

# Addressing The Shrinking Civic Space in South-East Nigeria

Full Research Report



## **Addressing The Shrinking Civic Space in South-East Nigeria**

This is a report of the research conducted by Alliances for Africa in the five south-east states of Nigeria, to determine the status of civic space, and the implications for individuals and organisations seeking to defend and expand civil and political rights. The report is available at [www.alliancesforafrica.org](http://www.alliancesforafrica.org)

Published by: Alliances for Africa, November 2021.

<b>Content</b>	
Acronym	4
Acknowledgement	5
Executive Summary	7
Introduction	7
Background of the study	8
Statement of Problem	9
Objectives of the Study	9
Research Questions	9
Scope of the Study	9
Significance of the Study	10
Limitations of the Study	11
Ethical Considerations	11
Methodology	11
Desk Research	13
What is Civil Society?	14
Civic Space in the Context of the South-East	16
Legal Framework Supporting Free Civic Space	16
The State of the Civic Space in the South-East	17
Discussion on Findings from the Desk Review	24
Analysing Data from the Field – Research Findings	24
Demographic Details	24
State of the Media	30
Threat and Attacks on the Civic Space	33
Heightening Insecurity	38
Identified Perpetrators	40
Freedom of Information and Expression	42
Rights of Assembly and Association	44
Citizen Participation	45
Non-Discrimination and Inclusion	46
Social and Economic Rights	47
Recommendations	57
Conclusion	60
References	62

## Acronyms

AML	-	Anti-Money Laundering
CAMA	-	Companies and Allied Matters Act
CFT	-	Countering Financing of Terrorism
COVID -19	-	Corona Virus Disease 2019
CSO	-	Civil Society Organisations
CBO	-	Community Based Organisations
DSS	-	Department of State Security
ENDSARS	-	End Special Anti-Robbery Squad
ESN	-	Eastern Security Network
FATF	-	Financial Action Task Force
FGDs	-	Focus Group Discussions
GBV	-	Gender Based Violence
IPOB	-	Indigenous People of Biafra
IRT	-	Intelligence Response Team
KII	-	Key Informant Interviews
LGBTQ	-	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer
MASSOB	-	Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra
NAFDAC	-	National Agency for Food and Drugs Administration and Control
NBC	-	National Broadcasting Commission
NGO	-	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPF	-	Nigeria Police Force
PWD	-	Persons living With Disability
RoLAC	-	Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption
SCUML	-	Special Control Unit for Money Laundering
SGBV	-	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
SIID	-	State Criminal Investigation Department
STS	-	Special Tactical Squad
VAPP	-	Violence Against Persons Prohibition bill

## Acknowledgements

Alliances for Africa is deeply appreciative of the individuals, communities, partners, and other institutions that trusted us with retelling of their stories, in a safe and honest way, and in a manner that respected their history and fear for the future of the south-east. Our data gathering, catalogued the shrinking civic space, the trends, the victims, the alleged perpetrators, and its effect on the lives of human rights defenders and wider civil society organisations in the south-east.

We use this opportunity to thank the lead research consultant Ms. Nnennaya Enyinna-Eneremadu and her team of enumerators who traversed the length and breadth of the south-east amidst volatile situations as they conducted key informant interviews and organised focus group discussions. We thank those who took time out of their busy schedules to complete the online survey questionnaire which allowed for us to get a robust engagement and opinions anonymously. The fear displayed by those attending the key informant interviews and focus group discussions is why this data gathering exercise is needed — it is always important to be part of the solution and to use one's voice actively. Thank you for not allowing your fear to silence you and your community.

For our staff, who have braved the sit-at-home orders to continue to engage with communities and provide frontline services to vulnerable victims whilst attempting to access justice, we are always grateful that you chose to hone your passion and skills with Alliances for Africa. We can never pay enough, love enough, or give enough, but we will always be the best place for you to develop that curious gaze on the structures that exist and the change you can bring to the table.

We recognise the widespread hardship COVID19 has caused many families in the south-east, whilst government officials have not been as proactive in dispelling the myths around the disease, this has allowed the disease to spread unabated and unchecked. The economic impact has been immediate and instant in many families.

The south-east is experiencing a massive upheaval in the structure of society, with insecurity and fear returning to many communities fuelling the drive to leave, the anxiety that young persons are feeling isolated and not heard, their future is lost and there is no hope for them.

Finally, to the community of agencies who recognised the commitment and importance of gathering real data on exactly what is happening in the south-east, to be able to address future strategic interventions wisely, we are grateful.

To the south-east, we have heard you.

## Executive Summary

This report is based on research conducted in the five south-east states of Nigeria, to determine the status of civic space, and the implications for individuals and organisations seeking to defend and expand civil and political rights. An open civic space is a situation where citizens are free to form associations, demonstrate in public places, receive, and impart information without restrictions in law or practice.

It is a situation where the authorities are tolerant of criticism from civil society groups and provide space and platforms for open and robust dialogue with members of the public, where there is free media, online content is uncensored, and citizens can access government information easily. This dimension is key for sustainable development in democratic societies. Without freedoms in society to influence decisions and hold the government to account, governance is left to the discretion of unrestrained autocrats.

The aim of the research was to capture the key civic space challenges in south-east Nigeria, as documentation of the situation in the zone. It is expected to be the basis to initiate interventions to reclaim the shrinking civic space and form a baseline for monitoring changes in the future.

To inform the research process, the Oxfam civic space monitoring tool was adapted to suit the environment with other specific indicators on access to services, enabling environment for livelihood, and gender equality. The tool was developed using Kobotoolbox for ease of analysis. Between October and November 2021, Alliances for Africa conducted 5 FGDs, 270 surveys and 25 key informant interviews with a wide range of civil society members who are mostly human rights defenders.

The result indicates that civil society believes that civic space in south-east Nigeria is repressed in all dimensions, and obstructed in the regulatory framework, administration, and access to information. For civil society organisations, access to funding is the most repressed dimension. The situation is worse for NGO workers engaging in frontline advocacy for human rights, participation in decision making, access to justice, and journalists.

The situation became more precarious with the militarisation of the southeast zone, due to efforts of the state actors to silence the secessionist group. As a result, so much violence has been unleashed on the people of the region, who are seen as disrupting the peace and stability of the incumbent government.

Following the long period of unrest and fear of unknown gunmen, activities of IPOB, incessant arrest of young men across the region, arson on police stations across the southeast, and jailbreak across different locations in the region. Despite the repressed condition of the CSOs access to funding, the narrowed dimension to CSOs legitimacy and accountability gives the ray of hope that will strengthen and sustain the human rights efforts to protect and reclaim the civic space in all the other dimensions.

## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the study

The Cotonou declaration<sup>1</sup> adopted in 2017 on strengthening and expanding the protection of human rights defenders and stakeholders working on various forms of human rights issues, including the rule of law, development, health, and social transformation in Africa demonstrates the critical importance of the relationship between civil society organisations, national human rights institutions, and national governments. The regional declaration and instruments<sup>2</sup> are part of the international family of human rights which includes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)<sup>3</sup>, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights<sup>4</sup> and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>5</sup> as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. These ideals emphasize the inherent dignity of every human being, reaffirms their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women.

