

POLICY BRIEF **ON PROTECTING CIVIC** **SPACE IN NIGERIA**

PREPARED BY

**WOMEN'S RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT AND
PROTECTION ALTERNATIVE (WRAPA)**



**AFRICAN CENTRE FOR LEADERSHIP,
STRATEGY AND DEVELOPMENT (CENTRE LSD)**



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Background

Strong civil society, economic security and citizen participation are crucial for a thriving democracy. Civic space provides the arena for citizens to participate in decision-making processes, express dissent, and demand better governance. It has enabled marginalized groups to voice concerns and demand justice. Thus, protecting civic space is crucial for promoting democracy, good governance, transparency, and accountability.

In Nigeria, a country with a robust history of activism and civic engagements, civic space has been marked by periods of military rule, tumultuous transitions, and struggles for power. Nigeria's civic space history reveals key lessons, including the importance of active citizen engagements in promoting democracy and accountability. The struggles against colonialism, military regimes and enthronement of civil rule demonstrate the power of collective action. However, history also shows challenges, such as government crackdowns on dissent and restrictions on freedoms.

Many Nigerians have been pushed into the poverty trap due to rising cost of living crisis prevalent in the country. Widespread poverty and inequality limit the ability of many Nigerians to participate in civic life as individuals struggling to meet basic needs often lack the resources or motivation to engage in governance processes or advocacy.

POLICY BRIEF ON PROTECTING CIVIC SPACE IN NIGERIA

Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) in partnership with African Centre for Leadership, Strategy & Development (Centre LSD) implemented the “Civic Space, Poverty, and Elections in Nigeria”(CISPEN) Project. The project examined the intersections of poverty, shrinking civic space, credible elections and the engendering of democratic governance in Nigeria.

As part of the project, we prepared a comprehensive, well-researched and evidence-based paper on “*Protecting Civic Space in Nigeria*”. The paper offered a historical context, analysed current challenges, identified key legal, social, and political factors affecting civic space in Nigeria. It also provided actionable recommendations to safeguard and expand civic space and foster inclusive governance and social development. The report was subjected to a presentation and robust interactive interrogation at a High-level Thought Leaders Conference, Policy Dialogue review and a robust public validation. This Policy Brief is an output of the interventions.

Executive Summary

This policy brief, *Protecting Civic Space in Nigeria*, explores the challenges and strategies for safeguarding civic space in Nigeria. It presents a synopsis of qualitative research conducted to highlight recurring themes, trends and patterns of shrinking civic space in the country. The brief identifies key drivers and barriers, including the increasingly regulatory measures such as the misuse of counterterrorism and cyber-crime legislative frameworks; and other actions by the Nigerian government as evidenced in its rejection of the UN Human Rights Council Resolution 32/31. This is despite the recognition of civic actors and organizations to reciprocate responsibilities and freedoms through efforts at self-regulation.

The policy brief therefore underscores the importance of protecting civic space in Nigeria. This is crucial for democratic governance, development, political accountability, and safeguarding human rights. It recommends constitutional alterations and legislative reforms that provide accountable guidelines, which guarantee the rights of Nigerians to participate in democracy, civic space and empower citizens to demand accountability.

1. Why Civic Space Matters

The 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN) (as amended) expressly guarantees the protection of freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association. Section 39 guarantees the right of citizens to express their views, engage in dialogues and convey dissent on any issue through any communication channel. These provisions are meant to protect civil and political liberties against forceful intrusions, and facilitate citizens' interactions and engagement with the government.

Civic space refers to the environment where citizens and their associations and organisations can freely express opinions, assemble, and participate in governance without fear of harassment or repression. As a space for social participation, civic space is made possible by widespread enjoyment of civil and political liberties; with freedoms of speech, assembly and association constituting core ingredients needed for a well-functioning democracy. When civic space is open, citizens and civic groups can organise, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they can proclaim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them. This can only happen when a state upholds its duty to protect its citizens, respect and facilitate their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express opinions.

Conversely, any restriction poses a challenge to civic engagement, thereby obstructing the space for social

participation. When civic space shrinks', voices are silent, accountability demands ignored and poverty deepened. Thus, repressive actions against civic actors, journalists, trade unionists, and opposition voices undermine the effective working of democracy. Historically, civic space was limited during colonial era, but protests and resistance laid the foundation for independence. Military regimes suppressed civic space, but CSOs and activists fought to enthrone democracy. Civilian rule since transition to democracy in 1999 has seen both progress and new threats to civic space under the 4th Republic.

