

ENHANCING INCLUSION IN NIGERIA'S CIVIC SPACE



POLICY BRIEF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The principle of inclusion is the bedrock of a democratic society, ensuring that all citizens have equitable access to add their voice in shaping their nation. In Nigeria, systemic barriers disproportionately exclude several interest groups, including the youth, the elderly, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from participating meaningfully in civic processes. The marginalization of these groups not only undermines their rights but also weakens democratic representation and societal progress.

Drawing insights from Global Rights' fireside dialogues and additional research, this policy brief identifies systemic barriers that these groups face and proposes actionable strategies to foster inclusivity. These recommendations aim to create a robust and representative civic space that empowers all Nigerians, thereby strengthening Nigeria's democracy.



BACKGROUND

Democracy is founded on the principle of participatory and representative governance. Its strength lies in its 'inclusivity'. Consequently, it must possess the ability to accommodate diverse voices and ensure equal participation in civic life. It relies on a system in which all voices, regardless of age, status, tribe, religion, region, or circumstance, can participate in shaping governance and debate issues that affect their lives. In Nigeria, systemic barriers continue to exclude key demographic groups such as young people, the elderly, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from meaningful civic engagement. This exclusion not only undermines democratic representation but also stifles societal progress, creating a civic space that is neither representative nor effective.

While it is easy to highlight the government's role in constricting the civic space and stifling participatory governance, a more tricky but equally necessary task is to examine the civic space itself and the failure of its gatekeepers to promote higher levels of inclusion—a failure that has not only contributed to its shrinking but also weakened efforts to build a truly

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70% of Nigerians are youth, yet their progressive ideas remain sidelined in leadership space.



democratic culture in the country. Civic engagement is not a one-dimensional process. It must encompass political, community, civic skill development, and social justice involvement. When these forms of engagement are absent, the quality of a society's democracy is called into question. Where certain groups are excluded from the citizen square, the effect is a discourse that fails to reflect the aspirations of the broader population, ultimately hindering societal growth. While the detrimental impact of these exclusions is widely acknowledged in Nigeria, effective actions to address them are yet to materialize.

Young people are key actors and a driving force for global development and peace if their talents and potential are harnessed. They are critical partners in the development of nations and their contribution to society must be measured in terms of productive pursuits of service to humanity. Yet they are often relegated to the sidelines of governance. As of August 1, 2024, about 70% of Nigeria's population is youth¹. Their human development potential is grossly underutilized, worsened by the fact that that Nigeria's human capital development is one of the lowest in the world and was ranked 150 of 157 countries in the World Bank's 2020 Human Capital Index. The ranking is no surprise as the nation accounts for the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, with 20 million children out of school. It is also the world's largest contributor to the health burden of children who die before the age of 5, with a child dying every 3 minutes from an infectious disease. Unemployment is rife and stood at the rate of 33% in 2023. It has worsened with the country's more recent economic misfortune. Concomitantly, they contend with a high poverty rate, evidenced by the fact that nearly 12% of the world population living in extreme poverty is resident in Nigeria. Alongside these issues, Nigeria's youth population contends with endemic insecurity. They not only contend with organized criminal terror groups, cult gangs, and kidnapping syndicates but they are also beleaguered by the government that is meant to protect them. The brutality and arbitrariness of law enforcement make it difficult for them to exist in their own country freely. Sometimes, their crime before the law is being young. Despite their progressive outlook and transformative ideas, their representation in leadership spaces remains marginal at best, rendering their calls for systemic change largely unaddressed. In spite of the National Youth Policy and the youth-led movement to ensure their inclusion in politics through the Not Too Young to Run Act, they hold just one percent of elective positions in government, and apart from social media access, their leadership capabilities are largely absent from terrestrial civic squares. Left out of the system, they run the risk of engaging in "politics by other means," as is manifested through the upsurge in insurgent activities and mass atrocities across the country.

¹<https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/nigeria-population/>

Senior citizens are considered to be people over the age of 60, which in Nigeria is the official retirement age. Nigeria has the highest number of elderly citizens in Africa and is ranked 19th globally. Senior citizens comprise 3.1% of the nation's population, and by 2050, the number of Nigerians who are 65 or older is expected to nearly triple. This category of citizens faces stereotypes that equate age with diminished capacity, further alienating them from civic discourse. This marginalization is compounded by both physical and digital barriers. Many elderly individuals lack the digital literacy required to access modern platforms for civic engagement, which increasingly rely on social media and other online tools. With the exception of affluent and politically exposed senior citizens, their visibility and influence in decision-making processes are significantly reduced.