Civil society operates in a civic space where they mediate between the citizens and the State promoting public action. The concept of civil society is that the state cannot possess absolute power, having entered a social contract to constitute a common authority to enact laws and maintain order. The citizens retain certain rights against which the state must not abuse. Some CSOs include, but is not limited to, the following: social groups such as those representing women, children, the youth the elderly and people with disability and special needs; professional groups such as association of artists, engineers, health practitioners, social workers, media, teachers, sports associations, legal practitioners, social scientist, academia, business organisations, national chamber of commerce, workers, employers, industry and agriculture, as well as other private sector groups; Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community- based organisations (CBOs) and voluntary organisations; Cultural, student, sports and other informal organisations<sup>6</sup>. Recently, there are digital online groups and activities, including social media communities that can be “organised” but do not necessarily have physical, legal, or financial structures<sup>7</sup>.

In the civic space, the civil society should be able to express themselves freely, to organise in groups for a common purpose, and to gather to make their voices heard: the freedoms of expression, association, and

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<sup>1</sup> African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, April 1, 2017, “Cotonou Declaration on Strengthening and Expanding the Protection of all Human Rights Defenders in Africa”, <https://www.achpr.org/news/viewdetail?id=31>

<sup>2</sup> African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, June 21, 1981 <https://www.achpr.org/legalinstruments/detail?id=49>

<sup>3</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948, [https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr\\_booklet\\_en\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1967, [https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1976/01/19760103%2009-57%20PM/Ch\\_IV\\_03.pdf](https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1976/01/19760103%2009-57%20PM/Ch_IV_03.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1967, [https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1976/03/19760323%2006-17%20AM/Ch\\_IV\\_04.pdf](https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1976/03/19760323%2006-17%20AM/Ch_IV_04.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Abdullahi M, Abdulkarim BG. Role of Civil Society Organisations in Promoting Democracy and Good Governance in Nigeria. International Journal of Adm and Development Studies 2017;7(1):1-10.

<sup>7</sup> Vandyck CK. Concept and Definition of Civil Society Sustainability. Centre for Strategy and International Studies 2017;(June):1-5.

peaceful assembly. Citizens must also be able to define, shape, and monitor government policies and programmes, and should be protected from unwarranted intrusions into their personal spheres; these rights to public participation and privacy are critical components of civic space, too. An open civic space enables civil society and a wide range of actors to fulfill their roles and act autonomously in pursuit of democracy, inclusive participation, good governance, and human rights<sup>8</sup>. However, these rights, rather than be protected by the government and enjoyed by all citizens, we observe trends of crackdowns on peaceful protest, constraints on online expression, societal problems treated as national security threats, and deployment of new technologies to invade privacy and constrain civic action.

These situations have become frustrating to civil society organisations, leading to agitations, heightening insecurity, and thereby attracting heavy state response that starts the cycle all over again. As a result, there is no peace, economic, social, and cultural rights are denied and because human rights are interdependent, the failure on one often leads to the failure of others. This has become the situation in south-east Nigeria. The human rights abuses, the perpetrators and impact of the attendant insecurity and shrinking civic space are what the study is set to investigate.

## **1.2: Statement of Problem**

Civic spaces, which could be physical or digital, have become the extension of our community. If they function in their true civic role, they are the settings where celebrations are held, where social and economic exchanges take place, information is shared, where friends run into each other, and where cultures mix. They are the "front porches" of our public institutions where we can interact with each other and with government. The civic spaces are recognised, valued and nurture the larger community<sup>9</sup>. An open civic space is an essential building block of development and national cohesion. In a country blessed with peace and stability, civil society fills the space untouched by government and the private sector, while in a fragile and conflict-ridden country, it plays an even more important role of providing services normally the responsibility of the state and business and can lay the foundation for reconciliation<sup>10</sup>. Summarily, in an open civic space, there is no threat or attack on the community, human rights and freedoms thrive and the rewards and benefits are numerous.

Presently, the south-east is experiencing gross human rights violations with freedoms under attack by state governments that want to stifle alternative opinions<sup>11</sup>. Every dissenting opinion is termed a hate speech and has resulted in attempts to promulgate a law against hate speech in Nigeria<sup>12</sup>. Civil society face various

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<sup>8</sup> Suleiman I. The Role of Women towards Political Participation in Nigeria. *America Economic and Social Review*. 2017;1(1): 15-44. doi:10.46281/aesr.v1i1.146

<sup>9</sup> Ntiwunka GU, Iyanda RO. Culture of Silence and Gender Development in Nigeria. In: *Gendering Knowledge in Africa and the African Diaspora: Contesting History and Power*; July 2017. doi:10.4324/9781315177717

<sup>10</sup> Ingram G. Civil Society: An Essential Ingredient of Development. Published online 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/04/06/civil-society-an-essential-ingredient-of-development/>

<sup>11</sup> Amnesty International, "What we do: Freedom of Expression", published online 2014. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/freedom-of-expression/>

<sup>12</sup> A Bill for an Act to Provide for the Prohibition of Hate Speeches and for other related matters. Published online 2019. doi:10.5694/j.1326-5377.1949.tb28334.x



kinds of human rights violations from the government in order not to express themselves or effectively participate in governance<sup>13</sup>. The governments are adopting new legal measures that restrict the ability of CSOs to operate freely. CSOs are negatively impacted by new repressive legislation that limits their access to foreign funding, prevents them from working on politically sensitive issues, and requires extensive reporting to government agencies. CSOs have adjusted to these new restrictions by shifting from advocacy to service delivery, while some have disbanded operations altogether when restrictions are too onerous. Some CSOs that continue to engage in advocacy work, find space to do so by switching the language of their appeals, building alliances, and focusing on less politicised issue areas<sup>14</sup>. Against this background, Civicus monitor has declared Nigeria's civic space as repressed<sup>15</sup>.

There is the need to reclaim the civic space to continue to achieve what it has always been intended, to enhance transparency and good governance, contributing to increased public debate on issues surrounding the formulation and implementation of government budgets as well as in supporting greater participation and inclusion. This process is initiated by this study to understand the specific human rights abuses, the actors, the threats to socio economic life of the civil society, impacts on the civic space and recommendations to opening the civic space.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

- To determine the human rights abuses/violations, issues of insecurity and socio-economic impacts in south-east Nigeria that have led to shrinking civic spaces;
- To identify the perpetrators and drivers of the human rights abuses, heightening insecurity leading to negative socio-economic impacts and shrinking the civic spaces;
- To determine the motives of the perpetrators;
- To recommend how the society can halt the trend and reclaim the civic space.

