



Mind Bombs: BudgIT and Nigeria's Graphic War on Corruption

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Bongo Adi prepared this case as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either an effective or an ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

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Mind Bombs: BudgIT's Anti-Corruption Crusade with Graphics

The meme wars are raging. The grand narrative battles of our time are being fought with pixels and bandwidth.

- Adbusters

PROLOGUE: AN IDEA BORN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Oluseun "Seun" Onigbinde stared at the stack of government documents piled on his desk at First Bank of Nigeria. As a strategy analyst, he had privileged access to public sector financial flows – the lifeblood of Nigerian banking. The numbers told a story most Nigerians had never heard: billions of naira appropriated for schools that never were built, contracts paid for roads that existed only on paper, salaries disbursed to workers who did not exist.

The problem, Seun realised, was not that this information was hidden. It was published in thick, jargon-laden budget volumes that no ordinary citizen could decode. Corruption thrived not in darkness alone, but in complexity. What if those numbers could be turned into pictures? What if the budget could be made beautiful, simple, and undeniable?

In January 2011, Seun brought this idea to his friend Joseph Agunbiade, a physicist and data enthusiast. Together, they entered the Co-Creation Hub hackathon in Lagos with a concept: open data, accessible government. They emerged with a name – BudgIT – and a mission: to simplify Nigeria's budget and make public finance data accessible to every citizen.

But making the budget legible was only the first challenge. The harder questions followed: Could this mission sustain itself financially? How could a civic organisation remain independent without being captured by donors? Was it possible to build a profitable business around fighting corruption? And, as BudgIT entered its second decade, how could Seun reverse its funding ratio from a precarious 70% dependence on grants to a healthier 50:50 split between donor funds and earned commercial income?

BudgIT: THE ORGANISATION

BudgIT describes itself as "a civic organisation that applies technology to intersect citizen engagement with institutional improvement, to facilitate societal change."¹ Founded at the 2011 Lagos Hackathon of the Co-Creation Hub, it was the brainchild of Oluseun Onigbinde, an electrical engineer, and Joseph Agunbiade, a physicist. The

name is an acronym of "Budget" and "IT" – fitting for a venture that straddles data science, design, and civic activism.

BudgIT's mission is to "simplify the Nigerian budget and public data, making it accessible to the general public to aid participatory governance."ⁱⁱ To achieve this, it developed a distinctive methodology: data mining combined with creative infographic design, delivered through social and traditional media to reach millions of citizens.

From its origins as a two-man operation funded by a US\$20,000 seed grant from the Co-Creation Hub, BudgIT grew into Nigeria's leading civic technology organisation. By 2020, it had reached close to 5 million Nigerians through digital and physical channels, and its State of States report had become the authoritative annual assessment of subnational governance in Nigeria – cited by the World Bank, DFID, AfDB, governments, and civil society organisations alike.

The Four Pillars of BudgIT's Work

BudgIT's activities rest on four pillars:

- Simplified access to budget data: Converting complex government budget documents into clear, shareable infographics and interactive dashboards
- Project monitoring: Tracking the execution of budgeted projects at federal, state, and local levels through the Tracka platform
- Accountability advocacy: Engaging media, civil society, and the public in demanding transparency in government spending
- Institutional support: Providing data analysis and capacity-building to willing government agencies, media organisations, and civil society groups

The Tracka Platform

At the heart of BudgIT's monitoring work is Tracka, a citizen-facing project-tracking tool launched in 2014 and operational in more than 20 Nigerian states. Tracka allows citizens to photograph developmental projects in their communities, geo-tag them, and post updates on their status. BudgIT's field officers support communities in engaging their elected representatives to demand the completion of budgeted projects. Tracka transformed BudgIT from a data publishing organisation into a grassroots accountability platform.

Data Methodology

BudgIT's data pipeline is rigorous. Data are sourced exclusively from government agencies and high-level research institutions: the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), and published government budget documents. BudgIT deliberately avoids crowd-sourced data to maintain accuracy and pre-empt challenges to its publications. After extraction, data are independently verified within the organisation before creative visualisation and distribution. Citizen and partner feedback is aggregated and formally transmitted to relevant government institutions as accountability demands.

