenges and limitations faced by organizations using digital technologies for advocacy in southeast Nigeria.
3. Explore strategies for overcoming these challenges and maximizing the potential of digital technologies for advocacy.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the potential benefits of digital advocacy, there are also challenges and limitations to consider, one key challenge identified in past studies is the issue of digital literacy and access as many vulnerable groups in Southeast Nigeria may lack access to the internet or be unfamiliar with how to use social media platforms effectively, limiting the reach and impact of digital advocacy campaigns, particularly in rural or marginalized communities where internet connectivity is limited as seen in a study by Eze and Onwubolu (2017), who revealed that fake news and misinformation can undermine the credibility of digital advocacy efforts and erode trust in advocacy organizations, highlighting the importance of fact-checking and verifying information before sharing it online to ensure that advocacy messages are accurate and reliable.

Advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups in Nigeria is crucial given the numerous human rights violations and social injustices faced by marginalized communities in the country. However, traditional methods of advocacy are often limited in reach and impact and the use of digital technologies offers a powerful alternative that can amplify the voices of vulnerable groups, mobilize supporters, and raise awareness about human rights issues. Southeast Nigeria, in particular, has a history of marginalization and human rights abuses, making it a critical region for advocacy efforts and by assessing the use of digital technologies in advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups in southeast Nigeria, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the potential of technology in advancing human rights and social justice in the region.

## Literature Review

The use of digital technologies in advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups in southeast Nigeria is a topic of critical importance in today's rapidly evolving digital landscape and with the rise of digital platforms such as social media and mobile apps, advocacy organizations and activists have found new and innovative ways to raise awareness and mobilize support for marginalized communities (Nadkarni, & Prügl, 2021).

The limited access to technology and internet connectivity in the region, according to a report by the International Telecommunication Union, only 85.1% of the population in Nigeria has access to the internet, with rural areas experiencing even lower rates of connectivity, this digital divide presents a major barrier for advocacy organizations seeking to reach vulnerable groups and raise awareness about their rights (Hinings et al, 2018;).

The high cost of data and unreliable electricity supply further limit the ability of marginalized communities to access and engage with digital platforms. Furthermore, the spread of misinformation and fake news on social media platforms poses a significant challenge to advocacy efforts in southeast Nigeria (Fitzgerald et al, 2018).

In a country where social media is a primary source of information for many people, false narratives and propaganda can easily distort the message of advocacy campaigns and undermine the credibility of organizations working to promote the rights of vulnerable groups as lack of digital literacy among some members of the population also contributes to the spread of misinformation, making it difficult for advocacy organizations to effectively communicate with their target audience.

Despite these challenges, digital technologies offer numerous opportunities for advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups in southeast Nigeria, Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram provide advocacy organizations with a powerful tool for reaching a wide audience and mobilizing support for their cause with Hashtags and trending topics amplifying reach of advocacy campaigns, allowing them to gain visibility and spark conversations on a national and even international level(Bello, 2021).

For example, the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria used social media to raise awareness about police brutality and mobilize mass protests against the government. Additionally, digital technologies enable advocacy organizations to collect and analyze data on human rights violations and leverage evidence-based advocacy strategies to effect change. Platforms such as Ushahidi and Frontline SMS have been used to document and map incidents of violence and discrimination, providing valuable insights into the challenges faced by vulnerable groups in southeast Nigeria and this data-driven approach can help advocacy organizations identify key issues, target their interventions more effectively, and hold government officials and other stakeholders accountable for their actions.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on the concept of digital advocacy, which refers to the use of digital technologies such as social media, online platforms, and mobile apps to advocate for social change and promote the rights of marginalized groups based on the belief that digital technologies can amplify the voices of vulnerable populations, raise awareness about their issues, and mobilize support for their cause (Aladi et al., 2022). This theoretical framework is particularly relevant in the context of Southeast Nigeria, where vulnerable groups such as women, children, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities face significant challenges in accessing their rights and resources.

The use of digital technologies in advocacy efforts allows vulnerable groups to bypass traditional gatekeepers and communicate directly with a global audience. This empowerment can lead to increased visibility, recognition, and support for their cause. Additionally, digital technologies provide a platform for collaboration and networking among like-minded individuals and organizations, enabling the creation of virtual communities and coalitions that can work together to promote the rights of vulnerable populations.

Digital technologies offer a cost-effective and scalable way to reach a wide audience, including policymakers, international organizations, donors, and the general public and by leveraging social media platforms, online campaigns, and mobile apps, advocacy organizations can raise awareness about the challenges faced by vulnerable populations and mobilize support for their cause, providing a platform for marginalized groups to tell their own stories, share their experiences, and highlight their priorities and by amplifying their voices through blogs, videos, and social media posts, vulnerable populations can challenge stereotypes, combat stigma, and advocate for policy changes that address their specific needs and this grassroots activism can build momentum for social change and ultimately lead to greater recognition of the rights of vulnerable groups in Southeast Nigeria.

Furthermore, digital technologies enable real-time monitoring and evaluation of advocacy campaigns, allowing organizations to track the impact of their efforts, measure outcomes, and adapt their strategies as needed and by analyzing data on social media engagement, website traffic, and online donations, advocacy organizations can assess the effectiveness of their messaging, identify gaps in their outreach, and refine their advocacy tactics for maximum impact (Onyebuchi et al., 2024).