### **1.4 Scope of the study**

The study was conducted across the five states of the south-east namely Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. We engaged stakeholders above 18 years that cut across individuals who are human rights defenders, ordinary citizens, frontline organisations, leaders of communities and religious institutions, media practitioners, opinion leaders, businessmen and women, professionals, community women, persons with disability and youths.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

Civil society is an immensely complex sector, their activities target social problems, they act as a watch dog to get the government to toe the right path. They implement intervention programmes to address emergency

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<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International Report 2020/21 "The State of the World's Human Rights" April 7, 2021.  
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/3202/2021/en/>

<sup>14</sup> Dupuy, K. Peace Research Institute Oslo, "How Does Political Repression Affect Civil Society Organizations? Examining CSOs in Bangladesh and Zambia" 2019; (September).

<sup>15</sup> CIVICUS Monitor (2021) <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

issues with support from donors. CSOs also advocate for change of undesirable situations that citizens face and cannot engage with state actors as individuals. Irrespective of the activities or responsibilities of civil society organisations; their work contributes to promoting human rights, peace, and justice. The actions of civil society organisations are delivered in writing, speaking, demonstrations, organising, advocating and participation. They utilise platforms such as the media, projects, research, reports, resistance to discrimination, outright vote of no confidence and organising to demand accountability while expressing themselves in their environment typically known as the civic space.

However, it has been alleged by government that some CSOs are established with the mandate to disrupt the peace and security of the state; or engage in criminal activities which necessitates the government oversight and regulation. Should this allegation be true, it becomes imperative for the government to identify such groups and take them through any process allowed by the law to stop their programmes for the safety of the citizens and the state. However, this is not the same thing as restricting any individual or organisation that expresses dissatisfaction at the action or inaction of the government or responding with brute force on any criticism against the government, in a way that makes it impossible for civil society organisations to freely engage in their civic space, it becomes repressive.

This study will therefore provide additional knowledge on the specific experiences of citizens in south-east Nigeria. The study will give more insight on the types and levels of human rights violations from state actors and non-state actors to incite fear and destabilise civil society from actively engaging with their responsibilities. This study will share the recommendations that diverse stakeholders can act on, to reclaim a vibrant civic space in south-east Nigeria.

## **1.7 Limitations of the Study**

The research study is not representative of the entire populations of women and men in the south-east. However, using the quantitative and qualitative methodology, data was collected and analysed which has provided dependable contextual and local information, perceptions, and experiences around the shrinking civic state of the region. However, this limitation does not reduce the quality and validity of the findings.

Questions and discussions related to shrinking civic space have remained sensitive due to present human rights violations and violence that citizens face for responding to questions. Expressing any opinion on the state of the region can be interpreted as taking sides with secessionist groups, same can be said of dressing or behaving in a particular manner or asking questions that do not positively reflect the government. Furthermore, survivors of various forms of violence were engaged but limited to questions that did not put them in a position of struggling to respond. In addition, the anonymity maintained by the data gathering process enabled them to provide the basic necessary information which mostly bordered on what the issues were, the impact on the general population, with some bias to women and girls, and their anonymous recommendations.

Insecurity: At the time of this study, citizens in the south-east were still amid the attacks from “unknown gunmen”<sup>16</sup> and government security forces. Therefore, the level of suspicion was high, with discretion and

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<sup>16</sup> “Mystery of Unknown Gunmen Identified as DSS Official in southeast Nigeria”, National Daily Newspaper, October 6, 2021, <https://nationaldailyng.com/mystery-of-unknown-gunman-identified-as-dss-official-in-southeast-nigeria/>

trust being the key ingredients to participation in the focus group discussions and key informant interviews. To reduce the fear and risk of engagement, contact persons within locations supported mobilisation and the questions were precise to elicit responses in a shorter time so that respondents could disperse. A typical incident happened in Ebonyi State on Thursday, October 28, 2021, when the IPOB leader was arraigned in court. It was a complete lock-down across the south-east, but the respondents braved it to assemble at a designated location, because of the trust of who had invited them to the event.

COVID-19: This is still an issue and was the major reason for reduced engagement to limit the number of people participating in the FGDs and KIIs, which could easily manage the space for the conversations with the researchers. Although no longer on lock down, enumerators had to comply with current COVID-19 prevention protocols.

## **1.8 Ethical Considerations**

Due to the sensitive nature of shrinking civic space, every respondent, both on the FGDs and the KIIs, gave their consent before participating in the research. In addition, they were assured of the confidentiality of the study, therefore, names are not mentioned, and identities of respondents are not revealed in this research.

## **1.9 Methodology**

The study identified serious concerns facing the citizens of the south-east, which has culminated in the disenfranchisement we see in the respondents and in the agitation of young persons for better governance. The south-east as already established from the desk review grapples with the challenges of political instability, and economic inequality in the Nigerian state with the impact of underdevelopment exacerbated by a lack of federal government resources to the region, poverty and hunger, high rate of unemployment, corruption, mismanagement of public funds at the expense of the citizens' interest, insecurity, communal conflict, and a lack of basic social amenities. These are the issues that the civil society engages in, with demands for fairness, improvement, and delivery of development, so that life becomes bearable for the citizens. However, in their quest to support leadership with their opinions, civic spaces for such expressions have become smaller and no longer accommodating, giving rise to the reason for this research.

The study utilised both quantitative and qualitative data collection strategies. The quantitative method employed an online survey tool, developed with the Kobotoolbox to collect both online and off-line data, allowing for a wider reach. A total of 355 respondents submitted the survey, 85 submitted incomplete data analysed as invalid while 270 respondents completed the survey tool as required and formed the basis for the derived results of the survey. Five active, frontline human rights defenders were selected from the fifteen contacts nominated in each state by the survey respondents to engage in the key informant interview. The qualitative method also covered focus group discussion of ten persons drawn from the broad spectrum of stakeholders from professionals to business people, media, community and religious institution leader, women, people with disability, youth and opinion leaders. Additional desk review tools included national and state newspapers, reporting incidents that are indicative of the shrinking civic space in the south-east; academic databases JSTOR, ResearchGate and OpenDocs on the Institution of Development Studies.





## 2.0 Desk Research - Context

This desk study was useful to determine the available information on the subject matter of shrinking civic space across south-east Nigeria. It provides the background to the conceptual framework that confirmed the human rights violations taking place across Nigeria and not solely focused on the south-east. The report is heavy on facts from other studies<sup>17</sup> surrounding the incidents of human rights violations on IPOB members, #ENDSARS protests and other civil society members who are human rights activists.

### 2.1 What is Civil Society

Civil society is a sphere of social interaction between the citizens and the state. The interactions are seen in the norms and values critical for solving community problems and pursuing common interests of citizens and they include but are not limited to trust, tolerance and inclusion in community, cooperatives, structures and networks.

Since the late 1970s, civil society has played an increasingly prominent role in the development sector, being innovative and grassroots-driven with the desire and capacity to pursue participatory and people-centred forms of development and to fill gaps left by the failure of states across the developing world in meeting the needs of their poorest citizens. While levels of funding for civil society programmes in service delivery and advocacy work have increased alongside the rising prevalence and prominence of civil society, concerns regarding their legitimacy have also increased. There are ongoing questions of these comparative advantages, given their growing distance away from low-income people and communities and towards their donors.

