

# Institutionalising Community Engagement and Citizen Participation to Enhance Governance and Policy in Nigeria

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite global trends toward more participatory policymaking, Nigeria's enabling environment for community engagement appears to lack mutual trust and is characterised by fragmented systems and inconsistent rules. This undermines policy effectiveness and erodes public confidence in governance. This policy brief points out that mistrust remains a critical barrier to active citizen participation, as community input rarely influences policy outcomes, thus causing further participation fatigue and erosion of trust.

The brief argues that creating nationally accepted standards for community engagement, per global best practices, will provide a framework for strengthening the Central Delivery Coordination Unit (CDCU) to monitor and evaluate how Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) design, fund, and use community engagement methods in performance assessment. It also illustrates the outcome of effective institutionalisation of community engagement by analysing South Africa's Integrated Development Plans (IDPs). This robust, legally-backed framework embeds community participation in local governance and development planning. By leveraging financial autonomy at the local government level to institutionalise bottom-up feedback systems, this can bring governance closer to communities. It alludes to the need to build long-term capacity within MDAs to design inclusive, iterative, and outcome-based community engagement processes aligned with national priorities.

## Introduction

Governance is a social contract between people and representatives. Such foundations have been the bastion of democratic principles, with people at the centre of representative government, thereby giving a sense of ownership. Beyond ownership, this social contract helps entrench trust and belief in quality service delivery as a benefit of governance. However, an essential element of such a social contract is the maintenance of channels for feedback and proper integration of citizens' concerns into governance processes. Succinctly put, citizen participation is an integral part of liberal-democratic theory, which holds that the reformist and developmental perspectives of "active citizens" are required for policy and institutional settings in governance (Fung 2003; Warren 2001). However, practicable and contemporary approaches suggest larger citizen engagement –i.e., an active relationship, improve public consultation (often periodic) – with more emphasis on continuous bridge building between governmental and non-governmental sectors on one hand and organisational/institutional forums for a large number of people.

Elections and competitions among parties for public office are often viewed as insufficient for representative government. The global emphasis has shifted to the need for continuous dialogue between governments and their citizens to set priorities and define outcomes. Thus, there is a need for institutionalised democracy using community engagement and citizen participation strategies. In Nigeria, election periods are often marked by sustained engagement with citizens to "sell" manifestos and visionary designs for the country's progress. These often translate into motivations for service delivery within the mandates of ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs). Evaluating the extent and effectiveness of community engagement in developing countries (like Nigeria) remains an issue. Key indicators often used to assess this include the quality of participatory and cooperative processes, service delivery outcomes following community engagement, and improvements in community organisational factors such as capacity building, recognition of inequalities, timeframes for expected results, funding, and structures for interaction (Head, 2008). On the other hand, non-governmental organisations that have also adopted community engagement as a tool for collaboration with communities for social justice and project outcomes evaluate its success using criteria of (i) enabling conditions (ii) leadership (iii) core commitments and guiding values and (iv) formative social science research.

This policy brief presents the current gaps in citizen and community engagement strategies and systems in Nigeria. With a focus on the national context, it proposes practical policy measures to institutionalise active citizenry engagement for governance outcomes in Nigeria. Lastly, to properly unpack the links between governance and community/citizen engagement, it covers a somewhat successful case study in Africa that can inform policy and strategy lessons for implementation in Nigeria. Overall, this policy brief intends to advance the principles of collective governance via institutionalisation of citizen/community engagement strategies that further strengthen feedback loops between government and its people; A prerequisite for social contract in democracies.