Internal displacement is a perennial problem in Nigeria due to its growing theatres of conflict and insecurity and natural disaster-induced displacement. As of December 2023, there were at least 3,397,531 IDPs in Nigeria². This includes 2,305,335 IDPs in the Northeast and 1,092,196 IDPs in the North-Central and North-West. These numbers continued to grow as the conflicts and climate-induced displacements increased in 2024. Displacement not only disrupts every facet of their lives, it denies them access to fundamental rights such as the right to privacy and family life, participation in governance, education, and healthcare. Structural disenfranchisement and lack of essential documentation further alienate them from political and civic processes. Most IDP camps are informal settlements that citizens fleeing disasters are forced to create because of the government's failure to provide adequate shelter and protection for them. Even at the few formal camps such as the Bakassi Camp in Maiduguri, Borno State, IDPs still struggle to access basic services and are systematically excluded from political participation. The reasons for their exclusion include the lack of voter registration facilities, poor implementation of national identification systems, and the absence of mechanisms to ensure their inclusion in elections or participation in governance. In addition, social stigmatization often frames IDPs as burdens rather than rights-bearing citizens, further entrenching their marginalization. Once displaced and they seek refuge in the camps, their voice and right to dignity are automatically suspended by the state and other citizens, rendering them 'invisible'.

While the rights of IDPs are technically protected under Nigerian law and international conventions like the Kampala Convention, the practical realization of these rights is severely hindered by systemic failings. These include poor policy implementation, corruption, and the lack of political will to address their plight comprehensively.

²<https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/displacement-tracking-matrix-dtm-nigeria-national-displacement-profile-2023#:~:text=As%20of%20December%202023%2C%20DTM,across%2014%20states%20in%20Nigeria.>

The failure to practice inclusivity in a democratic government has dire consequences. When marginalized groups are excluded, it creates a democracy that is neither reflective of the aspirations of its populace nor effective in addressing their needs. Systemic exclusions fuel feelings of alienation and mistrust in democratic institutions, eroding their legitimacy and credibility. Over time, this disenfranchisement may lead to increased political apathy, social unrest, and ultimately conflict as excluded groups seek alternative means to voice their grievances. Moreover, the absence of diverse perspectives in governance stifles innovation and inhibits societal progress, limiting the government's capacity to develop comprehensive solutions to pressing challenges.

While Nigeria's expansion of the civic space to encompass digital platforms has engendered free speech and provided citizens with safe spaces for civic engagement, it disenfranchises people without access to the internet, especially many marginalized groups. Senior citizens often lack the technological savvy required to participate, and IDPs face barriers due to resource constraints and other displacement-related challenges. Worse still, there are often little or no overtures by civil society actors to bridge the gap to include these groups or to ensure that terrestrial platforms are extended to them to participate in civic affairs.

To address these systemic issues, Global Rights hosted two fireside dialogues aimed at bridging the generational and social gaps in Nigeria's civic space. These dialogues provided a platform for those directly impacted to share their lived experiences and aspirations and to foster solidarity across special interest groups. These discussions underscored the urgent need for policies that integrate youth, senior citizens, and IDPs into decision-making processes. Without intentional strategies to address these exclusions, Nigeria risks perpetuating inequalities that erode the legitimacy of its democratic institutions.

This policy brief builds on insights from these dialogues and additional data to propose actionable strategies for fostering a more inclusive and representative civic environment in Nigeria.





CHALLENGES TO INCLUSION

Youth Marginalization: An exclusionary culture, poverty, high illiteracy rates, and limited access to leadership opportunities leave young people disconnected from civic processes. In countries like Senegal, where youth unemployment hovers around 21%, similar trends of civic disengagement are observed. In Nigeria, the lack of mentorship and representation in policymaking exacerbates frustrations among the youth, as highlighted in the fireside dialogues. The fireside dialogues also rehashed the narrative of the elderly political elites' capture of political power, convinced the younger generation lacks the experience to handle leadership challenges, sidelining their fresh ideas and readiness for change. It also revealed that years of youth repression had embittered generations of young people who blamed the older generations for the woes of the country. Participants called for succession planning through the deliberate mentorship of the younger generation by the older generation.

Exclusion of the Elderly:

Senior citizens, comprising 3.1% of the population, are often excluded from civic spaces due to ageist perceptions that reduce

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IDPs: Over 3 million displaced, locked out of basic rights like voting and civic participation.



their contributions to society. This exclusion is compounded by physical and infrastructural barriers, as well as limited digital literacy that hinders access to online platforms where civic discourse increasingly takes place. There is also the unspoken assumption that because most senior citizens are retired and often indigent, they cannot make substantial contributions to the civic space. In addition, it is assumed that their ideas are outdated, that they have no understanding of contemporary issues in civic engagement, and that if they could not catalyze change when they were younger, it is unlikely that they would suddenly be able to contribute meaningfully to resolving ongoing challenges.