Civil society has been widely recognised as an essential 'third' sector<sup>18</sup> and is composed of autonomous associations which develop a dense, diverse, and pluralistic network. As it develops, civil society will consist of a range of local groups, specialised organisations, and linkages between them to amplify the corrective voices of civil society as a partner in governance. Civil society organisations have significant importance as agents for promoting good governance, transparency, effectiveness, openness, accountability, and responsiveness. Good governance could be fostered by; policy analysis and advocacy, regulation and monitoring of state performance, actions and behaviour of government officials, documenting evidence and investigation of public opinion cases, private and public sectors, construct social capital and empowering citizens to identify and speak their values, beliefs, democratic practices and civic norms, by forming alliances to cater for the needs of the vulnerable and marginalised populations and participate in public and political affairs. Civil society gets involved in peace building and development work to improve individuals, communities, and nations wellbeing.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibezim-Ohaeri, V. Spaces for Change, "Galvanizing the Collective Action to Protect the Civic Space in Nigeria", March 13, 2021  
<https://yaraduafoundation.org/files/Galvanizing%20Collective%20Action.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Ghaus-Pasha A. Role of Civil Society Organisations in Participatory and Accountable Governance publication based on the 6th Global Forum on Reinventing Government Towards Participatory and Transparent Governance May 26-27, 2005  
<https://publicadministration.un.org/publications/content/PDFs/E-Library%20Archives/2007%20Toward%20Participatory%20and%20Transparent%20Governance.pdf>

## 2.2 Civic Space in the Context of the South-East

East Central State, as an administrative division of Nigeria, was created on 27 May 1967 from parts of the Eastern Region with Enugu as the capital. It existed until 3 February 1976, when it was divided into two states - Anambra and Imo. The area now comprises five states; Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi and Abia, now called south-east Nigeria, the indigenous homeland of the Igbo people who speak Igbo Language<sup>19</sup>. As of 2021, it has an estimated population of 17,081,729 persons<sup>20</sup>.

Economically, Igbos were traditionally subsistence farmers, their staples being yam and cassava. For those still engaged in agriculture, men are chiefly responsible for yam cultivation, women for other crops. Land, regarded as the most important resources is owned communally by kinship groups and is made available to individuals for farming and building. Some livestock, important as a source of prestige and for use in sacrifices, is kept. The principal exports are palm oil and palm kernels. Trading, based on their four market days of Ori, Eke, Afor and Nkwo, which also formed the Igbo traditional calendar and synchronised the inter-communal markets<sup>21</sup> demonstrated the entrepreneurial nature of the Igbos and structures communities' civic organising for meetings, marriages, funerals, or any related events.

Local crafts, and wage labour also are important in the Igbo economy, and a high literacy rate has helped many Igbo to become civil servants and business entrepreneurs in the decades after Nigeria gained independence<sup>22</sup>. In addition, the associations of traders selling various products in the market - meat, fish, oil, yam, and other produce to a large extent influenced the economy of the communities and the associations had strong opinions on how the communities were governed<sup>23</sup>.

Politically, the Igbo people engaged in a quasi-democratic republican<sup>24</sup> system of governance. In tight knit communities, this system guaranteed its citizens equality<sup>25</sup>. With the exception of a few notable Igbo towns such as Onitsha, which had kings called Obi and places such as the Nri Kingdom and Arochukwu, which had priest kings<sup>26</sup>; Igbo communities and area governments were overwhelmingly ruled by a republican

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<sup>19</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Igbo". Encyclopedia Britannica. Igbo. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Igbo> .

<sup>20</sup> List of Nigerian states by population. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Nigerian\\_states\\_by\\_population](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Nigerian_states_by_population).

<sup>21</sup> Ukaegbu J Ofoegbu. Igbo Identity and Personality Vis-à-Vis Igbo Cultural Symbols. Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, Facultad de Filosofia.; 1991.

<sup>22</sup> Akinyoade A, Dietz T, Uche C. Entrepreneurship in Africa.; 2017. doi:10.1163/9789004351615

<sup>23</sup> Grossman S., PEDL Research Note. The Effect of Market Association Political Power and Local Government Effectiveness on Trade: Evidence from Nigeria. Published Department for International Development January 14, 2014:1-3.

<sup>24</sup> Republicanism. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republicanism>

<sup>25</sup> Graham Furniss and Liz Gunner. Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature. The International Journal of African Historical Studies Vol. 31, No. 2 (1998), pp. 409-412 (4 pages) <https://doi.org/10.2307/221118> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/221118>

<sup>26</sup> Nnam MU, Owan EJ, Eteng MJ, Okechukwu GP, Obasi CO, Nwosumba VC. State repression and escalation in Biafra social movements in Nigeria: Any way out? Crime, Law Soc Chang. Published online 2021. doi:10.1007/s10611-021-09985-8

consultative assembly of the common people guided by customary law<sup>27</sup>, made up of customs that are accepted as legal requirements or obligatory rules of conduct; practices and beliefs that are so vital and an intrinsic part of a social and economic system<sup>28</sup>. These norms and customs were valued and most importantly, every family was represented at the decision-making level of chiefs' cabinet<sup>29</sup>.

Before the advent of the colonial administration, the largest political unit was the village group, a federation of villages averaging about 5,000 persons. Members of the group shared a common market and meeting place, a tutelary deity, and ancestral cults that supported a tradition of descent from a common ancestor or group of ancestors<sup>30</sup>. Authority in the village group was vested in a council of lineage heads and influential and wealthy men<sup>31</sup>. In the south-east these groups tended to form larger political units, including centralised kingdoms and states. It is notable that Igbo women were influential in local politics<sup>32</sup>.

Education has always been highly valued and in the past, community members voluntarily donated both home and abroad to erect school buildings that by 1956, there were roughly six thousand primary schools and fifty-four secondary schools in the south-east<sup>33</sup>. Generally, Igbos are a relationship loving people, who value community living, and expend energy and resources to repair damaged relationships and strengthen others. They are ingenious, brilliant, successful traders, great travellers, accomplished educationists, and linguists. They revere hard work, honesty, truthfulness, generosity, humility, respect for elders, respect for cultural and traditional values, but hate acrimony, backbiting, arrogance, greed, stinginess, dishonesty, stealing, ill-gotten wealth to mention but a few<sup>34</sup>.

The culture is further spiced with folktales, poems, proverbs, alliterations, stories of ancestral links, family and local community ties, and ancient conflicts and conquests. They have ceremonies including burial rites, wrestling contests, marriage rites and celebrations, salutations, respect for authorities of the land, naming ceremonies, arts and designs, local technology, religion, masquerades, festivals, conflict management, fines and levies, punishments for offenders, divorce, theft, lineage migrations, acts of ostracism, oath taking, language, communication skills.