## Contextualizing Gaps in Community Engagement and Citizen Participation in Nigeria

An essential element in any democracy or representative government is trust. Although strategies for engagement exist, the utilisation of participatory processes depends on how citizens perceive and trust such processes (i.e., when they exist). Globally, different regions have advanced society-centred participatory processes for community engagement that ultimately build the trust required to engage with existing processes. Worthy of mention among developed countries included the 'Third Way approach' to government and society relations (Giddens, 1998), revitalisation of civil society (Keane, 1988), and institutionalised participatory frameworks to achieve enduring social benefits (OECD, 2001, 2003, UNDESA, 2003). In developing countries, studies show that advances in communication technology and globalisation have been cited as strong enablers and drivers of participatory processes in community engagement and as building trust (see Held and McGrew, 2003; OECD, 2003).

Gallup polls from 2021 indicate that Nigerians had the lowest level of confidence in their national government across Africa (Gallup, 2022). This survey found that only one in four Nigerians had confidence in the national government, while Nigerians' confidence about election integrity, an important factor linked to development outcomes, fell from 45 percent in 2017 to 18 percent in 2021. This also increases citizens' perception of government as "corrupt" by 25 points above the global average of 68 percent (see Figure 1). These dimensions are essential to how citizens see governance processes and engage with existing systems that checkmate governance.

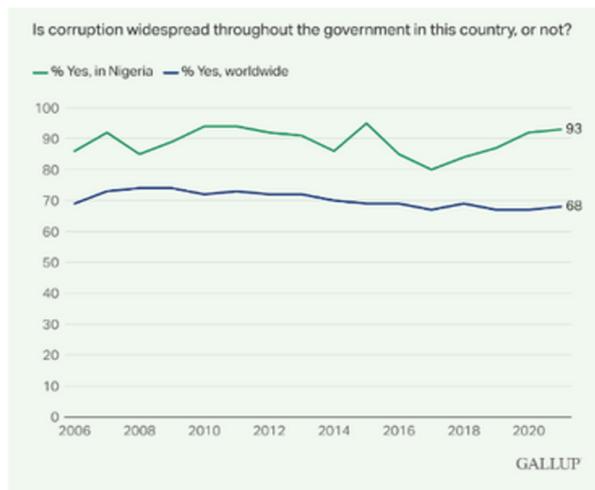
The extent of the trust deficit among Nigerians stems from their lived experiences across sectors and from failures in service delivery, often driven by corruption. The scale of such corruption reveals the government's inability to scale citizen-participation systems that can drive community engagement, especially when many Nigerians already anticipate a null outcome. Policy makers' approach to this seems to be in reverse, tackling the resultant issues arising from the breach in public trust rather than improving participatory processes/systems (such as community engagement) that strengthen confidence in the business side of governance and service delivery. The success of institutional community engagement depends on how much Nigerians (at all levels) trust participatory processes. Some of these systems already exist, but citizens' trust in such processes appears to remain a challenge. Within legislative contexts, these include: Town hall meetings, Petitions, committee and public hearings, and submissions of memoranda. Moreover, the constant incentivisation (e.g., tokenism) of extant processes further undermines expected outcomes and points to a recognition of a broken system in public trust.

**Figure 1: Nigerians' Confidence in National Government Falls to Lowest in Africa**



Source: Gallup Polls (June 2022)

**Figure 2: Perceived Government Corruption in Nigeria Among the World's Highest**



Source: Gallup Polls (June 2022)

Resources committed to community engagement systems also present a significant gap in implementing participatory citizen engagement for policy and governance in Nigeria. Setting priorities for community engagement and citizen participation shows how best efforts are directed toward improving existing systems to track community voices and feedback, and how effectively those voices are reflected in the implementation of interventions. With gaps around resources, investing in existing feedback to track these outcomes presents another set of challenges. Budgets of ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) often include financial costs for "stakeholder engagements," reflected as citizen/civil society participation, buy-in, and communication, either at the inception stage or as part of processes. There is a need to shift community engagements away from a "one-off-meeting" approach to garnering their voices and adopting a more structured, iterative approach.

