

**COVID-19 AND ELECTIONS:  
HOW CSOs CAN ENSURE THE  
INTEGRITY AND CREDIBILITY  
OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS  
AMID COVID-19**

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic poses an unprecedented challenge to democracies, elections and civil liberties all over the world, creating another period of crisis and uncertainty. In a short space of time, our ways of life, whether economically, socially or politically, has changed. Globally, there are over six million confirmed cases and significant loss of life since the virus was first diagnosed<sup>1</sup>. Majority of citizens in countries affected by the virus are living under some form of lock-down, including Nigeria. Businesses, government offices, schools, and religious centres have been forced to close. Although there seems to be a consensus that such policies are the most effective means to reduce the incidence of coronavirus (which causes COVID-19)<sup>2</sup>, they also strongly reduce civil liberties, erode social capital and bring about economic insecurity<sup>3</sup>.

One of the areas that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected, is elections – one of the key bastions of democracy and democratic parties. While few countries have taken the bold steps to continue with scheduled elections, a majority have postponed their elections due to the overwhelming public health risks or concerns<sup>4</sup>. The pandemic has exposed the entrenched weakness in the present electoral frameworks and healthcare systems across the globe. This has resulted in legislatures and executive policymakers scrambling to devise regulations and guidelines that can secure and protect the electoral processes while reducing the health risks to voters and the general public. This may involve substantial or even wholesale electoral reforms<sup>5</sup>, such as the introduction of early voting options, postal voting, multiple-days voting, etc.<sup>6</sup> However, expansive and effective electoral reforms cannot be complete without the participation and involvement of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Local, national and international civil society organisations have long played an important role in advising governments on short- and long-term electoral reform goals. This is even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic, because policymakers, legislators and government institutions need to be held accountable for the decisions they make.

In Nigeria, CSOs have been in the frontline of electoral reforms – either providing essential technical services or documenting and advocating policy change. Drawing on the diverse range of skills and expertise, CSOs could guide policymakers and legislators through some difficult questions on the Nigerian elections and electoral process in this time of crisis. CSOs can facilitate engagement with affected communities on government policies or

proposed actions – and this is a critical part of ensuring contextually relevant responses to the effects of the pandemic to the country’s economic and political system.

The Electoral Hub, as part of its contribution to the ongoing conversations around COVID-19 and elections, in this brief has provided some concrete actions that CSOs in Nigeria should adopt or undertake to secure and protect the integrity and credibility of the electoral process and deepen democracy.

## CSOs WORKING ON ELECTORAL GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria, the support of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in election system cannot be over-emphasized. Since 1999, the active participation of CSOs has been recognized as a very important element in the deepening and consolidation of democracy nationally and internationally. The CSOs have in numerous occasions applied pressure on the legislature to improve election legislation, broadened the extent of citizens' involvement in the electoral process, and increasing transparency and accountability of government. CSOs have also actively supported political and electoral reform processes and institutions, and have made the electoral process more inclusive, thereby ensuring a higher level of integrity. All these have immensely contributed to the organization and conduct of free, fair and credible elections. Even the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has recognized that CSOs as key stakeholders have played instrumental roles in the successful conduct of elections in the past, particularly the much-lauded 2015 general elections.

Similarly, the support from CSOs enhanced the non-partisan status of the Commission and reiterated the commitment to establish a fair playing field in the electoral process for all political parties and candidates. Generally, CSOs advocate for electoral reforms, promote wider media coverage of election-related events, mobilizes citizen participation in elections as well as observe and report elections – thus bringing improvement to the entire electoral processes.

A range of CSOs has effectively contributed to the electoral process. Some of the more prominent ones include the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room, YIAGA, Enough-is-Enough (EiE), CLEEN Foundation, and Centre for Democracy & Development (CDD). Almost all the CSOs are involved in election observations within their respective thematic areas. Using election observation, the CSOs provide vital information and updates to the public, both during the elections and on Election Day. This is incredibly significant because this information might not be readily accessible via the communication channels or websites of the electoral management body (EMB). CSOs provide real-time information on the opening of poll, operational glitches and general election day challenges. YIAGA Africa uses technological tools like SMS and evidence-based research methodology tools to deploy a citizen-led election observation initiative, called "#WatchingTheVote." The *#WatchingTheVote* approach relies heavily on using SMS to provide real-time election alerts validating the legitimacy of election results as well as encouraging election stakeholders to react immediately, either before, after or after elections. The Nigerian Civil

Society Situation Room plays a vital role in ensuring INEC, political parties and the security forces operate accountably and within the confines of the law.

The Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room gathers information about the elections through its network of member organisations, addresses key areas of engagement, recognizes issues, and escalates critical incidents that may impede the conduct of the elections. CLEEN Foundation provides information on election security, monitored security threats as well as the behaviour of the different security agencies working on Election Day. EiE focuses more on education, awareness-raising and mobilization of voters. This was achieved using social and mainstream media to educate young people on governance and elections; providing INEC with modern social media support; promoting the use of the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act by young people to access information and data; organizing young persons to engage in the electoral process leading up to the general elections through forums, discussions and meetings. Aside from election observations, CDD undertook a range of activities including countering misinformation and fake news during the elections. It should be noted that all the initiatives of the various CSOs are designed to promote credible elections and boost citizens' confidence in the electoral process through the provision of independent citizens' oversight.

It is also important to mention the efforts of the different organisations for the marginalized groups such as Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities in Nigeria (JONAPWD), Centre for Citizens with Disabilities and the Albino Foundation. The extensive activities and advocacy by the groups resulted in INEC introducing a new Framework on Access and Participation of PWDs in elections. This was to enhance the participation of persons living with disabilities (PWDs) in the electoral process. The policy set out provisions that would reduce the barriers that PWDs face as voters, candidates, and staff within the Commission. Notably, the 2019 general elections were the first time that visually impaired people could vote independently using a braille ballot jacket. Furthermore, provisions for magnifying glasses, sign language translation and a priority queue for PWDs were also fully enforced. In effect, all ad-hoc personnel received a checklist focused on identifying and assisting PWDs, while sign language interpretations were, likewise, available at polling units. It should be also noted that these groups engaged with the National Assembly on improving the integration of persons with disabilities into mainstream societal activities. Other activities included monitoring the implementation of both the Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act and the involvement of PWDs in national and state elections.

CSOs empower citizens to be actively involved in the electoral activities in a bid to deepen electoral democracy, transparency, and accountability in Nigeria. However, the majority of CSOs working to improve the electoral performance and outcomes of the elections in Nigeria is heavily dependent on foreign aid as observed by the Commonwealth Observer Group for the 2019 elections<sup>7</sup>. Thus, without supplementary funding from the private sector, philanthropic donations or business income, the vital roles that CSOs in Nigeria play can neither be sustained nor consolidated in the long term.

## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR CSOs TO ENSURE THE INTEGRITY AND CREDIBILITY OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS AMID THE PANDEMIC

While the EMB lead the electoral process and governance as the umpire, CSOs play a determining role in different stages of the electoral process and governance. Their importance is not only enshrined in the nation's legal frameworks but also administrative instruments of the EMB. This is because safeguarding the integrity and credibility of the electoral process as well as ensuring free, fair and violence-free elections is a shared responsibility of all electoral stakeholders. This becomes even more urgent in this pandemic which comes with certain challenges. It is with this understanding that the Electoral Hub is recommending the following twelve actions as important for CSOs in addressing the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic in elections.

### **(A) Awareness Raising**

As important actors in society, CSOs can assist the government to strengthen its efforts in curbing the spread of coronavirus disease by raising awareness of the dangers of the virus among the public. Also, CSOs can work with the relevant government agencies to discuss how to best engage with their local communities on how to handle the pandemic and the health safety protocols that have been recently introduced. CSOs can, therefore, tailor and disseminate reliable information on the risks of the virus, to carry out fact-checking and counter the misinformation surrounding the virus and address the potential psycho-social needs of the communities.

### **(B) Capacity building of Election Staff and Personnel**

An EMB's capacity to perform all its electoral functions and responsibilities effectively depend very much on the capacities and performance of its staff. With the proposed policy and administrative changes that would be introduced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) ahead of the governorship elections as well as other rescheduled elections, there is need for all INEC staff, whether permanent or ad-hoc, to be adequately trained on these new policies and changes as well as other public health expectations. It is imperative that CSOs, as key stakeholders and partners to INEC, contribute to the capacity building and training of these election workers using virtual technologies. Without doubt, professional and skilled INEC staff would be essential in ensuring successful conduct of elections as well as minimizing the risks of the spread of the virus.