The daily activities of the Igbos, such as greetings, respect for parents and elders, character development, skills acquisitions, naming ceremonies, age grade celebrations, title taking rites, settlement of disputes, inter-

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<sup>27</sup> Oraegbunam IKE. Crime and Punishment In Igbo Customary Law: The Challenge Of Nigerian Criminal Jurisprudence, Vol 7, 2010 <https://doi.org/10.4314/og.v7i1.57917>

<sup>28</sup> Orabueze, FO, Ogbazi, I., The Inscription of Fundamental Human Rights and the Liberation of the Igbo Woman from Customary and Administrative Burdens. UNIZIK Journal of Arts and Humanities, vol 14 (2) (2013) :1-28. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v14i2.1>

<sup>29</sup> Igbo Guide. <https://www.igboguide.org/HT-chapter10.htm>

<sup>30</sup> Village Group Political Unit. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/village-group>

<sup>31</sup> Achebe C. Things Fall Apart. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Things-Fall-Apart>

<sup>32</sup> Muonwe M. Women in Traditional Religion and Politics: Prospects for Women's Leadership Role in Nigeria. UNIZIK Journal of Arts and Humanities, vol 20(3) (2020) :1-19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v20i3.1>

<sup>33</sup> Eastern\_Region,\_Nigeria. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern\\_Region,\\_Nigeria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Region,_Nigeria)

<sup>34</sup> Iwunna, P., Chima, N.E., et al. History of Igbo People and Education: A Psychological Implication. International Journal Sharing Platform Historical Research Letters. Published online vol 53, June 30, 2021. doi:10.7176/hrl/53-05

personal relationships, hosting of visitors, courtships, oat-taking, house making or mending, lands sharing among families, seniority rites, socialisations, widowhood and widowerhood rites, mourning rites, use of proverbs and idioms, etc. constitute an integral part of the Igbos' world of cultures and traditional value systems<sup>35</sup>. Respect for the sanctity and sacredness of human life is an accepted norm. The deliberate and wanton destruction of lawful properties of others is abhorred and condemned in all its ramifications and they value human life and property<sup>36</sup>. There were norms and customs translated into the customary laws for enforcement and were critical for traditional civic organising.

Igbo communities created local entertainment outlets for themselves, to keep communities alive and active; these entertainment outlets enhanced children's intellectual development, ensured creativity, promoted the attitudes of healthy practices, morality and consolidated the foundations for the inculcation of the sense of the dignity of labour in the youth and adults alike<sup>37</sup>. Due to the structure of the Igbo society, civic space thrived because decisions among the Igbo are made by a general assembly in which every man could participate. There is vibrant civic space allowing of freedom of expression, participation in governance and rule of law.

## 2.3 Legal Framework Supporting Free Civic Space

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999<sup>38</sup> (as amended) is committed to uphold, protect, defend the rights and freedom of Nigerian people. Chapter IV lists the designated human rights provisions aimed at creating a society that promotes the inalienable values of freedom, equality, and justice; key among which are freedom of thought, speech, association, belief, fair hearing, life, personal liberty, etc.

Beyond the constitution, Nigeria is a signatory to international treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol)<sup>39</sup> and states that all people, everywhere in the world, have the right to speak out, to organise, and to act. These rights – the freedoms of association, assembly and expression - give citizens the freedom to form and join groups, peacefully protest, and advocate for the things they want – and to counter the things they do not want. These freedoms are an essential part of a vibrant democracy; where debates and discussions thrive, and where people can contribute to important decisions that affect them. Yet, in Nigeria, especially in the south-east, human rights violations have been normalised especially perpetrated by state actors.

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<sup>35</sup> Achebe C. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor 178; 1958.

<sup>36</sup> Asikaogu, J., *Igbo Cultural Values and the Effect of Globalisation: A Critical Analysis*, ARCN International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, vol 12, (2) 2018:42-51

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332762140\\_Igbo\\_Cultural\\_Values\\_and\\_the\\_Effect\\_of\\_Globalization\\_A\\_Critical\\_Analysis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332762140_Igbo_Cultural_Values_and_the_Effect_of_Globalization_A_Critical_Analysis)

<sup>37</sup> Nkkelonye, Cyprian. *The Igbo of South-East Nigeria:...* - Google Scholar. Accessed November 6, 2021.

[https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as\\_sdt=0%2C5&q=Nkkelonye%2C+Cyprian.+The+Igbo+of+South-East+Nigeria%3A+Ukpor+in+Five+Centuries+of+History.+Great+Express+Publishers%2C+2005.&btnG=](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=Nkkelonye%2C+Cyprian.+The+Igbo+of+South-East+Nigeria%3A+Ukpor+in+Five+Centuries+of+History.+Great+Express+Publishers%2C+2005.&btnG=)

<sup>38</sup> Nigerian Constitution 1999 [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Nigeria\\_2011.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Nigeria_2011.pdf?lang=en)

<sup>39</sup> Protocol to the African Charter on the Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WG/ProtocolontheRightsofWomen.pdf>



## 2.4 The State of the Civic Space in South-East Nigeria

Citizens need space to speak out and organise against injustice and the root causes of poverty, without fear of repercussions<sup>40</sup> guaranteed in the Nigerian constitution, and in regional and international instruments promoting the respect for human rights for which Nigeria is a signatory. Most importantly, Nigeria as a country and the south-east as a critical region within the country has been categorised as a repressed state<sup>41</sup>.

A repressed state on a scale of 0 - 10 scores between 2 - 4 and demonstrates a civic space that is significantly constrained. Active individuals and civil society members who criticise power-holders risk surveillance, harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, injury, and death. Although some civil society organisations exist, their advocacy work is regularly impeded, and they face threats of de-registration and closure by the authorities. People who organise or take part in peaceful protests are likely to be targeted by the authorities using excessive force, including the use of live ammunition, and risk mass arrests and detention. The media typically reflects the position of the state, and any independent voices are routinely targeted through raids, physical attacks or protracted legal harassment. Websites and social media platforms are blocked, and internet activism is heavily monitored<sup>42</sup>.

Below are the findings from the desk review on the state of civic space in the south-east, engaging the major dimensions for monitoring the shrinking civic space including:

### a. Regulatory Framework

This refers to the set of laws and regulations that define the size and nature of civic space. The frameworks are derived from a series of laws which cover registration, supervision, and regulation of CSOs activities. These policies and laws shape the ability of CSOs to obtain legal status, access resources, deliver services, and engage in advocacy, all of which are essential for civil society to flourish. However, the 2015 CIVICUS Enabling Environment National Assessment report for Nigeria found for that period “that CSOs operate with fairly few legal restrictions”<sup>43</sup>. The report recognised that CSOs at that time, faced a few non-legal restrictions, such as burdensome bureaucratic procedures, barriers to access funds, or difficulty in buying or leasing property. Legal requirements include the Companies Income Tax Act (CITA), the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) 2020<sup>44</sup> and the Civil Society Regulatory Commission Bill 2020 which sought to give ‘incidental powers’ to the Corporate Affairs Commission to do anything which is calculated to facilitate the

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<sup>40</sup> Civic Space Monitoring Tool: Understanding What is Happening in Civic Space at a Local and National Level. Oxfam publications: pp 1-10. <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620874/gd-civic-space-monitoring-tool-041019-en.pdf;jsessionid=50BA76E9542F7430D60B009E8EA66E58?sequence=1>

<sup>41</sup> CIVICUS Monitor Tracking Civic Space 2021. <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/nigeria/>

<sup>42</sup> Chioma Agwuegbo, Reclaiming Nigeria’s Online Civic Space: A Collective and Sustainable Civil Society Approach to Protect Liberties, March 12, 2021 <https://yaraduafoundation.org/files/Reclaiming%20Nigeria's%20Shrinking%20Online%20Space.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Nigerian Network of NGOS (NNGOs) Enabling Environment National Assessment: Nigeria report [https://www.civicus.org/images/EENA\\_Nigeria.pdf](https://www.civicus.org/images/EENA_Nigeria.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> Abdullahi AY. The Legal Framework for Regulating Not-For-Profit Organizations in Nigeria. UNIZIK Journal of Commercial and Property Law 2021; 8(2):84-97.

performance of the Commission's functions and general duties, including without prejudice, direct specified action to be taken or direct application of a civil society organisation's property.