NIGERIA: DEMOCRACY, CORRUPTION, AND THE GUARDED SECRET

The Military Legacy

Nigeria gained independence in 1960 and spent much of its subsequent history under military rule. Military juntas, autocratic by nature, governed without consultation, consolidated power, and deliberately restricted civic participation. By the time civilian rule returned in 1999, the country had inherited a constitution that was never consultative or participatory, a federal system that centralised power and incentivised corruption, and a civil society that had been systematically suppressed for decades.

The military also embedded a culture of official secrecy around public resources. State coffers were treated as personal property by those in power. Transparency was not a value to be upheld – it was a threat to be managed. Military rule ended formally in 1999, but its legacy endured in the institutional DNA of the Nigerian state.

Corruption and Public Finance

Nigeria's Corruption Perception Index has remained chronically poor since Transparency International began measuring it. The country has consistently ranked among the most corrupt in the world. In the Nigerian public finance system, corruption takes many forms: budget padding (over-inflation of line items), ghost workers (salaries for non-existent employees), contract inflation, over-invoicing, and outright non-execution of budgeted projects.

The budget is fertile ground for corruption. As Seun put it plainly: "The budget system is the epicentre of official corruption in Nigeria."ⁱⁱⁱ What is budgeted can be manipulated, diverted, or stolen. The promulgation of the Freedom of Information Act in 2011 did little to change this. Budget documents remained thick, technical, and inaccessible to ordinary citizens – a feature, not a bug, of the system. Budget fungibility – the conversion rate of appropriated budget to visible, measurable outcomes – remained extremely low.

Civic Space Under Pressure

The civic space in Nigeria has long been contested. The state has shown persistent discomfort with social activism. Journalists and civil society actors who cast light on government malfeasance face harassment, arrest, or worse. In August 2019, Agba Jalingo – publisher of CrossRiverWatch – was arrested and charged with treason for social media posts criticising his state's governor.^{iv} Legal scholar Chidi Odinkalu described the government's push for an anti-social media bill as "intergenerational warfare."^v

It is a well-established principle of democracy studies that access to information is a major pillar of democracy. Granting people access to and equipping them with the right tools to understand public documents "serves as a critical tool for fighting corruption, enabling citizens to more fully participate in public life, making governments more efficient, encouraging investment, and helping persons exercise their fundamental human rights."^{vi} Research consistently confirms the link between access to information and democratic participation: citizens who understand public affairs are more likely to demand accountability.^{vii} It is also arguable that in some instances, the elite political class has deliberately delimited access to information as a strategy to restrain active citizenship – as has been alleged for Nigeria, especially in certain northern regions of the country.^{viii}

When citizens lack information empowerment, their scope for civic participation is grossly underserved. Yet a significant proportion of Nigerians – particularly in rural and less educated communities – lacked both the knowledge and the access to public documents needed to meaningfully engage with governance.

The Digital Opening

The return to civilian rule in 1999 cracked open a window. Government budgets began to be published slowly. Democracy created space, however constrained, for civic inquiry. Then came the internet and social media – platforms that circumvented traditional gatekeepers and allowed citizens to bypass the government's control of information.

This was the environment into which BudgIT arrived in 2011. And into this environment, it threw a graphic grenade.

WEAPONISING PIXELS: BudgIT'S GRAPHIC REVOLUTION

The Power of Memes

BudgIT's core innovation was to recognise that infographics are not just communication tools – they are weapons of social change. To understand why, one must understand the theory of memes.

The term "meme" was introduced by biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 to describe a unit of cultural transmission – an idea, behaviour, or style that spreads from person to person by copying or imitation. Derived from the Greek word *mimēna*, meaning "something imitated," the term was shortened to rhyme with "gene."^{ix} It has since been described as a "virally-transmitted cultural symbol or social idea." In the context of the internet, digital memes usually come in the form of a hashtag or video, or, more frequently, a picture, which can be easily and rapidly copied, altered, and sent on.^x Basically, memes are images shared on social media that make fun of or highlight a social or cultural issue relevant to current pop culture.^{xi}

Digital memes possess three features that make them powerful: spreadability (they are easily replicated and shared), velocity (they travel instantly across networks), and virality (they can reach millions within hours). Dawkins himself proposed three criteria for memetic success: fecundity (replicability), copy-fidelity, and longevity.^{xii} In the digital environment, all three are easily met. Later scholars, particularly Limor Shifman (2014), added simplicity, emotional resonance, and participatory potential as predictors of memetic success. Technology has also "democratised graphic design. Anyone with access to a computer or smartphone can 'design' using text and images and share their output widely via social media."^{xiii}