## Table 1: 2025 Community Engagement Budget Allocations for Selected MDAs

Line Item from 2025 Budget	Budget Amount (NGN)	Status	MDA
NACA HIV ERADICATION ZONAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	128,627,453	ongoing	Sec. To the Govt. Of the Federation
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT MEETINGS ON IMPROVEMENT OF POLICY REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR ARTS CULTURE, TOURISM AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES	25,000,000	new	Federal Ministry of Budget & Economic Planning (Headquarters)
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL LIVESTOCK TRANSFORMATION PLAN, ANIMAL BREEDING AND CONSERVATION, ANIMAL GENETIC RESOURCES (ANGR)	20,000,000	new	Federal Ministry of Environment (Headquarters)
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT MEETINGS ON IMPROVEMENT OF POLICY REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR ARTS CULTURE, TOURISM AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES	10,000,000	Ongoing	Federal Ministry of Arts, Culture & Creativ Economy (Headquarters)
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL LIVESTOCK TRANSFORMATION PLAN, ANIMAL BREEDING AND CONSERVATION, ANIMAL GENETIC RESOURCES (ANGR)	34,000,500	new	Federal Ministry of Livestock Development (Headquarters)
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN COLLABORATION WITH NAPRI, FUNNAB FOR COMMERCIALIZATION OF INDIGENOUS BREED OF BIRDS	22,800,000	new	Federal Ministry of Livestock Development (Headquarters)
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT WITH THE STATE MINISTRIES OF LIVESTOCK FOR LIVESTOCK DATA GATHERING	34,900,000	new	Federal Ministry of Livestock Development (Headquarters)
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT (STATE GOVERNORS, COMMISSIONERS OF LIVESTOCK MINISTRIES OR LINE MINISTRIES, ALGON, TRADITIONAL RULERS AND LEADERS OF THOUGHT) ON FARMER-HERDER CONFLICT RESOLUTION AT THE FEDERAL AND STATE LEVELS	85,500,000	new	Federal Ministry of Livestock Development (Headquarters)
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENTS WITH TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND VARIOUS ORGANIZATIONS	160,000,000	new	Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security (Headquarters)
QUARTERLY STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENTS OF PUBLIC / PRIVATE FINANCIAL EXPERTS ON THE PROMOTION OF E-GOVERNANCE IN PUBLIC FINANCE	75,000,000	Ongoing	Federal Ministry of Finance (Headquarters)

<b>STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT ON THE DEPARTMENT'S PROGRAMMES/PROJECTS DIRECTION</b>	4,493,600	new	Federal Ministry of Budget & Economic Planning (Headquarters)
<b>STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT ON THE DEPARTMENT'S PROGRAMMES/PROJECTS DIRECTION</b>	5,493,600	new	Federal Ministry of Budget & Economic Planning (Headquarters)
<b>PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP (PPP) STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND SENSITIZATION FRAMEWORK</b>	32,090,120	new	Federal Ministry of Trade and Investment (Headquarters)
<b>QUARTERLY CITIZENS AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS TO COMMUNICATE GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES AND SERVE AS FEEDBACK MECHANISM</b>	260,465,286	Ongoing	Federal Ministry of Solid Minerals (Headquarters)
<b>IMPLEMENTATION OF QUARTERLY CITIZENS AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS</b>	32,487,750	Ongoing	Federal Ministry of Environment (Headquarters)
<b>STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT ON ADDRESSING LOSS AND DAMAGE TO THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE AT NATIONAL AND SUB-NATIONAL LEVEL</b>	12,500,000	Ongoing	Federal Ministry of Environment (Headquarters)