**(C) Increase Voters' Education Activities**

The legitimacy of any election depends on public understanding of and confidence in the electoral process. We, therefore, recommend that CSOs invest more resources towards additional voters' education to provide information about the process by which votes are counted and the election winner is determined. CSOs should also consider providing journalistic training and coverage planning to help reporters and media outlets appropriately report on the elections and to accurately report on events as they develop. These efforts are likely to provide the strongest defense against misinformation about the electoral process or false allegations.

**(D) Advocacy and Monitoring**

Demand for more accountability on the implementation of any new rules, regulations or guidelines issued as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Any response must incorporate accountability protections and safeguards against abuse. Further, citizens must be allowed to know about and challenge any COVID-19 related measures that affect any of his/her rights, constitutional or statutory. Finally, CSOs should advocate and demand that government or any of its agencies, as well as INEC, must be transparent about any measures they are taking so that these measures can be scrutinized, and if appropriate, later modified, retracted, or overturned.

**(E) Provide Strategic Analysis and Innovative Solutions**

While this may be one of the most difficult environments for CSOs, it is also a critical moment where its work has never been more important. There is an immediate role for CSOs in monitoring the impact of COVID-19 and government policies on the electoral process in Nigeria, and to advocate for effective responses to the pandemic. This can be achieved through strategic analysis from CSOs to assist and improve, both INEC and Government's decisions on elections in Nigeria.

**(F) Cooperate and Jointly Mobilize Resources**

CSOs need to work together to make sure that the right decisions are made by government and INEC during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This includes sharing of ideas or personnel in the execution of important intervention activities. It could also mean working jointly on various activities or combining resources to achieve a

wider impact on intervention activities. This will ensure that the true beneficiaries of democracy, the citizens, do not have the rights to select the leaders eroded either by ill-informed postponement or ineffective policies.

**(G) Increase the Use of Digital Tools and Technologies in Activities**

Technology can and should play an important role during this effort to save lives or encourage electoral franchise during this period. CSOs can make use of existing technologies or digital tools to help spread information on the elections, health messages and access to health care. Digital platforms or apps can keep citizens informed as well as encourage more public participation in the electoral process.

**(H) Engage in anti-fake news campaigns**

CSOs should engage in public education and sensitization to provide voters with accurate information about the process by which election officials count votes and determine the election winners. The public education effort should include a simple citizen's guide to election coverage and a one-stop-shop for online information about election processes and outcomes. This information should be translated into as many local languages as possible.

We propose two resources for promoting public understanding of elections and greater resistance to possible misinformation about the elections: (a) a summary of key facts about election processes and returns that is optimized for sharing on social media, and (b) an authoritative website that aggregates key facts about how elections work that could be promoted on the CSOs' websites or social media platforms as a resource for voters.

**(I) Track and Monitor implementation of COVID-19 Measures**

CSOs can support the successful implementation of government actions and distribution of support packages or development aid established during the COVID-19 pandemic. This can be done through the facilitation of meetings with the potential beneficiaries, the monitoring of measures and much-needed input into possible remedial actions where challenges arise. For example, CSOs may provide citizens with online tools or platforms to monitor the implementation of the government response to COVID-19. This would build momentum for a transparent and inclusive approach that would make public the use of all crisis-related funds and programs. In this context, CSOs can also help to ensure transparency and

accountability in public procurement, which is particularly vulnerable to fraud and corruption.

**(J) Citizen Oversight of Government Regulations and Actions**

Past experience in Nigeria clearly shows that CSOs can usefully complement mechanisms for governance oversight, such as the citizens' audit of government regulatory actions, as well as advise the legislature - with the help of community feedback - on how to implement the support packages. If government officials adopt a proactive approach to providing information to citizens, the task of CSOs will be greatly improved. In this context, it would be critical to use mobile technologies. Also, CSOs may set up complimentary hotlines to receive issues and complaints from the public that would be forwarded to the government for possible intervention or resolution. Furthermore, CSOs could map the regulations issued by the Federal Government as well as the state governments in the face of the crisis. Such monitoring should include the implication of the regulations on citizens, health, employment, education, business, and movement within the country

**(K) Election Observation**

One of the provisions in the new INEC policy on the conduct of elections is for CSOs to apply online to observe elections in Edo and Ondo States. Technology will be heavily relied on in the activities for Edo and Ondo. Unlike other elections, CSOs may use more technological tools such as YouTube, WhatsApp Messaging and Text messages to reduce the number of observers they send into the field. Activities of the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room as an umbrella of multiple CSOs will come in handy as CSOs can pool resources together, deploy fewer observers and use technology to breach the gap along with citizen's participation.

