REPORT

Inaugural Conference of the
Civic Space Project

The Yar'Adua Centre, Abuja-Nigeria

28th July, 2021

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Civic engagement in Nigeria cuts across all sectors and levels of society. For years, the Nigerian civic space has been engaged by different categories of civic activists and civil society organisations. These engagements are geared towards deepening the culture of democracy, holding the government to account, and allowing citizens' ideas to help shape the direction of governance.

Some people argue that the civic space globally, in Africa generally, and in Nigeria, in particular, is under serious attack. Those who share this narrative refer to the restrictive legislation by the Nigerian government, disruption of peaceful public protests, arrests of agitators and so on. The media agencies are also not left out, where both old and new media suffer from this clampdown. On the other hand, some insist that the civic space in Nigeria is not only expanding but thriving.

Despite conflicting views, the goal is not to take sides, but rather, to promote a strategic and comprehensive way of deploying the Civic space to encourage citizens to make use of the civic space strategically and constructively, so that the government can benefit. This means ensuring that relationships are established, barriers are broken, prejudices are dismantled, and our common citizenship is developed. This in turn will contribute towards strengthening social cohesion and national integration.

To that effect, The Kukah Centre (TKC) organised an inaugural conference titled: 'Civic Space: The Pathway to Social Cohesion and Integration in Nigeria.' The purpose of the conference was twofold: to launch its project aimed at strengthening the Nigerian civic space, and to spark up a series of discourses and conversations geared towards deepening the culture of democracy and free speech in Nigeria. This event, which occurred on 28th July 2021 at the Yar'Adua Centre, Abuja-Nigeria, followed Chatham House rules[1] and had in attendance a mixture of donors, the project implementer, civil society organisations, youths, faith-based organisations and the media. This admixture was crucial to ensure open and flowing discussions.

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[1] In which points made and information disclosed during a meeting may be reported by those present, but the source of the points or information may not be explicitly or implicitly identified. This report therefore also adheres to this rule.

The Civic Space: Current Realities

It was unanimously agreed that the civic space was built on fundamental rights of freedom and regulated by legal instruments. These instruments are expected to guarantee the continuous thriving of the civic space. However, it was argued that within the last six years, the civic space has shrunk especially with regard to rights and freedoms (both physical and virtual). It was also pointed out that the drivers of the shrinking civic space are not static, but change with time. This indicates that the elements of civic engagement and activism should be defined by current realities. On the other hand, the civic space so far has brought progress and advancement; the strength, energy and versatility of human beings ensure that the space does not shrink. However, episodic incidents have threatened civic engagement and participation, but that has only led to more creativity in navigating the civic space.

Another school of thought argued that it is not the space itself that is shrinking, but rather, the people engaging within the space that are oftentimes shrinking themselves and/or allowing the space to shrink them. This downturn is evident through societal injustices and prejudices, that has led to exclusion of certain minority and marginalized groups. These biases contribute to making the space toxic. While the Civic space was created to help the marginalized, the ultimate aim of civic engagement is for freedom of association to share knowledge and the ability to influence the work of the government.

According to the Freedom House[2] index, Nigeria has been in steady decline, ranking as partly free. This is evident in the decline of its civic and political rights. This has also led to censorship, not just censorship by the powers that be, but also self-censorship. Moreover, the current civic space has been argued to focus more on the rights of citizens, than concurrently illuminate citizens' duties. Civic engagement encompasses more than just a platform to participate but also represents a ray of hope. Therefore, there should be a responsibility to actively organize and fight for the society we want.

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[2] Freedom House is the oldest American organization devoted to the support and defense of democracy around the world. It is a non-profit non-governmental organization that conducts research and advocacy on democracy, political freedom, and human rights. Freedom House is founded on the core conviction that freedom flourishes in democratic nations where governments are accountable to their people.

Challenges Impacting Civic Engagement and Participation

Several factors were identified to negatively impact the civic space as well as civic engagement and participation. Some of these include:

- Government Regulations: Despite the provisions of the 1999 Constitution of The Federal Republic of Nigeria, Nigerians are deprived of their fundamental human rights to exercise their freedom of expression (Section 39) and the freedom of association (Section 40) via restrictive legislation. Examples include the push for the Social Media Bill and the limitations on the media. There are also protests by the public of the failure of the government to listen to the cries of its people as well as meet collective aspirations. These actions often leave the leaders isolated from the citizens.

- Role of the Media: it can be quite challenging for the media to effectively function in civic engagement because of several factors. One of such is regulations by the government which hampers objective reporting by the media houses as well as platforms for people to gather and have debates that will foster social cohesion. On the part of the media, some of the media houses have political and/or ethnic leanings which can negatively impact social cohesion and national integration.