Source: 2025 Budget

Evaluation of the 2025 budget shows different amounts (i.e., line items) budgeted for community/stakeholder engagement across 10 ministries and agencies (See Table 1). Further investigation into performance budgets and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) reports might show how feedback from stakeholders and community engagement will inform project deliverables, while further research will be required to contextualise these into the MDA performance mechanism to build trust in public institutions and policy frameworks. To assess how effective these stakeholder engagements have been in the past, researchers can utilise existing legal frameworks, such as the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2007. Although this law did not explicitly mention community engagement, it was clear in its provision for MDAs to provide fiscal data on budget proposals, execution, and performance for citizens to interrogate. Civil society groups have relevant experience with this, but have yet to unpack the community/stakeholder engagement component. Such civic society responsibilities to interrogate the potency of this law have often been achieved by designing civic tech tools that help increase access to participatory feedback on government spending. A handful of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have provided these innovative civic tech tools to help the government build open data platforms and websites around these issues identified. CSOs also continue to train citizens to use the data to engage the government. Such frameworks can also help uncover gaps in resource mobilisation for potent stakeholder/citizen engagement.

Consultation fatigue represents another gap in community engagement, closely linked to a trust deficit. Due to community stakeholders' experience with repeated and/or ineffective consultation processes, many have become exhausted or disengaged with such national community engagement systems. This stems from the outcomes of previous community engagement, which appear to lose their potency over time. Tokenism cannot improve consultation fatigue. This leads to superficial participation, disengagement, and frustration when financial expectations are not met (Pretty, 1995). Lapses in communicating the outcomes and impact of community engagements contribute to consultation fatigue, with many stakeholders having specific outcomes cut short. Therefore, highlighting the need for national community engagement systems to show clear pathways for how engagements will directly or indirectly contribute to deliverables and outcomes, while maintaining channels for community feedback. This can be done at the inception, mid-line and end-line of projects. By developing stakeholder communication plans, implementing proper Gender, Equity, Diversity and Social/digital Inclusion (GEDSI) stakeholder criteria, these can also help reduce consultation fatigue. Closely linked to this factor is political buy-in and leadership to drive innovation and community engagement platforms. Often, leadership can drive and reduce consultation fatigue by aligning processes for vertical and horizontal integration of community engagement ideas with outcomes.

The lack of consensus on what constitutes effective community engagement measures represents another gap in Nigeria's community engagement systems at national level. Different ministries and government agencies implement community/stakeholder engagements based on mandates and policy requirements. Without a standardized community engagement system, federal agencies might find it hard to apply systematic measures that enhance quality and outcomes in their efforts. Studies (Albercht & Scriven, 2011; World Bank, 2015) which review and standardizes community engagement have identified key criteria such as inclusivity (all segments of society consider –including vulnerable and marginalized groups), transparency (sharing clear and accessible information on purpose, process and expected outcomes for such community engagement), mutual respect (that ensures civic subjects are not as object), sustainability for developing standardized community engagement measures. Again, international organizations and civil society have advanced some standardized community engagement measures. Specifically, the International Association of Public Participation (IAPP) and Open Government Partnership (OGP) have developed globally recognized measures and standards for community engagement which can assist national frameworks and standards to be implemented by MDAs during initiatives that involve direct community feedback.

## Case Study on Successful Institutionalisation of Community Engagement Systems: South Africa's Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Local Government Municipalities

Developed as the bedrock for municipalities' improvement, South Africa's Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) represent an essential service delivery and blueprint system for wholesome local development (See South African Cities Network, 2020). It was created to align with local, provincial, and national development plans for infrastructure, social, environmental, and economic upscaling. Every municipality is assessed and properly integrated into larger plans through robust needs assessments and analyses of strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and challenges. This means proper coordination among MDAs to achieve larger municipal goals.

A key feature of South Africa's IDP is its focus on local and community engagement, supported by the Municipal Systems Act. This framework not only mandates that municipalities across South Africa develop IDPs but also hinges the success of this on community engagement. Consultation systems are core components of these IDPs. The Municipal System Act states that "... a Municipality must encourage and create conditions for the local community to participate in the affairs of the Municipality." It also provides guidelines to ensure that such participation is not limited to incipient (i.e., preparatory) processes but extends to the implementation and review of IDPs.