Other laws and bills particularly significant to the civil society sector are legal regimes enforced in furtherance of anti-money laundering (AML) and countering financing of terrorism (CFT) measures. AML and CFT measures derive inspiration from international financial regulations such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)<sup>45</sup>. The Money Laundering (Prohibition) Act 2011, the Terrorism (Prevention) Act No. 10, 2011 as amended<sup>46</sup>, the Special Control Unit against Money Laundering ("SCUML") Regulations 2013 and 2016<sup>47</sup>, and the Central Bank of Nigeria AML/CFT Guidelines 2013<sup>48</sup> are some of the major national legislations enacted in response to FATF promptings.

Strong objections followed the recent amendment of the Companies and Allied Matters Act, CAMA, with speculation that Christian leaders and other vocal critics of the amended legislation were accused of being corrupt and feared accountability<sup>49</sup>. Attacks of this nature unleashed on opposition political leaders and civil society actors have the effect of delegitimising their agitations for good governance, mobilising public hatred toward them or to increase their vulnerability to stigma and ridicule. A further consequence is declining public trust and confidence in that person so labelled, and by implication, the civil society.

## **b. Access to Funding**

This refers to the ability of civil society organisations (CSOs), academia, CBOs to make use of different potential sources of funding and the actual ways this is open or controlled. Funding and resourcing are one of – if not- the most important issue currently affecting CSOs in the south-east. Writing proposals and meeting with potential donors are all very familiar activities for NGOs. The ability to raise funds and cultivate donor relationships is a "must have" skill yet not well honed by many working from a premise of non-professionals. Many CSOs and CBOs in the south-east are dependent on external funding coming from institutional donors that support their cause, and this dependence can create a competition for accessing shrinking funds among CSOs. This can be a problem when state governments fear the access that a well-resourced CSO can provide, even though there is clear donor fatigue and funding of south-east organisations. Within the south-east CSO sector, many organisations now face severe financial constraints, forcing them to scale back on operations, attempt to seek out alternative funding, and reduce employment for local personnel.

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<sup>45</sup> The Financial Action Task Force. FATF Guidance on Anti-money laundering and terrorist financing measures and Terrorist Financing Measures and Financial Inclusion. Financial Action Task Force. 2011;(June):1-75.

<sup>46</sup> Money Laundering (Prohibition), Act 2011 (as amended), (harmonized Act No. 11, 2011 and Act No. 1, 2012) <https://www.nfiu.gov.ng/images/Downloads/downloads/mlpaamend.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Special Control Unit Against Money Laundering (Scuml):2000. <https://www.scuml.org/about-us/>

<sup>48</sup> Amendment to AML Act 2013.Pdf. [http://www.cbn.gov.ng/out/2014/fprd/aml act 2013.pdf](http://www.cbn.gov.ng/out/2014/fprd/aml%20act%202013.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> Onyebuchi Ezigbo, Fearing Accountability, CAN Steps Up Agitation against CAMA. This Day, September 2, 2020 Accessed November 21, 2021. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2020/09/02/fearing-accountability-can-steps-up-agitation-against-cama/>

Unfortunately, because of heavy reliance on limited donor funding, many organisations face the risk of eventual extinction<sup>50</sup>.

### **c. Administration and Bureaucracy**

This refers to the ways in which the operation of CSOs is enabled, constrained, or suspended by administrative practices of the government. The major challenges to partnership are the character of the state and the exacerbated weaknesses of civil society if any. Presently, south-east governments have tended to operate as a closed systems with little access to the public. At the federal level, powers have concentrated at the centre rather than being decentralised and delegated. What we have are state officials who are disconnected from the citizens with a tendency for unilateral actions, dictation, and command rather than consultation. State officials tend to be authoritarian, absolutist, suppressive and operate as imperial majesties. There is little room for consultation and freethinking debates. Dialogue is seen as weakness; criticism is seen as dissenting opinion and the opposition are resisted and suppressed.

### **d. Safety and Well-Being of People**

This includes the use of legal and illegal mechanisms to protect or threaten organisations, staff members, media personal and activists. Violations can refer to verbal or physical abuse, including sexual assault, kidnapping, intimidation, extortion, and murder by both state and non-state actors. Increasingly, protest organisers are being intimidated and coerced by various state institutions. There have also been situations in which travel bans, which have no basis in the rule of law, have been slammed on individuals for their alleged roles in the #EndSARS protests. The Coalition of 32 CSOs working to promote democracy and human rights expressed grave concerns about the rise in the level of attacks targeted at human rights defenders and activists in the country. When the state actors resort to acts of intimidation, profiling and coercion of individuals and groups who defend human rights and have not committed any offence, the government's action constitutes a serious attack on freedom of expression, which is a constitutionally guaranteed right of every Nigerian citizen<sup>51</sup>.

An instance is the attack on Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). This has posed a serious threat to the civic space because, while holding their activities, they have faced arbitrary arrests, sporadic shooting that cost the lives of many, unlawful detention, repressed freedom of speech and association, gender-based violence on their female members such as Gloria Okolie who has been in police custody since June 17 2021, and experiencing various forms of violations<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> PLAC Sport Lighting Civic Space Efforts and Issues. Funding-from-donor-model-to-social-enterprise. Published online 2021. <https://placbeam.com/2021/09/03/ngo-funding-from-donor-model-to-social-enterprise/>

<sup>51</sup> CSOs criticise attacks on human rights activists. The Guardian Newspaper. <https://guardian.ng/news/csos-criticise-attacks-on-human-rights-activists/>. Published 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Vanguard Newspapers. gloria-okolie-drags-igp-malami-others-to-court. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/08/detention-21-year-old-gloria-okolie-drags-igp-malami-others-to-court/>. Published 2021.

## **e. Access to Information and Public Voice**

This refers to access to objective and reliable information, including freedom of expression, through different forms of media and other advocacy actors with informative functions (NGOs, CSOs, Think Tanks, researchers etc.).

