Engaged Citizens Constitituency Influence Story No.6:

Election Agenda Setting: Promises Made, Promises Kept? How Nigeria's civil society is holding elected government leaders to greater account – a look back over four elections

Since the restoration of civil rule in 1999, development partners have played a significant role in promoting fairer and freer elections in Nigeria. Through programmes such as the Partnership to Engage, Reform and Learn (PERL) and its predecessors, the UK Government has backed up election monitoring and advocacy for changes in electoral law with critical support to civil society and media to influence political agendas and hold elected officials to account.

In Nigeria, as in any democratic country, an election is a fresh opportunity to make progress on fulfilling the fundamental ideas of a democratic society. It is a crucial moment for a citizen to take part by attending campaign events, informing themselves on campaign manifestos, interrogating these manifestos and demanding that their needs are prioritised, and of course voting.

Elections represent a propitious time to ramp up public discussion on policy, to focus the minds of citizens on developing an agenda of their issues and to form coalitions of the willing around issues they have in common. They can then take their priorities to the candidates in an election, demand that campaign commitments reflect them, and then track how well the politician delivers on these promises during their

time in office. Citizen's involvement in politics gives credibility to a political process and system, a moment when issues should move to the forefront and not be edged out by the noise of divisive rhetoric or tribal and religious politicking. Yet voter turnout in the last elections cycle in 2023 was only 23 per cent.

The state of elections in Nigeria

According to a recent report by the MacArthur Foundation[i], elections in Nigeria are a clear demonstration of how the electoral process can marginalise large groups, including women and youth and people with disabilities. Due to widespread misconduct, including voter suppression, the outcome of elections is increasingly being decided by the courts rather than by the electorate. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) needs measures to demonstrate greater transparency and independence and lift public confidence in the electoral process.

What is more, the vetting process for candidates is tightly controlled by politicians, to control the distribution of public resources. Elected officials are generally expected to promote public projects that garner a political return for their party, through award of contracts or rendering of services to party loyalists and in favourable political locations, rather than to the broader geography under their purview, whether that is a whole state or a parliamentary constituency.

The UK's role in deepening democratic elections

Development partners in Nigeria regularly convene at the national level during every election cycle to support election monitoring as observers. However, their role has evolved over time to include providing technical assistance to INEC on election and logistics management, and to civil society groups and media houses on voter education and independent reporting of elections from the field to contest any discrepancies in the results reported to INEC.

In 2011, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) gave support to civil society groups to monitor local elections and to establish monitoring mechanisms such as putting observers in 'situation rooms' at polling stations from which they could digitally monitor elections and feed results into a central database.

Development partners also give support to civil society groups demanding changes in electoral legislation. For more than ten years, FCDO has provided technical assistance to make improvements in Nigeria's electoral laws and open up the candidate selection process to democratise it. It has also given support to INEC to build up its independence, make it more accountable to the public and to strengthen its technical capabilities.

In the recent 2023 elections, civil society was fully engaged in oversight by conducting third-party monitoring. Nevertheless, the outcome of the 2023 elections showed the limitations of these efforts when faced with the influence of political parties in the form of voter suppression efforts to undermine rivals in many Nigerian states during presidential, national assembly, gubernatorial and state assembly elections.[ii]

Citizens groups regroup to work within electoral constraints

Given that the electoral process in Nigeria is still in need of further reform, civil society groups and the media have turned their attention in some states to focus on ways to influence the agenda and priorities of the winning candidates, whether the winner is their preferred choice or not.

This is part of a long and gradual shift that is happening; of citizen groups moving away from engaging candidates strictly along party, ethnic, religious or geo-political lines, which merely reinforces the status quo of patronage and clientelism. They are now organising better to push politicians to be more inclusive and equitable and to share the benefits of democracy once in office.

Many citizens groups are now leveraging the knowledge and skills they have in oversight of sub-national public resources, built up through years of holding their state and local governments accountable for how they budget, plan and carry out public investments. They are now applying these to demand candidates set out their policy priorities during their campaign in line with citizen's concerns and longer-term development plans and holding candidates to task once they are in office through public planning processes.

In elections that took place in the mid-2000s, citizen groups engaged in collective agenda setting for citizens to have ownership of their needs and recommend ways to do things better. In recent years, this has crystalised into setting out their priorities in the form of citizen charters of demand (CCD), for candidates to incorporate into their manifestos, and government plans if they are victorious. This has taken several election cycles to evolve into a number of Nigeria's states.

2011 elections: citizen coalitions extend influence on incoming government

The UK-funded State Accountability and Voice Initiative (SAVI, 2008-2016) supported civil society in Nigeria to build coalitions for greater impact during the elections of 2011 and 2015 with a range of support to civil society groups, non-governmental organisations, the media, think tanks, labour unions and the private sector – work which PERL continued in subsequent elections. Both SAVI and PERL helped partners to create the underlying conditions for greater accountability on the part of political leaders for effective service delivery.

One of the key challenges for citizens working in partnership with government, looking to make sure their issues are taken up and followed up by successive governments, is when elections bring new officials into office. Many politicians seek to make their own mark with their own agenda, rather than continue the agenda of their predecessor. During the elections in 2011 and 2015, civil society groups stepped up and sustained public pressure to push their issues, both pre- and post- elections, and showed what can be done during a period of political transition.