From Comedy to Accountability: The Rise of Political Memes

Memes began as comedy – parody images, satirical videos, and absurdist internet humour. But change agents quickly recognised their potential as instruments of serious politics.^{xiv} A turning point came in 2008 with Shepard Fairey's iconic "Hope" poster of Barack Obama (see Exhibit 2), which went viral and became one of the most powerful political images of the modern era.^{xv} Before this, in 1996, the first internet meme is said to be the dancing baby or "baby Cha-Cha," which appeared on the television sitcom *Ally McBeal*.^{xvi} Ever since, a new genre of communication has emerged tagged "memeology", dealing with how graphics influence the way we think and communicate, and how graphic iconography is shaping social and political events and being deployed for activist protestations.^{xvii}

In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement spread globally through viral memes and hashtags (see Exhibits 3 and 4). When campus police officer John Pike casually pepper-sprayed seated protestors at UC Davis, a single photograph spawned hundreds of satirical memes and earned its own Wikipedia entry within hours.^{xviii} Memes have been deployed as potent weapons to pursue socio-political agendas of liberation, such as

fighting corruption and enforcing norms of good governance. They are being turned into a strategy to defy seemingly invulnerable organisations and are being employed as tools to frame public discourse about injustice – especially those involving police actions.

Nigeria caught the meme-politics fever during the January 2012 fuel subsidy protests, when the government attempted to remove a decades-long fuel subsidy regime (see Exhibits 5 and 6). Spontaneous protests erupted across major cities, sustained not only by traditional placards and pickets but by creative memes spreading through Twitter hashtags and Facebook posts. The memes were instrumental in stoking the emotional energy that ultimately forced the government to retreat.

From Surveillance to Sousveillance

Traditional political power operates through surveillance – the state watches its citizens. BudgIT inverted this dynamic. The term “sousveillance” was coined by Canadian engineer Steve Mann to describe citizens’ monitoring of those in power.^{xix} It denotes the opposite of surveillance. “Sur” is a French suffix for “above” or “on”, and “sous” is the suffix for “under”. Surveillance refers to a top-down approach to monitoring, as in government surveillance or the observation of citizens. Sousveillance, however, describes the opposite situation where citizens mount a watch over the government. BudgIT turned data and design into instruments of sousveillance. By dissecting government budgets and broadcasting the results as infographics, BudgIT transformed Nigerian citizens into “under-seers” – able to scrutinise the state’s internal workings, compare promises to performance, and demand explanations.

Government officials who once operated in comfortable obscurity suddenly found their budget decisions visualised, shared, and scrutinised by millions. The distributed, dispersed power of sousveillance – operating through moral suasion evoked by digital advocacy, or “meme warfare” – offered an antidote to the state's concentrated power.^{xx}

BudgIT's “Mind Bombs”

BudgIT's infographics are not decorative – they are strategic instruments designed as “mind bombs”: emotionally laden graphics that stir the moral conscience of viewers, deriving their power from quick spread and virality. Each graphic exposes specific corruption mechanisms:

- Budget padding: Over-inflation of line items beyond reasonable cost
- Budget mismatch: Appropriations with no corresponding projects or deliverables
- Budget replication: Duplicate expenditures repeated across fiscal years
- Fictitious items: Spending on non-existent goods, services, or workers

BudgIT's infographics fulfil all Shifman's criteria for memetic success: they are simple, emotionally resonant, and participatory. Citizens do not merely consume them; they share, discuss, and act on them. Each infographic is both evidence and a call to action. See Exhibits 7–10 for examples of BudgIT's published infographics.

As Seun put it: “The budget is the first element in the corruption chain – what is not budgeted is difficult to be siphoned or mismanaged.”^{xxi} BudgIT's goal is to ensure that what is budgeted is also visible, scrutinised, and, ultimately, delivered.

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE MISSION: THE SOCIAL ENTERPRISE CHALLENGE

The Funding Dilemma

Social entrepreneurship is, by definition and in principle, an innovative model of business that deploys business principles to address social challenges. It is the ability to utilise business models and techniques to develop solutions to social problems, with the central feature being the combination of both profitability and social value creation.^{xxii} Social enterprises are for-profit enterprises run alongside non-profit organisations, enabling social entrepreneurs to continue and expand their work.