## Methodology

The descriptive survey research design was used in this investigation (Macaulay et al., 2021) using the tool of questionnaire. The residents of Owerri metropolis constitute the population of this study, and according to the World Population Review (2023) data bank, the population of Owerri is projected to be 983,352. Wimmer and Dominick's online sample size calculator was used to determine a sample size of 384 with a 95% confidence level and a 5% error limit.

Utilizing the multistage sample technique, copies of the questionnaire were given out to residents of Owerri Metropolis in Imo State, having been separated into three areas: Owerri North, Owerri West, and Owerri Municipal. Two communities from each local government area were purposefully chosen, purposefully selection of two communities each from local government areas that made up the Owerri metropolis was done by the researchers. The researchers at random distributed the questionnaire proportionately to community members ( $384/6 = 64$ ), after the collection of questionnaires, 368 was found valid for the study.

## Data Analysis

This section focused on the data presentation and analysis.

### 1. Assess impact of digital advocacy on the visibility and effectiveness of advocacy efforts for vulnerable groups in southeast Nigeria.

Item	High	Moderate	Low	Can't say	Total
Impact of digital advocacy on the visibility and effectiveness of advocacy efforts for vulnerable groups in Owerri metropolis	181 (49.1%)	105(28.5%)	62(16.8%)	20(5.4%)	368

**Source:** Field survey, 2024

The impact of digital advocacy on the visibility and effectiveness of advocacy efforts for vulnerable groups in Owerri cannot be overemphasized as many of the respondents' exposure level to advocacy efforts by both government, private organizations and NGOs for vulnerable groups in Owerri are mainly through different digital media platforms.

## 2. Identify challenges and limitations faced by organizations using digital technologies for advocacy in southeast Nigeria

Item	Government regulations	Peoples' responses level	Lack of technical know how	Fund	Total
challenges and limitations faced by organizations using digital technologies for advocacy in southeast Nigeria	69 (18.7%)	93(25.2%)	47(12.7%)	159(43.2%)	368

**Source:** Field survey, 2024

Different challenges and limitations are faced by human right organizations using digital technologies who are invested in human right advocacy in Nigeria, Owerri to be precise as the respondents were of the view that these organizations were faced with a lot of challenges and issues ranging from government interferences and regulations which often gag advocacy effects, the low responses or interest of the target audience is quite disheartening as many respondents are not quite aware of many of these advocacy organizations who are invested in human right protection and preservation.

## 3. Explore strategies for overcoming these challenges and maximizing the potential of digital technologies for advocacy

Item	Seek for grants and investments	Invest in human resource building	Invest in more target audience related programs	Cohabit more with government and regulations	Total
Strategies for overcoming these challenges and maximizing the potential of digital technologies for advocacy	79 (21.4%)	92(25%)	126(34.2%)	87(23.6%)	368

**Source:** Field survey, 2024

From analysis of the table above, the respondents were of the view that although many challenges handicaps the overall positive and wide range impact of different advocacy programs and strategies in Nigeria south east region in particular, different strategies for overcoming these challenges and maximizing the potential of digital technologies for advocacy such as Invest in human resource building to build technical know-how level of service providers, Seek for grants and investments as these ventures can be quite expensive and pocket testing, Cohabit more with government and regulations as no one can survive without the law and as such none is above it, but more importantly is the strategy of Invest in more target audience related programs as it is the bedrock of any venture.

## Discussion of Findings

The impact of digital advocacy on the visibility and effectiveness of advocacy efforts for vulnerable groups in southeast Nigeria cannot be overemphasized as many of the respondents' exposure level to advocacy efforts by both government, private organizations and NGOs for vulnerable groups in southeast Nigeria are mainly through different digital media such as online forums, focus groups, online programmes, digitalized documentaries, websites shows, live broadcast, online editorials and so on and as such the visibility and

effectiveness of different advocacy efforts for vulnerable groups in southeast Nigeria is critical, this in line with a study by Nwachukwu and Umejiesi (2018) who revealed that social media platforms were effective in mobilizing support for marginalized groups, raising awareness about their struggles and by sharing personal stories, videos, and images, advocacy organizations were able to humanize the experiences of minority ethnic communities and galvanize public support for their rights which in turn, put pressure on policymakers to take action and address the systemic discrimination faced by these groups.

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Ozo and Nwafor (2019), supported these assertion as seen in their study that revealed that digital advocacy campaigns were effective in raising awareness about the rights of vulnerable groups in Nigeria, by analyzing the impact of a social media campaign launched by a local NGO to raise awareness about the rights of women and girls in rural communities, using hashtags, images, and personal stories to engage with followers and spark conversations about gender equality and women's rights

## Conclusion

Digital advocacy in Nigeria is confronted with numerous challenges, ranging from inadequate infrastructure, limited access to digital technologies, to restrictive laws and regulations. The proliferation of digital technologies has enabled Nigerians to connect with each other and with the world, facilitating the dissemination of information, the mobilization of support, and the amplification of marginalized voices.

To fully harness the potential of digital advocacy in Nigeria, it is essential to address the challenges identified in this study, requiring a multi-faceted approach that involves government, civil society, and the private sector. Ultimately, the future of digital advocacy in Nigeria depends on the ability of stakeholders to work together to address the challenges and harness the opportunities presented by digital technologies. By doing so, Nigeria can unlock the full potential of digital advocacy to drive social change, promote human rights, and strengthen democratic governance.

## Recommendation

This study therefore recommends that;

1. Investing in digital infrastructure and human resources to improve access to digital technologies.
2. Providing training and capacity-building programs for civil society organizations activists and even service users who are the target of these programmes.
3. Encouraging collaboration and partnerships between civil society, government, and the private sector to optimize the digital platform usage for advocacy.

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