Various members of the media across the south-east have reported the continued harassment, assaults, detention and being banned from entry to places such as the government house, by government officials<sup>53</sup>. After the #EndSARS protest<sup>54</sup>, several media houses that reported the incidents that accompanied the protest were heavily fined. The National Broadcasting Commission, fined Nigerian media houses AIT, Channels TV and Arise News between N2 million and N3 million Naira accusing them of airing “unverified images” of alleged shootings<sup>55</sup>. There have been 160 journalists attacked in Nigeria in the last two years<sup>56</sup> and several detained, harassed, and assaulted while covering state elections<sup>57</sup>. The Nigerian Union of Journalists NUJ) launched a five-year-review on press freedom in Nigeria starting from 2016 to 2021 where the report indicted state actors who made attempts to gag the press<sup>58</sup>.

Since 2014, there has been a tidal wave of legislation containing provisions that have enormous potential to further shrink the civic space have been introduced in Nigeria’s state and federal legislatures. Notable among them are the Non-Governmental Organisations Regulatory Bill<sup>59</sup> (NGO Bill), the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019, the social media bill sponsored by Senator Mohammed Sani and the Hate Speech sponsored by Senator Aliyu Sabi Abdullahi.

## **f. Freedom of Assembly, Association and Dissent**

This refers to whether individuals and groups can gather and organise themselves freely, have freedom to protest or publicly express disagreement

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<sup>53</sup> Okeke SV, Okwumba OE, Ezeah G, Gever VC. Journalism practice in a country facing division threats: Newspaper framing of secession agitations in Nigeria. Library Philosophy and Practice <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/228203753.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> barristerng.com. Police conduct mass arrests in Imo, raid newspaper vendors for circulating IPOB, ESN news. <https://barristerng.com/police-conduct-mass-arrests-in-imo-raid-newspaper-vendors-for-circulating-ipob-esn-news/>

<sup>55</sup> Cable. T. NBC fines ARISE TV, Channels, AIT over #EndSARS protest reportage. <https://www.thecable.ng/breaking-nbc-fines-arise-tv-channels-ait-for-unprofessional-endsars-protests-reportage> .

<sup>56</sup> Premium Times Nigeria. 160 Journalists Attacked in Nigeria in Last Two Years — Report. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/425969-160-journalists-attacked-in-nigeria-in-last-two-years-report.html>

<sup>57</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists. Journalists in Nigeria detained, harassed, and assaulted while covering state elections. <https://cpj.org/2019/03/journalists-in-nigeria-detained-harassed-and-assau/>

<sup>58</sup> Reporters S. Igboho’s Aides: Nigerian Union Of Journalists Lambasts Department Of State Services Over Assault On Pressmen. <http://saharareporters.com/2021/08/02/igboho-s-aides-nigerian-union-journalists-lambasts-department-state-services-over-assault>

<sup>59</sup> NGO BILL: Another disturbing evidence of closing spaces in Nigeria | TheCable. Accessed November 6, 2021. <https://www.thecable.ng/ngo-bill-another-disturbing-evidence-closing-spaces-nigeria>

The Nigerian Army said its troops, alongside other security agencies, acted in self-defence as well as in defence of lives and property of peace-loving Nigerians when it shot dead at least five members of the Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) as they marched to commemorate the 49th anniversary of the declaration of the defunct Biafra Republic by late warlord, Odumegwu Ojukwu<sup>60</sup>.

MASSOB condemned the terrorist attack against Chukwuma Soludo at Isuofia. They equally condemned the unwarranted killings of Ebonyi state indigenous citizens by Fulani terrorist herdsmen. MASSOB condemned in totality, the breaking of Owerri prison by the so-called unknown gunmen. The group wondered how untrained persons with no military training could overpower the entire security apparatus of Nigeria in the South-East<sup>61</sup>. Apparently, it has become a crime to belong to a certain association or identified with certain groups, or wear certain colours, some of which are MASSOB or IPOB or ESN in the south-east. Such an association only exposes a citizen to attack by state or non-state actors.

## **g. Dialogue and Consultation**

Everyone is entitled to an opinion and the governance authorities have the duty to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment for citizens to exercise their right to participate in decision-making. Dialogue and consultation provide the opportunities for citizens to contribute their opinion to decisions that impact them in the society. Dialogue and consultation underpin the fundamental human right of inclusion and participation. When citizens dialogue with their leaders, the process helps the development of a public policy and deepen their understanding of the problems they seek to address.

At a time, the government had set up a 13-member committee on national dialogue, (VOAnews.com, October 27, 2013) assigned with developing a plan for the national discourse realising that it is a necessary to find solutions to the nation's challenges and creating unity that can improve lives and living standards. Two centres were set up in each geo-political zone, the south-east inclusive, to accommodate as many views from citizens as possible. Also in 2014, there was a national conference expected to proffer appropriate solutions that will assist in moving the nation forward. The senate and house of representatives conducted the constitutional review across the country in zones, involving citizens contributions towards the amendment of the constitution that ended in the first quarter of 2021 (<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/>).

Where these citizens opinions are garnered and implemented, this depicts responsive governance. However, hardly has any of the outcomes of these reviews, conferences and dialogues been implemented. This makes a mockery of dialogue and consultations. Also, beyond the dialogues and consultations mandated from the federal level, there has not been any state level citizens dialogue and consultation. In Imo State, in 2013 at the beginning of the tenure of Governor Rochas Okorocha, formed grassroot level governance named State Development Council (SDC) Coordinators or 'mini governors'. The council would pay pensioners in their wards instead of the pensioners coming to the capital city. They would carry out renovation of schools,

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<sup>60</sup> Premium Times. Why protesting MASSOB, IPOB members were killed — Nigerian Army. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/204410-protesting-massob-ipob-members-killed-nigerian-army.html>

<sup>61</sup> Daily Post Nigeria. MASSOB accuses FG of sponsoring attacks in Igboland. <https://dailypost.ng/2021/04/06/massob-accuses-fg-of-sponsoring-attacks-in-igboland/>

supervision of government's primary healthcare centres, schools, other public establishments, and security development; but all these fell through the cracks.

#### **h. Access to justice and legal services**

Human rights and justice are very fundamental parts of the law and development of any society. An aim of the law is to maintain order in any given society, and these laws are given for the benefit of everyone, from those in power to the common everyday man and the end of the law is justice. Justice should be assessed by all citizens for in the words of Chief Justice Hewart in (*R v Sussex Justices, Ex parte McCarthy*) ([1924] 1 KB 256, [1923] All ER Rep 233) "It is not merely of some importance, but of fundamental importance that justice should not only be done but should be manifestly and undoubtedly seen to be done".

Section 17(2) (e) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 as amended, provides for the independence, impartiality, and integrity of courts of law and for easy accessibility to be secured and maintained. Access to justice is itself a human right and a denial of this is a denial of the basic tenets of human rights principles 'Life' implies not only life in the physical sense but a bundle of rights that makes life worth living, there is no juristic or other basis for holding that denial of "access to justice" will not affect the quality of human life so as to take access to justice out of the purview of right to life guaranteed under section 36(1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2011 as amended, the African Charter and other major international instruments. (<https://guardian.ng/opinion/the-challenges-of-access-to-justice/>)

Yet, our civic space experiences long delays in the adjudicatory process, long adjournments of proceedings, over reliance on technicalities, collapsing infrastructure, corruption in the system, congestion in courts and prisons, poverty of knowledge, culture of impunity and declining confidence of the citizenry in the efficacy and efficiency of the administration of justice. Today, public confidence in the justice delivery system is waning.