**(L) Coordination and Shared Vision**

Finally, for CSOs to act effectively in the above-listed areas, they need to be strategic in thinking and have a shared vision. This would entail the ability to identify and effectively utilize new opportunities that COVID-19 presents, deploy creative ideas, mitigate risks, strategically engage the media and cooperate with the electorate. Similarly, and of utmost importance, CSOs should strive to coordinate their actions across the diverse organisations working in the electoral space particularly those working on the Edo and Ondo governorship elections. This would produce more tangible results and greater impact.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes an unprecedented challenge for the electoral process in Nigeria, posing existential internal as well as external threats to democracy and credible elections. The extent of this health crisis and the severe economic recession, that will be triggered as a result of the drastic measures currently underway to curb the pandemic, call for a collective response from CSOs. CSOs are fundamental in the formation and building of a safer and inclusive electoral framework in elections in Nigeria, whether under pandemic crises or not. This can be achieved through civil society organizations providing the necessary guidance on the implementation of reforms in our electoral process and system; monitoring and tracking compliance on reforms or initiatives undertaken, urging other election stakeholders to fulfil their obligations towards the provision of credible and inclusive elections.

At the end of this crisis, there can be no return to business as usual. An urgent and comprehensive public debate and transparent consultations on new strategies and measures are highly needed. The question of whether recovery will lead to more inclusive, fair, and credible elections depends fundamentally on the meaningful and effective participation of CSOs in this process.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Worldometer, “Coronavirus Toll Update: Cases & Deaths by Country of Coronavirus Pandemic,” Worldometers, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

<sup>2</sup> Sasmita Poudel Adhikari et al., “Epidemiology, Causes, Clinical Manifestation and Diagnosis, Prevention and Control of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) during the Early Outbreak Period: A Scoping Review,” *Infectious Diseases of Poverty* 9, no. 1 (March 17, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40249-020-00646-x>.

<sup>3</sup> Thiemo Fetzer et al., “Coronavirus Perceptions and Economic Anxiety,” March 19, 2020, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2003.03848>.

<sup>4</sup> International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), “Elections Postponed Due to COVID-19 -As of June 2, 2020” (International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), June 2, 2020), [https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/elections\\_postponed\\_due\\_to\\_covid-19.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/elections_postponed_due_to_covid-19.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), “Elections Held and Mitigating Measures Taken during COVID-19 – as of May 27, 2020,” International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), May 27, 2020, [https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/elections\\_held\\_and\\_mitigating\\_measures\\_taken\\_during\\_covid-19.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/elections_held_and_mitigating_measures_taken_during_covid-19.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> For example, South Korea amended its electoral legislations to expand the window for early voting for its 2020 parliamentary elections, while numerous states in the United States of America have implemented or considering implementing large-scale voting by mail ahead of its 2020 general elections.

<sup>6</sup> Commonwealth Observer Group. Nigeria General Elections 2019: Reports of the Commonwealth Observer Group. The Commonwealth, 2019.p. 20



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### About the Electoral Hub

The Electoral Hub (E-Hub), an organ of the Initiative for Research, Innovation and Advocacy in Development (IRIAD), is a multidisciplinary strategic think-tank which seeks to provide solutions to improve the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. It is conceptualized to complement the roles and activities of the different institutions, stakeholders and drivers of the electoral process and governance. E-Hub's aim is to strengthen electoral governance and accountability in Nigeria through the provision data and critical analysis supporting the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. Because we believe that the integrity of the electoral process is crucial in improving the electoral governance architecture and democracy in Nigeria. We also believe in contextual analysis for solutions rooted in the principles of justice and equity.

The Hub's core values are knowledge-exchange, inclusion, justice, equity, transparency and accountability.

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