The fireside participants called for a bridging of generational gaps through the acknowledgment of communication gaps and addressing intergenerational misgivings. They also emphasized the need for sustained platforms for intergenerational dialogue and inclusive policy reforms. They noted in particular that the disenfranchisement of indigent senior citizens from civic discourse negatively impacted government policies and affected their wellbeing. For instance, healthcare and transportation. They therefore called for geriatric considerations in Nigeria's healthcare system and in policies that affect their access to public life.

The Coalition of Societies for the Rights of Older Persons in Nigeria (COSROPIN), was represented at the event and highlighted its role in championing the establishment of the National Senior Citizens Centre (NSCC) and the development of a draft bill on the Rights and Privileges of Older Persons in Nigeria. The bill, which was passed by the Senate during President Muhammadu Buhari's tenure, still awaits concurrence from the House of Representatives.



Disenfranchisement of IDPs:

The African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) and the 2012 National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons establish a framework for the government's responsibility in preventing and protecting citizens from arbitrary and other forms of internal displacement, meeting their assistance and protection needs during displacement, and ensuring their rehabilitation, return, reintegration, and resettlement following displacement. Despite these instruments, IDPs in Nigeria continue to face multidimensional challenges, including lack of documentation and little or no support for their rehabilitation and resilience, especially from the government. IDPs at the Fireside chats revealed that they felt a deep sense of abandonment and neglect by their government and fellow citizens. Noting that little was being done to rehabilitate them, they pointed out that most IDP camps were informal and that even the government camps were overcrowded and lacked several basic amenities, including electricity, potable water, sanitary, educational, and healthcare facilities. They also recounted living over a decade without meaningful resettlement or civic inclusion.

IDPs considered that they were never fully integrated into their host communities and were continually being treated as strangers who could not be trusted. Their host communities treat them like nuisances that are depleting their already scarce resources and never invite them to participate in community activities or decision-making. The failure of the state and other citizens to accord them dignity and respect due to their status was a sore contention that resonated throughout the dialogue.

Another critical issue raised during the fireside dialogue was secondary displacement, which is a common phenomenon experienced by most IDPs. Because most IDP camps are informal, they are often situated on private property, and the landowners would often evict them once they needed to develop their property. The government also occasionally evicted them from government-sanctioned camps, mandating them to return to their communities, which more often than not remained unsafe. Some participants highlighted that some IDPs in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) are currently living on land earmarked for development by the FCDA, forcing them to move yet again. It is worth noting that IDP camps are intended to be temporary shelters; however, some of the IDPs who attended the dialogue revealed that they had been living in these camps since the onset of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009, over 15 years ago. They remained too indigent to relocate; their indigenous communities had remained under the control of terrorists, and the government had not revealed any concrete plan to rehabilitate them.

The representative from the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants, and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI) discussed the commission's efforts to reintegrate IDPs into public life and ensure that policies translate into tangible outcomes. They highlighted the commission's work to standardize a legal framework rooted in the Kampala Convention. In 2020, the commission launched a resettlement project aimed at constructing 600 housing units for IDPs across six locations in Nigeria. For the 2024 budget, an additional 10 states, including the FCT, have been earmarked for similar projects. As at the time of this report, none of these plans had materialized.

The representative from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) spoke about their ongoing work in protecting the rights of IDPs in Nigeria and their collaboration with the NCFRMI. The NHRC has established a Protection Rights Working Group, which they chair. This group comprises stakeholders from various sectors involved in protecting IDP rights. With funding from the UN, the NHRC works to hold relevant stakeholders accountable. However, IDPs present at the Fireside Chat denied knowledge of this intervention.

The representative of the NHRC also highlighted efforts in the BAY states of the North East (Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe), to ensure IDPs are not excluded from exercising their civic rights—for example, providing buses during elections to facilitate participation. They acknowledged the government's failure to address the temporary nature of IDP camps and emphasized the commission's commitment to providing durable solutions for IDPs. Finally, they promised to send a report to the commission to follow up on these issues.

Most participants affirmed that they were neither aware of the existence of the National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons nor of the government's strategic thrust in protecting their rights. They noted that while organized civil society tended to provide humanitarian support, particularly food, to IDPs, they often failed to be inclusive of them in designing interventions that affect them and treated them as projects rather than people. There were also no systemic attempts to address sexual and other forms of gender-based violence, which tend to be rife in IDP camps.

Digital Divide:

The increasing reliance on digital platforms for civic engagement excludes those without access or literacy. For instance, many rural-based Nigerians lack access to internet services. There has not been enough investment in the infrastructure to make these services available to every Nigerian, despite his or her location. The global thrust to acknowledge the right to the internet as a human right is rooted in the

principles of access to information and freedom of expression. It also decreases the possibility of being disenfranchised from citizen squares.

