The Executive Director YIAGA AFRICA, Samson Itodo yesterday charged journalists across electronic, print and online media to invest time and energy in data-driven journalism ahead of the 2019 general elections saying that quality of elections is best analyzed using credible and accurate data. Mr Itodo said this on Saturday during YIAGA AFRICA’s Watching The Vote (WTV) media roundtable for the 2019 general elections and the Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) for the 2019 Presidential elections.

Cross-Section of Journalists at the WTV media RoundTable with Journalists in Abuja

He said, the 2019 election is a crucial election in the history of Nigeria and to ensure that the result reflect the voting realities, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and the media need to revolt against any attempt to manipulate the election. According to him, YIAGA AFRICA’s WTV, the largest citizen movement committed to credible elections will be deploying citizen observers across all 774 Local Government Areas in Nigeria. He said, YIAGA Africa is sounding a note of warning that it will expose any attempt to manipulate the election.

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“So there will be no need to take to violence or cause any form of instability because there is a methodology that can provide evidence,” he said. Itodo expressed optimism that the deployment of the PVT for the election would help to boost citizen confidence in the electoral process. He advised Nigeria journalists to embrace the global trend of data driven elections reportage as they covered activities related to the forthcoming general elections. He said that data reporting and investigative journalism on the forthcoming elections were important as there are already a lot of misinformation and fake news in the public. He said that the only way to counter fake news and misinformation is by using data and evidence, saying gone are those days when people focus more on non-data reporting of an election.

During the roundtable which saw about 40 journalists from electronic, print and online media, YIAGA AFRICA’s Watching The Vote management team shared plans on its election observation deployment plan for the 2019 Presidential elections. According to the WTV project director, Cynthia Mbamalu, “what is important for us is that before the elections, we put all our plans as an institution that will deploy observers and ensure we have better partnership with election stakeholders.” She stated that as part of YIAGA AFRICA WTV initiative, 882 observers were deployed to all 774 local government areas to observe pre-election proceedings, while 3,030 polling unit observers will be deployed across the 1.515 of the 120,000 polling units across the country. She also revealed that WTV will deploy Observers to 46 voting points in the Federal Capital Territory Abuja.

Samson Itodo speaking with Editors at the WTV roundtable in Abuja

WTV pre-election observation reports were also analysed during the session while the WTV deployment for the 2019 election and media reportage of PVT findings for the 2019 elections was discussed. While conducting the session on PVT, training Manager, Paul James emphasized that YIAGA AFRICA’s WTV randomly selected polling units to deploy non-partisan observers in order to provide accurate election data fresh from polling units. According to James, having observed the process in Anambra, Ekiti and Osun Governorship elections, PVT has consistently provided data on quality of elections and how it can be improved.

Also speaking is Advisor, Election at the National Democratic Institute, Richard Klein who explained various countries where the PVT has been used to detect fraud in the electoral process. According to Klein, the PVT was first used in the Philippines to protect the votes of citizens from a dictator saying Zambia is the first African country to successfully deploy the PVT which helped eliminated fraud in the 1991 Presidential elections. NDI are providing technical support to YIAGA AFRICA for credible elections in Nigeria.

The roundtable with reporters is the first set of engagement with journalists as the team will further engage editors both in Lagos and Abuja.
Ahead of the 2019 General elections, YIAGA AFRICA through its Watching The Vote (WTV) project on Wednesday, a radio program to engage Nigerians on the need to participate actively in the electoral process. The Radio program tagged “Watching The Vote half hour” was flagged off on Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) in Abuja and aired on other FRCN stations across Nigeria. Speaking during maiden edition of the program, Project Director Cynthia Mbamalu said the program became necessary because citizens should participate in the electoral process from an informed position and thus information about the electoral process should be disseminated to the public accordingly. She further said, the project is out to provide timely information on both the pre-election environment and the election day activities in order to counter misinformation and rumours. According to Mbamalu, Watching the Vote is the largest citizen movement committed to credible elections in Nigeria and they are committed ensuring that Nigerian’s votes count. She said, “We are deploying the largest number of observers for the 2019 general elections. For us, it is more than just watching the electoral process, it’s about ensuring that our observation will help reduce violence. That way we can build early systems against electoral violence.”

