

# SPECIAL BULLETIN

## AGENTS FOR CITIZEN-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION

### National Conference: Civil Society Operational Environment in Nigeria



13-15 September 2022

Funded by the  
European Union



Implemented by  
the British Council



# CONFERENCE SUMMARY

This bulletin summarises the key highlights and outcomes from the ACT National Conference on the Civil Society Operational Environment in Nigeria held in Abuja from 13-15 September 2022.

## Stakeholders Make Case for Better Operational Environment for CSOs in Nigeria

The Agents for Citizen-driven Transformation (ACT) Programme has supported the Steering Committee on Civil Society Regulatory Environment to host a National Conference on the Civil Society Operational Environment in Nigeria. The conference was held in Abuja between 13th and 15th of September 2022. The three-day conference was made possible with funding from the European Union Delegation to Nigeria and West Africa.

The conference brought together civil society organisations (CSOs), government officials, legislators, regulatory agencies, development partners, private sector groups, and other stakeholders in the civil society space to address regulatory issues affecting the operations of CSOs in Nigeria. The event offered the stakeholders the opportunity to consolidate efforts toward enabling a conducive regulatory environment for CSOs in Nigeria.

Over 250 stakeholders attended the conference either in person or virtually. Key public officials represented at the event included the Deputy Senate President, the Honourable Minister of State for Finance, Budget and National Planning, and the Special Assistant to the President on Ease-of-Doing-Business who is also the Executive Secretary of the Presidential Enabling Business Environment Council. Other dignitaries included the Executive Director of Nigeria Network of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the Chief of Party, USAID-funded SCALE Programme, the Director-General of Odua Chambers of Commerce, and the Country Director of the British Council in Nigeria. Senior officials of regulatory agencies including the Corporate Affairs Commission, the Special Control Unit Against Money Laundering, and the Federal Internal Revenue Services also attended the conference.

Speaking during the opening of the conference, the Deputy Senate President recognised the vital role that CSOs play in the country's development and assured of the commitment of the Nigerian government to supporting CSOs in the country.



Speakers at the National Conference. Source: ACT



Alexandre Borges Gomes, Deputy Ambassador, European Union Delegation to Nigeria and ECOWAS. Source: ACT

**“CSOs play an important role in promoting the fundamental rights of citizens and ultimately contribute to the socio-economic development of the country. They need to be able to exercise their operational rights fully without unnecessary restrictions. Therefore, the government is committed to providing an enabling environment for CSOs both at the national and subnational levels.”**

Distinguished Senator Obarisi Ovie Omo-Agege, Deputy Senate President, Federal Republic of Nigeria

## Conference Highlights

Major highlights of the conference included over a dozen plenary sessions and various breakout sessions and panel discussions. The plenary sessions included keynote addresses and presentations on topical issues including the impact of CSOs on Nigeria's development; harmonising CSO registration procedures at the sub-national levels; gender and social mainstreaming in regulatory frameworks; the online financial statement filing system by the Corporate Affairs Commission; donors' perception of the CSO regulatory frameworks in Nigeria; and screening of *We Move*, a video documentary on CSO movement in Nigeria. More topics were discussed during the breakout sessions, including the legality of profit making by CSOs; the sufficiency of the amended Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) for CSO regulation; CSOs and taxation; and other legal frameworks for CSOs. The breakout sessions enabled participants to have deeper conversations around issues of the CSO regulatory environment.



Dr Olabode Esoh, FIRS Nigeria. Source: ACT

Members of the conference steering committee also held a press briefing to leverage the media to amplify the CSO regulatory environment issues and possible solutions more widely. About 25 national and local media organisations comprising radio stations, print/online and television networks covered and reported on the conference.

**“There are several laws that CSOs should take advantage of as they fundraise. When companies make donations to CSOs, it is classified under allowable expenses that are not taxed. Since many companies are not aware of this, CSOs can take it upon themselves to sensitise them about this option. It is for the development of our society.”**

Dauda Ziwi, Team Lead, Legal Advisory and Litigation Department, Federal Inland Revenue Service

The various conference sessions generated interesting ideas and suggestions for improving the regulatory environment for CSO operations in Nigeria. Some of the recommendations include the need for the authorities to harmonise and streamline the multiple regulations that CSOs are subjected to. For instance, participants discussed and agreed that Item 32, Part 1 of the second schedule of the 1999 Constitution should be moved from the exclusive to concurrent list of the constitution. This will enable state governments to effectively manage incorporation, regulation, and closure of corporate bodies at the state and local government levels. Participants also discussed that the Pension Reforms Act 2014 and other related labour laws be reviewed to clearly define the status of volunteers and interns in relation to pension and tax deductions.