When BudgIT launched in 2011, its financial sustainability was an afterthought. The Co-Creation Hub's US\$20,000 seed grant bought time, and the organisation's early traction attracted further support from Indigo Trust and the Open Society Foundation. In 2017, BudgIT received a US\$3 million, three-year commitment from Omidyar Network (now Luminate) and the Gates Foundation. By 2020, BudgIT's total annual budget had reached approximately US\$1.2 million.

Yet the funding structure remained precarious. Seventy per cent of revenue came from the BudgIT Foundation – dependent on grants and donations – while only 30% came from Fitila, its commercial arm. Seun was candid about the risk:

"... to get around the problem of financial sustainability, we decided to register two different companies, one a non-profit named BudgIT Foundation, and the other a for-profit enterprise called Fitila ... Even as of now, the source of revenue is still 70:30 in favour of BudgIT Foundation, which relies more on grants and donations from institutional partners, and our desire is to reverse the trend to ensure it is 50:50."

"He who calls the piper dictates the tune. Without an independent revenue stream, our mission can be held hostage by the interests of our grantors. That is a danger we must neutralise."

Non-profit organisations that depend heavily on donor funds face a particular vulnerability: they may be labelled agents of neo-colonial interests, and their credibility with the communities they serve can be undermined.^{xxiii} BudgIT had seen this dynamic play out with other civil society organisations across Nigeria.^{xxiv} The organisation needed a path to financial independence.

The Dual-Entity Model

BudgIT navigated Nigeria's legal landscape by structuring itself as two separate legal entities:

- BudgIT Foundation: A non-profit organisation operating on grants, donations, and endowments. This entity carries the civic mission – the budget dissection, the Tracka platform, and the accountability advocacy.
- Fitila Africa: A for-profit company generating commercial revenue by offering BudgIT's core competencies – data visualisation, infographic design, and communications strategy – to corporate and government clients.

This hybrid social enterprise model allowed BudgIT to pursue its social mission without being entirely dependent on donor goodwill. Fitila's commercial clients paid for customised infographics, communications strategy, and data analytics services. Seun envisioned Fitila eventually offering corporate clients a version of Tracka for monitoring organisational performance and the delivery of social investment projects.

Seun described the model's evolution:

"With the lean growth strategy, our total budget, including operating expenses, has climbed up over the last few years to around US\$1,200,000, with the lion's share coming from the BudgIT Foundation. Fitila has, over the years, increased its contribution to the total annual budget from

around 10% when we started to about 30% now. We have always been craving for financial stability – the kind that tilts our income sources toward the 50:50 mark.”

The dual structure was not without tensions. Running two legally distinct organisations with complementary but different objectives required significant management bandwidth. The for-profit arm had to be commercially viable without compromising the integrity of the non-profit mission. And Fitila's 30% contribution, while growing, remained far short of the 50% target.

Earned Income Strategies

Seun identified three strategic avenues for growing Fitila's revenue:

- **Data products:** Building and selling custom infographics and memetic iconographies to corporate organisations for communicating with shareholders, communities, and stakeholders
- **Creative communications capacity:** Providing data storytelling and communications services to corporate and government clients lacking BudgIT's specialised expertise
- **Technology licensing:** Adapting Tracka and other proprietary tools for commercial clients – enabling corporations to monitor supply chain performance or social investment project delivery

Seun acknowledged that the for-profit entity was not easy to run. Running a lean start-up strategy – as mandated by the Co-Creation Hub model – meant growing slowly, proving value before expanding. But the commercial market for data visualisation services in Nigeria was still emerging, and competition for the available mandates was intensifying.

CHALLENGES AND SETBACKS

Data Access

The single greatest operational challenge is obtaining actual expenditure data from the government. Budget appropriations are published, but actual spending data – the real test of whether budgeted money was spent as intended – are often unavailable, delayed, or deliberately obscured. At the subnational level, the problem is acute: state and local government fiscal data are jealously guarded, released selectively, or published in formats that are difficult to parse. BudgIT's data analysts must invest significant time converting data from non-readable formats while maintaining accuracy across multiple conversion processes.