2015 elections: taking a more planned and systematic approach

In partnership with the media and using a strategy of promoting "mandate protection" – namely a way for civil society groups to continue to press for their agendas into the next administration – civil society groups in many states attempted to get political candidates to make open and public declarations in the press about public priorities that they would carry forward into the next administration. Groups devised strategic plans involving media partnerships, holding meetings and debates between citizens and elected officials, and making citizens better informed and able to participate in public fora. Mandate protection took on various forms in different states.

In Lagos State, for example, through partner training, broadcasters kept citizens engaged in the issues after the elections, including on gender inclusion.

In Katsina State, the Coalition of Civil Society Organisations conducted a wide-ranging effort, contributing to townhall meetings, gubernatorial debates, and media debates with the candidates, and helped citizens engage with legislators and other politicians. As a result, there was high public participation, including that of women, in political programmes, media engagement and voter turnout within the State.

Box 1: Mandate protection: Citizen's 10-point checklist

This was developed by citizens groups with support from SAVI, learning from their experiences during the previous election (2011), in preparation for the next (2015):

1. Pre-election activities and objectives
2. Evaluation of pre-election objectives
3. Evidence of election promises (documents, videos)
4. Grouping promises into thematic areas
5. Short and long-term wish list of civil society and media partners
6. Matching up wish list with government promises
7. Media strategy for each category
8. Strategies to meet elected or high-ranking government officials on agenda with constructive suggestions
9. Monitoring and reporting mechanism on delivering issues on the agenda
10. Roles and responsibilities of civil society partners to deliver agenda items

2019 elections: redeploying citizens charters to elections and their aftermath

Starting in the 2019 elections cycle, citizens groups and other local partners started using

citizens charters as a more harmonised and cohesive way to bring their issues in front of political candidates during campaigns. These charters were used by some southern states, such as Anambra, and had begun to emerge in Kaduna State and spread to other states, including Kano and Jigawa.

The way local partners used citizen charters of demand (CCD) to hold candidates to account took different forms in each state. In each case, PERL guided and mentored civil society and media partners to ensure these charters were inclusive, aligned with public planning processes, developed and deployed in a co-ordinated fashion, and gained government and parliamentary recognition as well as political attention.

- In **Anambra State**: these charters facilitated an inclusive consultation process that engaged previously marginalised groups in government budgeting processes with the added benefit of tracking implementation. When applied to elections, the charters also served as a tool to not only monitor campaign promises, but whether and how these pledges were fulfilled during a political leader's time in office.

- In **Kaduna State**: civil society began to use CCD during the elections cycle. To boost the engagement of marginalised groups in all dimensions of the election cycle, the Women Mentorship and Leadership Initiative (WAMFOI) helped create an additional CCD to express the needs and demands of women and people with disabilities. The issues generated by WAMFOI and PWD community were synthesized and incorporated into the general CCD presented to candidates at the pre-election dialogues. A total of 16 cross cutting issues were generated by the women and PWD. Some of the issues presented to the candidates were adapted by them in their campaign 'blueprints' and manifestoes.

2023 elections: taking a more systematic approach

Four years later in **Kano State**, learning from their peers in Kaduna, civil society groups used the CCD in a more systematic way, with guidance and mentoring from PERL's team in Kano. Civil society groups placed their charters in front of each candidate for them to review and to include the issues in these charters in their political manifestos. These citizens groups came together across the state to develop a consolidated 'Hasken Kano' CCD, by consensus, for the whole state, which they then asked gubernatorial political candidates to make their highest priority before, during and after elections, helping to set an agenda that could be monitored. Partners analysed the manifestos of the three gubernatorial candidates to gauge the effect CCDs had on a candidate's blueprint. The Kano Tracker was set up by journalists, civil society organisations and community leaders for citizens to report service delivery problems.

Fulfilling one of its election commitments, the new administration in Kano re-opened Hasiya Beyaro Pediatric Hospital. The Governor "explained that restoring the hospital to a fully-fledged status was part of his campaign promises aimed at ensuring that the people of Kano continue to benefit from the facility". The reopening of the hospital was the first project commissioned by the Governor in his first 100 days in office.[iii]

In **Jigawa State**, to prepare for the upcoming 2023 elections, civil society organisations, the media and other partners designed a citizens' agenda in line with annual budget provisions, and local communities came up with an agenda for elected representatives, while media partners designed an agenda to document campaign manifestos and track progress on fulfilling these manifestos during and after elections. Women's groups developed their own CCD and shared it with political parties and candidates. This demonstrates the maturity and capacity of non-state actors in Jigawa. The political parties adapted the CCD as a tool for their campaign engagements, referencing it at political gatherings with stakeholders, especially during election dialogues.