The event brought to the fore the opportunity in the Company Income Tax Regulation that companies can utilise to reduce their tax burdens and use the saved funds to support the work of CSOs in the country.

The conference also advocated to the authorities not to shrink the civic space by suppressing or closing down CSOs that might be defaulting in their compliance with regulations. Instead, government should constructively engage with such CSOs to help them comply with state regulations. Participants noted that provision of adequate, timely information to CSOs by government agencies will help CSOs in complying with new or existing regulations.

CSOs were encouraged to file returns regularly and appropriately to relevant bodies at the national and sub-national levels and institute proper internal control systems as these steps will improve their credibility with donors and the public. On the other hand, donors were encouraged to work not only with CSOs registered by the CAC, but also with those registered at the sub-national levels.



Breakout session. Source: ACT

**“The conference has exposed those in the civil society space to new information. Regulators and government agencies that have bearing on CSO operations should push more information out there for the benefit of those concerned. If not for this conference, the myriad of information we have gathered would not have been possible.”**

Clinton Dandison, who represented the Sustainable Action for Nature, a CSO based in Port Harcourt, Rivers State

## Other Services for CSOs

The Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC), the Federal Inland Revenue (FIRS) and other regulatory agencies were provided with exhibition stands at the conference to provide opportunities for regulators to interact directly with CSOs, address critical regulatory concerns, register new organisations, and provide information to help CSOs function effectively.

Major initiatives supported by the ACT Programme (in collaboration with other donors) to ease the governance and operations of CSOs, include: the launch of the online financial filling system, which will enable CAC customers to file their financial accounts electronically, the CSO Regulatory Platform that will host a compendium of relevant laws and provide backend support to help CSOs comply with extant laws; and the Self-Regulatory Model Framework developed by the General Assembly and National Technical Committee on Civil Society Self-Regulation. Furthermore, a research report and strategy to help mainstream gender inclusion in civil society regulatory institutions, frameworks, and practices were also presented.

### Key highlights:

- The CAC attended to 108 guests and commenced the registration process for at least 10 new CSOs
- FIRS received 102 guests and used the opportunity to provide advisories about state IRSs
- Guests expressed the possibility of an improved relationship with the regulators, and highlighted satisfaction and a clearer understanding of regulatory processes

## Policy Resolutions

A series of policy resolutions were committed to at the conference:

- The Steering Committee on Civil Society Regulatory Environment will drive the process of a coordinated CSO engagement on constitutional amendments to move item 32 Part 1 of the 2nd schedule of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria from the Exclusive Legislative List to the concurrent Legislative List.
- The Steering Committee will also set up a team to scrutinise the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights' Freedom of Association Guidelines to measure its current adoption within the domestic framework and offer suggestions as to enhanced implementation at the national and sub-national levels.
- Subnational CSO networks were created to engage ministries, departments and agencies on the harmonisation of the multiplicity of registration requirements at the subnational level. The Steering Committee on Civil Society Regulatory Environment will mobilise relevant stakeholders to train CSOs on how to relate well with the government.
- CSOs will drive coordinated engagement with the National Assembly, the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC), the Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS) and other regulators on establishing a clear categorisation mechanism for CSO/NGOs in Nigeria for compliance purposes, based on suggested and agreed thresholds.
- The Steering Committee should engage all stakeholders within the Open Government Partnership (OGP) process to ensure civic space commitments in the National Action Plan (NAP) II, which are not fully implemented are included in NAP III and bring the recommendations from the National CSO Conference to the attention of the government and civil society Co-Chairs of the OGP so that issues of enabling environment for the sector are grounded in a binding commitment both locally and internationally.
- The Steering Committee will work closely with development partners to institutionalise the National CSO Conference as an annual event to track progress made within the sector.
- All stakeholders including government agencies and civil society organisations must as a matter of policy ensure disability and gender inclusion in all interventions including the development of the regulatory framework for CSO operations.
- The Steering Committee should facilitate the formation of a forum of donors/development partners interested/supporting initiatives on enabling environment for CSO operations to serve as a platform to regularly update/ educate donors on appropriate regulatory frameworks while also avoiding duplication of initiatives working to promote civil society enabling environment.
- The donor community must deliberately support the legislative Committees on Civil Society and Development Partners to strengthen their capacities to engage with civil society and move for oversight appropriate regulatory reforms.