Budget Credibility

Even when data are available, their credibility is uncertain. Nigeria's budgets routinely underperform: projected revenues are not collected, appropriated expenditures are not disbursed, and actual outcomes diverge substantially from the approved budget. When BudgIT publishes infographics based on approved budget figures, citizens may later discover that the money was never spent – creating discrepancies between BudgIT's publications and lived reality, and undermining confidence in the exercise.

Public Apathy

Not all Nigerians are moved to action by infographics. At the bottom of the economic pyramid, many citizens are more concerned with immediate survival than with budget transparency. Patron-client relationships between local politicians and poor communities often make citizens reluctant to challenge their representatives, even when presented with compelling evidence of malfeasance. Overcoming this apathy –

particularly in rural areas – remains a persistent challenge for BudgIT's grassroots engagement work through Tracka.

The Sustainability Gap

Despite years of effort, BudgIT had not reached its 50:50 funding target. Fitila's commercial success was constrained by the limited size of Nigeria's market for data visualisation services and by the management demands of running two organisations simultaneously. International grants remained the dominant funding source – a dependency that, while not yet a crisis, represented an ongoing strategic vulnerability.

WHAT NEXT FOR BudgIT?

As BudgIT entered its second decade, Seun faced a convergence of strategic decisions with no easy answers.

On financial sustainability: The 70:30 funding ratio had stubbornly resisted change. Fitila had grown its contribution from 10% to 30% over a decade – progress, but not transformation. What strategy would most effectively drive Fitila toward the 50% target? Should BudgIT double down on data products and corporate communications? Should it seek new geographic markets across Africa? Should it pursue a strategic partnership or a technology licensing deal? Or was the 50:50 target itself a distraction from the core mission?

On mission integrity: Every step toward commercial revenue raised the risk of mission drift. Corporate clients might, over time, shape BudgIT's work in ways that compromised its civic independence. Donor relationships, meanwhile, risked ideological capture. How could BudgIT preserve its integrity while becoming financially sustainable?

On impact and scale: BudgIT has proven its model in Nigeria. Its State of States report was cited by major development institutions. But the challenges of Nigeria's public finance system – opacity, corruption, apathy – remained formidable. How could BudgIT deepen its impact? Was it time to scale the model across other African countries?

Seun sat with these questions. BudgIT had come a long way from the stack of public sector documents on a First Bank analyst's desk. The pixels had proved powerful. But the organisational architecture to sustain that power still needed to be built.

Exhibit 1: History and Evolution of Memes



Source: Various published sources on internet meme history.

Exhibit 2: The "Hope" Obama Poster (Shepard Fairey, 2008)



Note: This poster, created by street artist Shepard Fairey during Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, became one of the most viral political images of the modern era, illustrating the power of visual design in political communication.

Source: Wikipedia / Shepard Fairey / Associated Press.

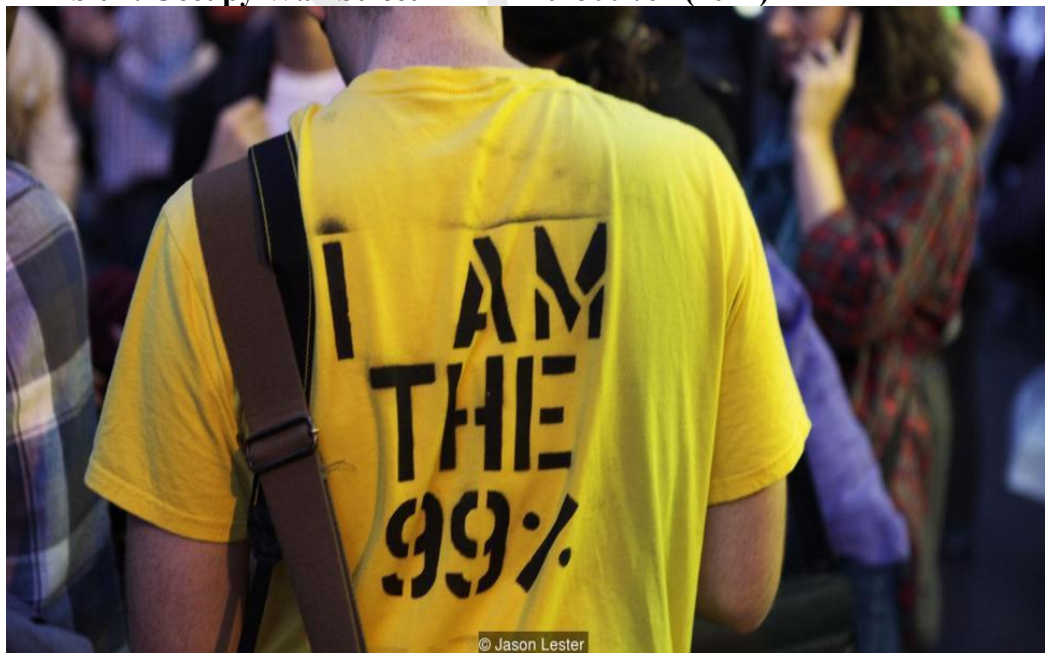
Exhibit 3: UK's Pro-Remain Campaign Slogan "I'm In" (Brexit Referendum, 2016)