During the 30 minutes show, Mbamalu highlighted that the Watching The Vote team will deploy 3034 Polling Unit Observers for the 2019 Presidential elections while also deploying 822 roving observers to report critical incidents. Polling Unit observers according to her will report election day activities like arrival and set-up, accreditation and voting, sorting, counting and announcement of result. This according to her will be reported to a special database and will enable Watching The Vote verify the accuracy of results announced by electoral commission. Electoral violence has historically been a major factor hindering valid statistics during elections in Nigeria. The subsequent episodes of the WTV Half Hour further featured INEC head of Voter Education and Publicity, Barrister Oluwole Osaze Uzzi who declared the readiness for the 2019 elections. Mr Uzzi also urged citizens to locate their Local Government and collect their Permanent Voters Card.

Similarly, the Police Public Relations Officer, Frank Mba shared the plans by the Police Force ahead of the 2019 elections urging citizens to be vigilant and report suspected movement to the Police. He also urged YIAGA AFRICA to always share its Pre-election security concerns with the police for further action.
Summary of Findings

1. Political Parties Battle for Geopolitical Zones: Political parties have shifted their campaigns to geopolitical zones with high intensity and frequency. Our WTV finding suggest that parties are jostling to secure block votes from geo-political zones. Compared to the last reporting period, the campaign activities of African Democratic Congress (ADC) increased by 3%, All Progressive Congress (APC) by 6%, People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and Social Democratic Party by 4%. The APC and PDP had more campaigns in the South-South geopolitical zone while the ADC and SDP had more campaigns in the North-East and South-West geopolitical zones respectively.

2. Purchase of Permanent Voters Card (PVC): The incidence of buying and selling of PVCs remains unabated in this reporting period. Buying or selling of PVC was reported in 2% of LGAs which is a 1% increase from the previous reporting period. WTV LTOs directly witnessed this in Obi# (Benue), Okehi (Kogi), Kokona (Nasarawa), Mokwa (Niger), Jos South (Plateau), Igabi, Chikun (Kaduna), Rano (Kano), Kaura Namoda (Zamfara), Aba North, Bende, Ikwuyo (Abia) and Saki East (Oyo). Similarly, 10% of WTV LTOs also heard of buying of PVCs in at least one LGA in: Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Bauchi, Yobe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Zamfara, Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Akwa Ibom, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo, Rivers, Lagos, Ogun and Oyo states.

3. Voter inducement pervades electoral campaigns: The distribution of money, gift items and other goods for votes remains a threat to the credibility and legitimacy of the forthcoming elections. In this reporting period, WTV LTOs reported the distribution of money or gift items as a form of voter inducement in some LGAs across the country. The WTV LTOs directly observed the distribution of money or gift items in 13% of LGAs and same was heard in other 31% of LGAs.

4. Early warning signs of Violence: Violent (physical or verbal) attacks were witnessed during the party campaigns of some political parties. WTV LTOs directly observed verbal attacks in 3% and physical attacks in 9% of LGAs respectively, with the North-Central having the highest record of verbal attacks. Vandalism and destruction of properties belonging to candidates or their supporters was directly witnessed by WTV LTOs in 31 LGAs. WTV observers also received reports of vandalism in 61 other LGAs.

5. Decline in Hate Speech Against Women: Compared to the previous reporting period, there was a slight decrease (from 3% to 2%) in hate speech against women.

6. Marginal Increase in Voter Education and activities of INEC: This reporting period recorded a 2% increase from the previous reporting period in voter education by INEC with the North West Geopolitical zone recording the highest level voter education activities by INEC at 73%, CSO’s at 67% and National Orientation Agency (NOA) at 41%. The South-West recorded the lowest report of voter education activities.

7. North Central Recorded Increase in Women and Youth Participating in the Political Campaigns: generally, WTV LTOs directly witnessed women and youth groups canvassing for votes in 22% and 29% of LGAs respectively. Similarly, women and youth groups were heard canvassing for votes in more than a quarter (35% and 38% respectively) of LGAs. However, their activities were found to be predominant in the North-Central geopolitical zone.

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