2. Current Challenges: Withering Shrinking Civic Space in Nigeria?

2.1 Restrictive Legal Frameworks

Certain legal frameworks, such as the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) 2020, include provisions that grant extensive regulatory powers over non-profit organizations. Section 839(1) allows authorities to suspend trustees, while Section 842(2) permits the transfer of funds from dormant accounts. Proposed bills, like those on social media and hate speech, also raise concerns over the freedom of expression and civil liberties.

2.2 Socioeconomic Barriers

Widespread poverty and inequality limits the ability of many Nigerians to participate in civic life. Individuals struggling to meet basic needs often lack the resources or motivation to engage in governance processes or advocacy.

In 2022, Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics¹ found that 40.1% of the population lived below the national monetary poverty line, and a staggering 63% of persons living in Nigeria (133 million people) were multidimensional poor. Specifically, 68.6 million Nigerians lived in extreme poverty, with the poverty threshold at \$2.15/day.

2.3 Insecurity

Persistent insecurity, including terrorism, banditry, and communal violence—creates fear and discourages public participation. Heavy-handed security responses can further restrict civil freedoms.

2.4 Digital Surveillance and Restrictions

The civic space has expanded into the digital sphere, but new regulations have increased state surveillance. Laws such as the Cybercrime Act 2015 and NCC's Lawful Interception of Communications Regulations (2019) permit monitoring of communications without a court order, raising concerns over privacy and press freedom.

06

2.5 Judicial Independence

Public confidence in the judiciary is undermined by perceptions of political interference, inconsistent rulings, and disregard for court orders. The judiciary plays a crucial role in safeguarding civic space and must be seen as impartial and effective.

¹ See, National Bureau of Statistics today launched the results of the 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Survey, launched November 17, 2022

2.6 Suppression of Protests

Recent protests, including the #EndSARS movement, illustrate both the potential of civic mobilization and the risks it can attract. Excessive force, arrests, and censorship in response to peaceful demonstrations threaten the right to dissent.

2.7 Corruption and Weak Accountability

Corruption undermines trust in institutions and impedes public service delivery. This discourages civic participation and erodes the legitimacy of governance processes.

2.8 Limited State Engagement with Civil Society

There has been a notable decline in formal engagement between the government and CSOs. Key advisory roles are unfilled, and CSOs are often excluded from national decision-making platforms. This weakens collaborative governance.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Government

1. Amend restrictive laws such as CAMA 2020, the Cybercrime Act, and counter-terrorism regulations to ensure they protect, rather than limit, civic space.
2. Guarantee judicial independence by removing political influence and enforcing compliance with court decisions.

3. Implement inclusive socioeconomic policies that reduce poverty and inequality, enabling broader citizen engagement.
4. Reinstate structured dialogue with civil society by appointing relevant advisers and including CSOs in national committees and policymaking bodies.
5. Protect the rights to peaceful assembly, expression, and association through transparent policing and rights-based law enforcement approaches.

3.2 Global Partners

1. Apply diplomatic engagement to encourage Nigeria's commitment to civic rights and international human rights obligations.
2. Provide sustained support for Nigerian CSOs through funding, technical assistance, and training opportunities.
3. Promote legal reforms and institutional strengthening efforts that advance human rights and democratic values.

3.3 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

1. Build coalitions to unify advocacy efforts and strengthen collective impact.
2. Challenge unlawful restrictions through legal action and public campaigns.
3. Empower communities through civic education and grassroots engagement.
4. Engage policymakers using data-informed

POLICY BRIEF ON PROTECTING CIVIC SPACE IN NIGERIA

advocacy, policy briefs, and public dialogue.

5. Utilize digital platforms to inform, mobilize, and protect civic expression online.
6. Collaborate internationally to gain visibility, access support, and share best practices.

4. Advocacy Approaches

1. Network strategically among CSOs to build solidarity and resilience.
2. Mobilize public support through awareness campaigns, storytelling, and citizen education.
3. Engage in litigation to address legal challenges and protect constitutional rights.
4. Strengthen dialogue with policymakers to influence reforms.
5. Leverage international partnerships to secure resources and reinforce local efforts.

09

5. Conclusion


Civic space is a public good that supports accountability, inclusion, and democratic growth. Nigeria's civil society remains vibrant and committed, yet it requires an enabling environment to thrive. By addressing legal, social, and institutional barriers, stakeholders can work together to create a more open and inclusive civic landscape. Protecting civic space is not only a constitutional responsibility—it is essential for the progress and stability of Nigeria's democracy.

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