Note: The "I'm In" graphic went viral on social media during the 2016 UK Brexit referendum, demonstrating how simple digital graphics can be weaponised as tools of political mobilisation.

Source: UK's Stronger In campaign / social media.

Exhibit 4: Occupy Wall Street – "I Am the 99%" (2011)



Note: The "99%" meme became the defining visual symbol of the Occupy Wall Street movement, spreading globally across social media and demonstrating the power of simple numerical framing in political communication.

Source: Credit: Jason Lester / Occupy Wall Street movement.

Exhibit 5: Occupy Nigeria – Guy Fawkes Mask (2012)



Note: During Nigeria's January 2012 fuel subsidy protests, the Guy Fawkes mask – symbol of the global Occupy movement – was widely adopted by Nigerian protesters, illustrating the transnational spread of protest iconography.

Source: Social media / Occupy Nigeria movement archives.

Exhibit 6: Occupy Nigeria – Street Protest (2012)



Note: Protesters in Lagos during the January 2012 fuel subsidy removal crisis. Memes shared on Twitter and Facebook were instrumental in sustaining the protests' emotional energy until the government was forced to partially reverse its policy stance.

Source: Social media / Nigerian press archives.

Exhibit 6b: Tactics of Civil Society Activists in Nigeria

Tactic	Meaning	Example
Agenda Setting	Placing specific governance issues on the public and media agenda through data-driven publications	BudgIT's State of States Report
Strategic Support for State Institutions	Partnering with reform-minded government agencies to improve data quality and publication	BudgIT's collaboration with state budget offices
Non-Violent Action	Organising and supporting peaceful demonstrations and civic protests	Occupy Nigeria fuel subsidy protests, 2012
Policy Scrutiny and Analysis	Analysing government policies and publishing findings for public consumption	BudgIT's budget padding analysis
Tracking Government Expenditure	Monitoring actual vs. appropriated spending at project level	Tracka platform (20+ states, 2014–present)
Whistleblowing	Encouraging citizens and insiders to report corruption and misuse of public funds	Tracka citizen reports on unexecuted projects
Public Interest Litigation	Using the courts to enforce citizens' rights to information and accountability	Freedom of Information Act cases