Intersectional Exclusions:

The dynamics of intersectionality of identity are critical to evaluating the participation of the special interest groups discussed above. Where these identities intersect, their invisibility in society is often more deeply entrenched. Young IDPs and elderly individuals in displacement camps face multiple layers of marginalization. An overarching identity is gender. For example, a young displaced woman in an IDP camp faces numerous forms of discrimination. A female senior citizen in the same circumstance may not fare any better. They are often more disenfranchised than their men folk and carry the additional burden of being primary caregivers to vulnerable children who are unacknowledged by the government. She would encounter barriers due to her age, her gender, and her displacement status, amplifying her exclusion from education, healthcare, and civic rights.

Fragmented Advocacy Efforts: The lack of coordinated advocacy among marginalized groups weakens their collective influence. Youth and elderly populations often advocate separately, presenting disparate demands that fail to resonate with policymakers. This fragmentation reduces the impact of their advocacy.





OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFORM

The fireside dialogues illuminated failsafe initiatives that can serve as models for scaling inclusive practices nationwide. For example, community leaders in a northern Nigerian local government area effectively used traditional methods, such as town criers, to disseminate civic education messages to elderly residents who lacked access to digital platforms. This approach ensured that critical information reached a demographic often excluded from digital initiatives. However, their feedback is often lost as through this one-way communication.

Similarly, the deployment of mobile registration units for IDPs has proven successful in providing documentation necessary for civic participation. In camps around Maiduguri, these units allowed displaced individuals to obtain identity documents, enabling them to exercise their voting rights and access essential services. Such initiatives highlight the potential of practical, localized solutions to complement national reforms. However, in instances where IDPs face secondary displacement, their efforts at establishing civic identities are again lost.

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Traditional town criers bridged the digital gap for elderly citizens proof that grassroots solutions work.



Another opportunity lies in fostering collaborations between civil society organizations and local governments to implement targeted programs. For instance, partnerships aimed at providing digital literacy training for elderly citizens have shown promise in both urban and rural communities. In one pilot program, elderly participants gained confidence in using smartphones to access information and engage in civic discourse, demonstrating the transformative impact of such efforts.

Expanding these programs can create a ripple effect. By building on the lessons of successful initiatives, Nigeria can develop a robust framework for inclusivity that combines grassroots innovation with institutional support. Leveraging traditional communication methods alongside modern technologies ensures that no demographic is left behind, fostering a civic space that is genuinely representative.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates the needs of youth, the elderly, and IDPs into national policies and civic processes. Key recommendations include:

Firstly, digital inclusion must be prioritized. National digital literacy programs targeting marginalized groups can bridge the technological gap. Partnerships with telecommunications companies to subsidize internet access will ensure equitable participation in online civic discussions.

Community tech hubs, particularly in rural areas, can serve as centers for digital engagement, empowering youth, elderly citizens, and IDPs alike.

Secondly, legal and institutional reforms are imperative. The Kampala Convention must be fully operationalized to safeguard the rights of IDPs. Electoral laws should be amended to allow displaced persons to vote irrespective of their location. Anti-ageism laws must also be enacted to combat stereotypes and ensure elderly representation in governance.

Moreover, intergenerational collaboration offers a pathway to cohesive advocacy. Structured platforms for dialogue between youth and the elderly can bridge generational divides, fostering mutual understanding and unified efforts. For instance, mentorship programs where elders guide youth in civic engagement while youth introduce elders to digital tools can enhance collective advocacy.

Economic empowerment is another critical avenue. Tailored vocational training programs for IDPs can reduce dependency and promote sustainable livelihoods. Entrepreneurial and digital skills development for youth will prepare them for future economic opportunities, while community leadership roles for elderly citizens can leverage their experience to strengthen societal cohesion.

Finally, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must be implemented to track progress and identify gaps. Transparent metrics and grassroots oversight committees can ensure accountability and sustained efforts toward inclusivity.

In conclusion, an inclusive civic space is not just a democratic ideal but a necessity for Nigeria's development. By addressing the systemic barriers faced by youth, elderly individuals, and IDPs, the nation can harness the full potential of its diverse population. The fireside dialogues hosted by Global Rights have laid the foundation for this transformation, offering insights and actionable solutions to guide policymakers. Now, the challenge lies in translating these ideas into tangible reforms that ensure no voice is left unheard in Nigeria's civic discourse.

Expanding civic inclusivity is not merely about integrating marginalized voices; it is about reshaping the very structures that have perpetuated exclusion. By fostering a culture of representation and equity, Nigeria can build a democracy that not only survives but thrives. The lessons from these dialogues serve as a roadmap, urging stakeholders to commit to a future where civic engagement is accessible to all, regardless of age, displacement, or socioeconomic status.

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Empower through digital inclusion: Tech hubs for youth, elderly, and IDPs create an equitable future.





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