- Lack of a robust and comprehensive database: data gathering in the country often works in isolation with no standard regulation on integrating information collected. This impacts the reliability of data and statistics and leads to the damage of fake news founded on half-truths and fabricated facts, where individuals rely more on estimates than facts, or even no facts at all.

- Insecurity: Insecurity is still rampant in many parts of the country. While strengthening the civic space amidst the insecurity is challenging, disrupting citizens from peacefully expressing themselves also increases the likelihood of violence.

- Communication gaps: Lack of communication breeds suspicion and mutual distrust, which could lead to exclusion and possible violence, hampering social cohesion. Many Nigerians still do not understand one another because of a lack of communication.

- The unwillingness of individuals to participate in civic engagement: this is due to different factors such as fears of a clampdown on protesters by the government, a distinct lack of interest in citizen participation, a lack of confidence and/or even personal integrity.

Strengthening the Civic Space: The Way Forward

What has brought human progress is the ability of man to keep knocking at the door. Attempts have been made and will continue to be made to shrink the civic space. There must therefore be a willingness to occupy the space, as nobody will give you the space until you are willing to take the space. Moreover, the civic space plays a vital role in bringing about cohesion and stability. While the masses do not need to fight the government at all times to get their voices heard, it is important for citizens to continually claim the civic space by persisting and continuing the fight. By the end of the discourse, the following recommendations were put forward:

■ Changing the political culture of the country: The starting point to strengthening the civic space is to understand and differentiate the indices of national development. One of these is to work on leadership recruitment processes; it is key to have a government in place that ensures that rule of law is adhered to at all times.

■ Role of the Media: The Nigerian media plays a critical role in strengthening the civic space. The integrity of the media therefore matters. Media outlets should provide proper framing of narratives to reduce misinformation and hate speech. There is also a need for media houses to always fact-check and address how media reportage is carried out, to ensure that the right message is passed across. Furthermore, they should recognize the damage of fake news founded on half-truths and fabricated facts, and contribute to educating the masses on how to identify 'fake news.'

■ The need for Evidence-Based Advocacy: To effectively participate in the civic space, adequate knowledge of the challenges revolving around and within the civic space must be known to tailor the suitable solutions. Additionally, appropriate mechanisms must be put in place for the dissemination & fact-checking of information received.

■ Inclusion and Diversity: Issues of diversity and inclusion should not be neglected. Ignorant people cannot participate in civic engagements. Inclusion should be all-inclusive and all-encompassing. To therefore participate effectively in the civic space, Nigerians need to be adequately

educated on social cohesion and the need for acceptance and open-mindedness. Strategies that mitigate perceived issues of marginalization should also be designed by providing platforms that address the concerns of minority groups as well as the issues of marginalization and feelings of injustice.

■ Promoting social cohesion and coexistence through debate and dialogue: Hatred is usually informed by false information. Effective communication is therefore crucial. When people are free to express themselves on how nation-building should go, it is easier to foster social cohesion. Consequently, the civic space should be expanded to include more dialogue and debate. One of such methods is to call for a national dialogue to address the concerns of people that have festered over the years.

■ Investment in Education and Advocacy: Sensitization of the masses on how cohesion can be achieved and, on their responsibilities and duties as citizens is imperative.

■ The need for community engagement: Civic participation should not be limited to urban regions alone. Community sensitization processes in local communities must be carried out. This includes educating local communities on building social cohesion and promoting community stakeholder engagement in driving the narrative. Civic space engagement should also be promoted by providing platforms for citizens to engage and interrogate government policies.

■ Socialization and Specialization of the Civic Space: In recent times, the civic space has become more socialized, with a lot of specialization; there is always an area that more work should be done. To strengthen civic activism, participants in the space must take on more specific roles to promote civic engagement.

■ Religious Actors as Drivers to promoting the civic space: Religious leaders in Nigeria are respected in their communities. They have the power to raise awareness and influence attitudes, behaviours and practices. They can shape social values via faith-based teachings. Religious leaders are influential hence they play a vital role in promoting the civic space.

Conclusion

Though both are needed amidst the fight to promote the civic space, strategy is better than energy. Therefore, citizens must develop a positive engagement strategy that also includes approaches to engage the media and widen the space. Participants in the civic space must also possess personal integrity. This will not only revive a sense of accomplishment but also ensure the sustainability of civic participation.

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This report was produced by The Kukah Centre, a Nigeria-based non-profit, non-governmental and public policy organisation that offers alternative approaches to the challenges of leadership and the impact of conflict on national development. Interfaith dialogue is at the core of the Centre's work and involves actively promoting conversations among Nigeria's faith communities, as well as between leaders in faith and public policy. The Kukah Centre's core programme areas include: Interfaith Dialogue, Peace and Conflict Resolution, Leadership Training and Development, Good governance, Public Policy Research, Memory and Knowledge Preservation.

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