Source: United States Institute of Peace Special Report

Exhibit 7: BudgIT Infographic



Source: BudgIT Infographics

Exhibit 8: BudgIT Infographics



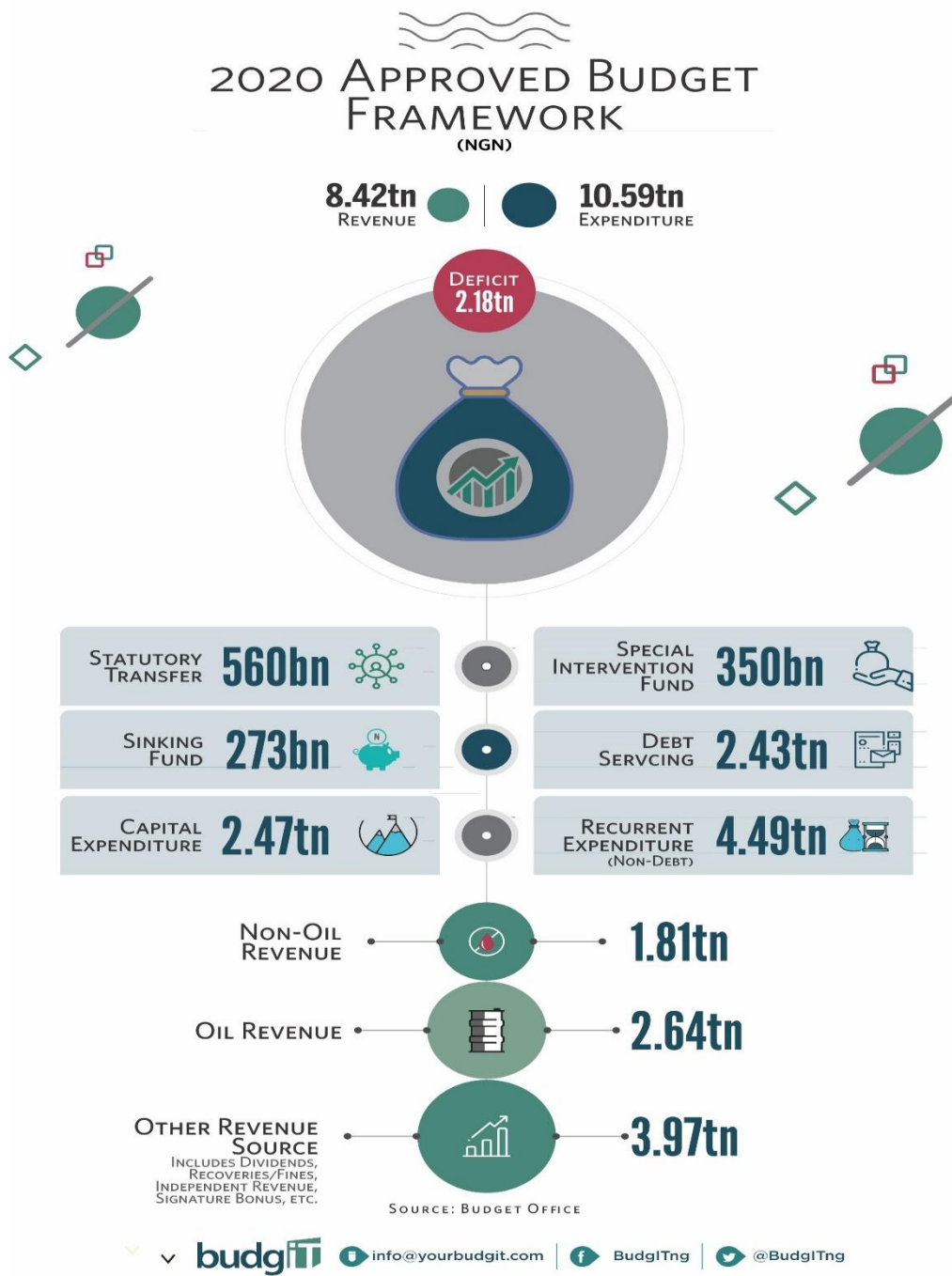
Source: BudgIT Infographics

Exhibit 9: BudgIT Infographics



Source: BudgIT Infographics

Exhibit 1: Budgit 2020 Nigeria's Approved Budget Framework



Source: BudgIT Infographics

End notes

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- ⁱⁱ <https://yourbudgit.com/about-us/> retrieved on February 5, 2020.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Authors' Skype interview with Seun Onigbinde, February 13, 2020.
- ^{iv} According to a copy of the charge sheet reviewed by Attah Ochinke, the journalist's lawyer. If found guilty, Jalingo could face up to three years in prison for the disturbance charge and up to life in prison for treason, according to the Nigerian criminal code. Police arrested Jalingo in Lagos on August 22, 2019.
- ^v Chidi Odinkalu, "Senate's anti-social media bill is an act of inter-generational warfare" *Businessday*, November 27, 2019 <https://businessday.ng/opinion/article/the-senates-anti-social-media-bill-is-an-act-of-inter-generational-warfare/> retrieved on Saturday, February 9th, 2020.
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- ^{xviii} For examples see, e.g., <http://peppersprayingcop.tumblr.com/> or <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/casually-pepper-spray-everything-cop>. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UC_Davis_pepper-spray_incident
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^{xxi} Authors Skype interview with Seun Onigbinde on February 13, 2020.

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