The ruling party's 12-points agenda was largely shaped and influenced by the CCD presented by the citizens. The state made budgetary provisions in the 2024 budget drive the implement of these priorities.[iv] Similarly, in keeping with the campaign commitments, the Jigawa State Government procured laboratory and ICT equipment worth 150 million Naira (approx. £100,000) for the eight designated Centres of Excellence schools and Senior Secondary Schools across the State with the aim of improving the quality of education at senior secondary schools in the State.[v]

Box 2: Election Agenda Setting in Jigawa in 2023

Determined to change the narrative around elections, Sani Muhammad, a local activist in Jigawa State, joined a broad-based coalition of civic groups, media and community advocates. The mission was simple but compelling: aggregate and harmonise citizen input into what they called 'Citizens Charter of Demand' before the election, organize dialogue with candidates during elections to mainstream CCD into the manifestoes and track which promises are kept or broken after elections. According to Sani, *"we organised town hall meetings to articulate citizen demands, we held interactive forums with candidates of major political parties and developed trackers to monitor how elected officials are fulfilling their campaign promises."* Building on this, they also designed and launched #nextjigawa, an online citizen platform designed to track governance processes in the State.

[see corresponding **Human Angle Story No.6**]

Other established accountability mechanisms in Kaduna and Jigawa (e.g. KADLGAM in Kaduna and the Project Monitoring Partnership (PMP) in Jigawa) that already use CCDs to annually track government budget performance [see **Story 4 – Citizen Budgeting: How citizen charters promote more transparent, accountable public finance in Nigeria's states**] were redeployed in 2023 to track the commitments of politicians over the first 100 days in office and during their first year. Each made use of their own tracking tools and methods, which PERL had helped them to develop over a number of years.

Today, some of these accountability mechanisms are firmly anchored into place [see **Story 7 – Kaduna SLAMs: Strengthening Governance in Nigeria through Co-Created, State-Led Accountability Mechanisms**] and continue to track how these promises are being followed up, long after the elections were held in their states.

- In **Kaduna State**, citizens and other election partners held dialogues with gubernatorial candidates of major political parties and presented the CCDs developed by citizen groups and accountability mechanisms in the State. The charters influenced the manifestoes of the current administration with 11 items captured, cutting across health, education, and social protection. The citizens launched an app "The AGENDA" for documenting and tracking campaign commitments. A recent increase in tuition fees for tertiary institutions in Kaduna State was a major focus for youth and students during the gubernatorial dialogue supported by PERL. The current Governor, as a candidate, then committed to a downward review if elected. In August 2023 he duly announced a 30% downward review of tuition fees for all state-owned tertiary institutions in Kaduna State.

- In **Jigawa State**, the government is aware of the increasingly powerful influence of civil society and the need for popular appeal with an electorate thinly spread across a wide area. To capitalise on this, citizens groups designed and launched #nextjigawa, an online citizen platform designed to track governance processes in the State. PERL provided technical guidance and logistics support to the citizens groups who led the design and implementation of the #nextjigawa platform to improve documentation and tracking of commitments. This included the PMP, an umbrella group of civil society and community groups, and the Emirates Development Association (EDA), a partner with a high level of community trust, who came together earlier to create a single citizens charter of demand.

To date, citizen charters in Kano, Kaduna and Jigawa States have had a demonstrable influence on candidates and their pledges. New administrations in these states now declare in their manifestos what citizens priorities they aim to deliver over the coming four years. State partners, through joint government-citizen and parliament-citizen platforms, are aligning state development plans with citizen charters and political manifestos, ensuring that citizen's priorities are reflected in the objectives of political parties and state development plans. The momentum for this is now self-sustaining, with diminishing, occasional backstopping, technical support from PERL.

A look ahead to 2027 elections: analysing the results of accountability efforts

To prepare for the next elections cycle in Nigeria's states, information is being gathered by umbrella citizens groups and accountability mechanisms to assess whether, and to what extent, citizen

oversight of political candidates and the use of charters has translated into promises kept. The Kano Tracker, Kaduna's "The AGENDA" app, and #nextjigawa, continue to serve as citizen-led innovative platforms/tools for monitoring and tracking documented campaign commitments by elected officials before, during and after the 2023 general elections in their states. Citizens are now using the data from these platforms to measure the performances of public officials and as the basis for constructive engagement with policy makers in their states. This data should serve as a catalyst for such efforts to gain further momentum in 2027 elections. All the partners involved in this development are now eager to see whether future political leader's pledges are reflected in the budget process. Success will come if political candidates recognise the public pressure they face when they come into office, prompting political parties to nominate more competent and responsive candidates in future elections.

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[i] https://placng.org/i/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Report-on-Inclusivity-in-Nigerias-Elections.pdf
[ii] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EU%20EOM%20NGA%202023%20FR.pdf
[iii] https://tribuneonlineng.com/kano-gov-reopens-33-year-old-pediatric-hospital-shut-down-by-ganduje-administration/ *and* https://kanofocus.com/2023/08/13/gov-abba-kabir-yusuf-commissions-hasiya-bayero-paediatric-hospital/
[iv] *see #nextjigawa on the Jigawa State Website and Facebook:* https://www.facebook.com/NextJigawa/?__rdr
[v] https://jigawastate.gov.ng/news/2019/04/24/jgsg-procures-n150m-laboratory-and-ict-equipments-for-schools/

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