This system enhances local governance while aligning its progress with national development policies, agendas, and plans. It also recognises that citizen/stakeholder participatory processes extend beyond election periods, when politicians seek "social contract" consent, often revisiting these communities during the next election cycle. The IDP in the local and municipal systems is also institutionalised, allowing regular monitoring and progress checks with specific timelines for updates (every five years) if there are changes in community priorities and circumstances. It also has well-rounded community measures, criteria, and a strategy to check overall progress. These include: (i) The roles of the different stakeholders during the participation process (ii) ways to encourage the participation of unorganised groups (iii) methods to ensure participation during the different phases of planning (iv) timeframes for public and stakeholder inputs (v) ways to disseminate information (vi) means to collect information on community needs to collect information on community needs.

However, there are still challenges with IDP implementation in South Africa. Political agency, influence, and capacity to sustain momentum remain major obstacles to the success of IDPs in South Africa. Like many institutions in Africa, the functionality and efficiency of these systems also depend on resources earmarked for community engagement and the development of learning reports to inform policy. Despite this, IDPs have resulted in more transparent, responsive, and inclusive governance at the local level. The participatory planning processes have empowered communities to actively influence their development priorities and ensure that local governments meet their needs. It has been successful in addressing historical imbalances and providing communities with a direct voice in decision-making.

## Policy and Practice Options for Nigeria

There is a need to invest in understanding participation dynamics and to commission additional studies on the potential and long-term effectiveness of community engagement capacity building initiatives for MDAs at the national level. There appears to be some recognition in the current administration of the role community engagement can play in fostering feedback on governance. For the first time in Nigeria, the President appointed Special Assistants on Community Engagements with a regional focus. What remains to be seen is how these political appointees can utilise their portfolios alongside newly created regional development commissions to drive the institutionalisation of community engagement for policy and initiatives beyond the archetype one-off engagements often held in boardrooms. These processes need to be seen as capable of linking the feedback process to outcomes and initiatives.

To reduce citizen trust deficit in governance institutions, there must be nationally accepted standards for community engagement tied closely to initiatives' outcomes. A collaborative system that helps MDAs mainstream investments in community engagement throughout the entire lifecycle of sector-based initiatives/projects. This should be closely linked to the KPIs of appointed ministers and to indicators to monitor ministries' integration into Mr President's development agenda (if need be). What this implies, at least for the Special Adviser to the President on Policy and Coordination, is a closer attention to community engagement components of MDAs. As such, the Central Delivery Coordination Unit (CDCU) would need to devise metrics to measure how MDAs utilise community engagement systems (e.g., resources, design, feedback, outcomes) to align with the overall government policy agenda. By strengthening the public appraisal criteria for ministers and MDAs, the community engagement component is therefore enhanced by further engaging with citizens, media, and civil society across specific metrics to interrogate overall performance.

Secondly, with the financial autonomy of local governments guaranteed by the Supreme Court of Nigeria, community engagement requires a targeted approach to leverage local governments' proximity to help conceive a bottom-up feedback approach. This should also apply even to Federal MDAs for community engagement processes. Designed guidelines should show how local actors participate in planning and implementation, and how their concerns during execution were addressed. It should also show how community engagement outcomes impact local governance and development pathways. Furthermore, the creation of regional development commissions (e.g., the North-East Development Commission) should provide clearer pathways for aligning community engagement with identified development challenges specific to each region. This not only helps measure the performance of these fledgling commissions but also strengthens accountability frameworks and reduces trust deficits.

Legal safeguards provided by the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act (and the recent Supreme Court pronouncement on sub-national compliance) should also be further probed by citizens and civil society to test how the implementation of community engagement systems ties to development outcomes. Larger systemic bottlenecks, such as the oath of secrecy for civil servants, which undermines FOI effectiveness, require review, as CSOs are constantly ranking the extent of public disclosure of data that citizens can use to engage and build trust further.



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