



...Promoting Human Rights

STRENGTHENING CIVIC SPACE IN NIGERIA: ADVANCING THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY FOR DEMOCRATIC INCLUSION AND ACCOUNTABILITY



Lawyers Alert (LA) strives to see a society where all individuals fully enjoy their rights within inclusive, accountable, and rights-respecting governance systems. Through legal aid and rapid response, we support victims of human rights violations, alongside civic space monitoring, documentation, and evidence-based advocacy. We also promote protection of civic freedoms, including freedom to peaceful assembly, association and protest. By advancing rights awareness and public education, and strengthening civil society capacity and coordination in support of these rights.

Lawyers Alert's work on civic space is grounded in the belief that the environment should enable citizens and civil society organisations to participate freely in political, social, and public life. Freedom of peaceful assembly is a key pillar of democratic governance because it allows citizens to express grievances, demand accountability, and advocate for social change.

Against this backdrop, Lawyers Alert has, in the last 4 years, forged partnerships and collaborations aimed at creating awareness, sensitising and defending the rights of persons whose civic rights are violated, both by the government and individuals. One such collaboration is our work with Hope Behind Bars on the “Increasing Civic Rights and Freedom of Peaceful Assembly in Nigeria” project funded by the CIVICUS WERISE Campaign cohorts 1 and 2. The intervention sought to strengthen and protect the right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly (FOPA) in Nigeria through advocacy, public awareness, legal support, research, and institutional engagement. The initiative was rooted in the constitutional and international legal guarantees that recognise Peaceful Assembly as a fundamental human right. Section 40 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees Citizens the right to assemble freely and associate with others for the protection of their interests. Nigeria is also a signatory to regional and international instruments, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), both of which protect the right to peaceful assembly. Despite these protections, civic freedoms in Nigeria continue to face increasing restrictions. Security agencies frequently disrupt peaceful protests and civic gatherings, while protesters and human rights activists are often subjected to intimidation, arrests, and unlawful detention. The #EndSARS protests further exposed the shrinking civic space in Nigeria and highlighted the urgent need for stronger protections for citizens exercising their democratic rights. This project therefore sought to promote a Nigeria in which all citizens, especially women, youth, and vulnerable groups, can peacefully express their opinions, organise collectively, and participate in civic activities without fear of repression or violence.

Impact on Civic Space and Democracy in Nigeria

The project was highly significant to the protection of civic space and the advancement of democracy in Nigeria.

Through strategic advocacy, media campaigns, legal interventions, and public sensitisation, the project helped raise awareness of citizens’ constitutional rights and the responsibilities of security agencies in protecting those rights. By engaging directly with institutions such as the Nigeria Police Force and the Nigerian Bar Association, the project encouraged a more rights-based approach to policing assemblies and handling protests. The initiative also strengthened democratic participation by empowering citizens to engage peacefully in governance processes without fear of harassment or intimidation. The provision of free legal support for protesters and activists will help protect vulnerable citizens from unlawful detention and abuse of power, while promoting accountability within the justice system.

Additionally, the project’s research and documentation component provided evidence on violations of civic freedoms in Nigeria, thereby contributing to policy reforms, public discourse, and future advocacy efforts. The use of media campaigns, short videos, posters, infographics, and articles further expanded public engagement and encouraged broader support for the protection of civic rights.



At the launch of the research on violations of civic freedoms in Nigeria, in Abuja, Nigeria

Ultimately, the project promotes democratic values such as accountability, participation, inclusion, transparency, and respect for human rights. By safeguarding civic space, the project contributes to

Building a more open and democratic society where citizens can freely participate in national development and governance.

Challenges

Despite its importance, the project faced some challenges during implementation.

One major challenge was the visible resistance or antagonism from government institutions and security agencies. Since the project addressed issues relating to protests, civic freedoms, and police accountability, some authorities perceived the initiative as confrontational or politically sensitive.

Another challenge was the fear among citizens and participants who may be reluctant to openly engage in project activities due to concerns about harassment, arrest, or security backlash. The history of disruptions of peaceful protests in Nigeria has created fear and distrust among many citizens, particularly youth and activists.

The project also faced operational challenges related to the size and diversity of Nigeria. Coordinating activities across different regions, especially in communities with varying political and security realities, may require significant resources and strong collaboration between stakeholders.

Furthermore, misinformation, negative media narratives, or deliberate attempts to discredit civic actors may undermine public trust in the project's objectives and reduce participation.

Recommendations

To ensure the project's success and sustainability, several measures are recommended.

1. Firstly, continuous engagement with government institutions and security agencies is necessary to build trust, improve understanding of constitutional rights, and encourage cooperation. High-level advocacy meetings with police authorities and other relevant institutions should remain a key strategy throughout the project lifecycle.
2. Secondly, strong legal support mechanisms should be maintained to protect participants and respond promptly to cases of unlawful arrest or detention. The collaboration with lawyers' networks and the Nigerian Bar Association should be strengthened to ensure rapid legal intervention where necessary.
3. Thirdly, public awareness and media engagement should be intensified to educate citizens about their rights and promote positive narratives around peaceful assembly. Media partnerships will be essential in amplifying campaign messages and building public support for civic freedoms.
4. There is also a need for continued research and documentation of violations against peaceful protesters and human rights defenders. Reliable data and evidence will strengthen advocacy efforts and support long-term policy reforms.
5. Finally, collaboration with civil society organisations, community leaders, journalists, youth groups, and women-led organisations should be expanded to create a broad-based movement for the protection of civic space and democratic rights in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The "Increasing Civic Rights and Freedom of Peaceful Assembly in Nigeria" project was a timely and important intervention aimed at strengthening civic freedoms and democratic participation in Nigeria. At a time when civic space continues to shrink and peaceful protests are increasingly restricted, the project provides a strategic platform for advocacy, awareness creation, legal protection, and institutional engagement.

By promoting the right to peaceful assembly and protecting citizens from unlawful restrictions and abuses, the initiative reinforces the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. It empowers citizens to participate actively in governance processes and creates opportunities for constructive engagement between the public and state institutions.