Staff of the Corporate Affairs Commission interact with CSOs.  
Source: ACT



FIRS staff show CSOs how to file the applicable taxes.  
Source: ACT

## Conclusion

At the end of the conference, participants expressed satisfaction with its outcomes and suggested that it should be an annual event.

**“We thank the European Union, the British Council, and the Agents for Citizen-driven Transformation Programme for this well thought-out conference. We have learnt so much on CSO self-regulation, the legality of profit-making, taxation and other legal frameworks. Our time was well spent at the conference.”**

Usman Ahmad Dadah, Executive Director, Dadah Foundation for Educational Empowerment, Adamawa State

For ACT, supporting the conference was part of the programme’s plans to continue creating platforms for dialogue among key stakeholders towards empowering CSOs in Nigeria as agents and drivers of national development. Going forward, the Programme will support stakeholders to implement many of the policy resolutions.

**“A reformed and improved operational environment allows CSOs to play their role as independent partners in development. We hope that conversations and decisions at the conference will continue beyond the event and lead to better regulations for CSOs in Nigeria.”**

Lucy Pearson, Country Director of the British Council in Nigeria



Lucy Pearson, Country Director of the British Council in Nigeria. Source: ACT



Cynthia Mbamalu, Programme Director, Yiaga Africa. Source: ACT

## TESTIMONIALS FROM CSO PARTICIPANTS

**“The National Conference has helped to deepen conversations around corporate governance and self-regulation.”**

David Awotipe, Director General, Odua Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture

**“This platform has made it possible for CSOs to air their minds and make suggestions.”**

Harry Dandyson, Executive Director/Team Lead, Centre for Human Rights, Health, Ethnic Harmony, and Livelihood Development

**“We have received lots of feedbacks from questions we have asked which will be beneficial to our organisations.”**

Cynthia Obinwanne, Talklove Africa Foundation

**“I have learnt more about the CSOs ecosystem and how the environment have been affected positively.”**

Ibukunoluwa James, Ibukunoluwa James, Associate, Development Agenda for Western Nigeria (DAWN Commission)



Ikemesit Effiong, Head of Research, SBM Intelligence. Source: ACT



Salisu Abubakar, Corporate Affairs Commission. Source: ACT

## MEDIA ROUNDUP

**CSOs Call for Unified Authority on Regulation of Activities. ThisDay, 16 September 2022**

<https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/09/16/csos-call-for-unified-authority-on-regulation-of-activities/>

**CSOs Appeal for Protection Against Repressive Laws. Leadership Online, 15 September 2022**

<https://leadership.ng/csos-appeal-for-protection-against-repressive-laws/>

**Multiple Regulations Hampering CSOs Impact in Nigeria. Daily Trust, 15 September 2022**

<https://dailytrust.com/multiple-regulations-hampering-csos-impact-in-nigeria>

**Nigeria Should Provide Enabling Environment for CSOs. Premium Times, 15 September 2022**

<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/554214-nigeria-should-provide-enabling-environment-for-csos-groups.html>

**CSOs Urge FG to Unpack Regulatory Bottlenecks. Vanguard, 14 September 2022**

<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/09/csos-urge-fg-to-unpack-regulatory-bottlenecks/>

**CSOs Urge Government to Initiate Incentives for Companies in Nigeria. NAN News, 14 September 2022**

<https://www.nannews.ng/2022/09/14/csos-urge-govt-to-initiate-incentives-for-coys-in-nigeria/>

## VIDEOS

Watch video highlights:

Day One: [youtu.be/zRz8YKw0qYQ](https://youtu.be/zRz8YKw0qYQ)

Day Two: [youtu.be/lhc5I5zHeoI](https://youtu.be/lhc5I5zHeoI)

Day Three: [youtu.be/1ODMexrbG24](https://youtu.be/1ODMexrbG24)

### Find out more

**Agents for Citizen-Driven Transformation (ACT)**  
ACT@ng.britishcouncil.org  
www.justice-security.ng

### Key contacts:

National Programme Manager: Damilare Babalola (Damilare.Babalola@ng.britishcouncil.org)  
Operations Manager: Maxwell Anyaegbu (Maxwell.Anyaegbu@ng.britishcouncil.org)