#### **i. Civil Society Legitimacy and Accountability**

Across the globe, civil society organisations (CSOs) are more trusted by the public than businesses and government. Business leaders might maximise their profits at the expense of the business or its customers, and government officials might use their power for their own gain, but CSOs depend on their good reputations and performance to mobilise resources. They have fewer opportunities to convert resources into self-interest uses. Recent experience suggests, however, that civil society leaders can also be guilty of self-interest behaviours, even though the rewards may be less dramatic than they are in other sectors. This is particularly a concern as CSOs become more influential on human rights issues. (<https://www.amazon.com/Creating-Credibility-Legitimacy-AccountabilityTransnational/dp/>)

Civil-society organisations have historically played a crucial role in tackling issues of transparency, legitimacy and accountability within governments and businesses, with many positive results. It is perhaps inevitable, therefore, that political and business leaders at the national and global level have become anxious about the impact of civil-society advocacy. Some government leaders have suggested that, since they have been elected, only they should be able to develop and implement public policy. They argue that civil-society organisations can never have the legitimacy of democratically elected representatives.



Civil society must strive for maximum transparency and accountability in its work. At the same time, we must be willing to defend the rights of citizens and their organisations to participate actively in public life. We have fought long and hard to create the space to practise active citizenship and civic space is being reduced. A disciplined, united, and well-informed civil-society community, backed by the positive attitudes and support of ordinary citizens, should prevail. NGOs must build on these and other models and work together to increase their own accountability without losing flexibility or their genuine contact with the grass roots ([http://www.lasociedadcivil.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/the\\_end\\_of\\_blind\\_faith.pdf](http://www.lasociedadcivil.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/the_end_of_blind_faith.pdf))

## **DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS FROM THE DESK REVIEW**

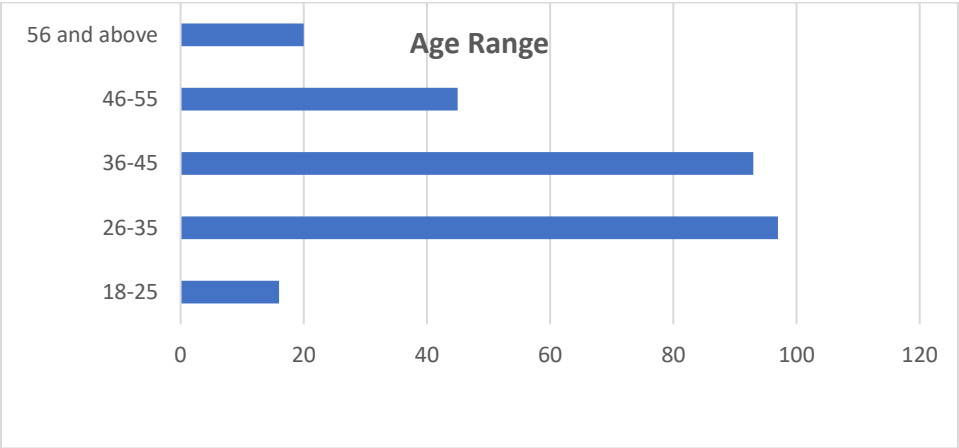
Shrinking civic space in the south-east as identified from reviewed literature shows excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests and detention, extra judicial executions, torture and ill treatments, sexual and gender-based violence, impunity and limited freedom of expression by the state actors; the activities of the non-state actors have to a limited degree mirrored that of the state actors in places where it is alleged they have been armed by the state such as “unknown gunmen” and other criminal elements who have taken the opportunity to commit crimes against their communities.

The available desk and literature review have identified various threats of human rights violations wholesale destruction of properties, repression of access to basic freedoms, large scale insecurity often leading to internal displacement of communities, mental trauma and anxiety, and constant fear of the unknown. Poverty has increased which is an indicator of the current dire economic crisis exacerbated by the sit-at-home orders in the south-east. In addition to these are death threats, travel bans, regulations of social media, deregistration of registered organisations, snooping on private citizens and ban on cryptocurrency.

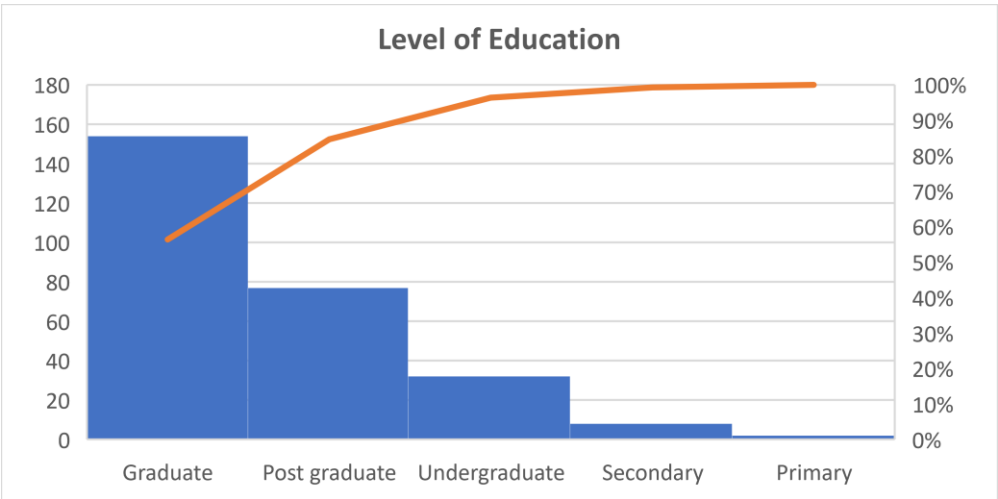
The desk review highlighted recommendations, most of which cut across the entire country such as holding perpetrators accountable for their offences, by fact finding and ensuring that they face the relevant punishment. Also, the implementation of the legal frameworks that support reforms and respect for human rights, imbibe accountability to stamp out impunity and government to make efforts to promote human rights. These findings provide for gaps on who the perpetrators are state and non-state actors, their perceived or confirmed motives for attacking the civic space. How these situations have affected both female and male genders differently, especially with regards to the socio-economic aspects of securing a livelihood. All aspects of social and cultural rights are affected.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS

## Implication of demographics on age and level of education of human rights defenders



Disaggregated data on age, demonstrated that majority of the respondents were 26-35 years range followed by the 36-45 years range. These are the very active ages mostly impacted by the situation of the shrinking civic space because it can be argued that they occupied the civic space more. They are populated by those whose lives and livelihoods are facing challenges, people in the media who are regularly harassed by state actors because of their investigative reporting. These age ranges also use social media more. However, from the analysis above, those within 18-25 years, and 56 years and above are not heavily engaging with the civic spaces. Question could be asked, if it was the medium of engagement as the survey tool was not on the recognised demographic tool Instagram for the 18-25 years range or Facebook for the 56-year group. Of concern though with issues bordering on poor governance, the 45-55 years range seem to have withdrawn from the conversations on the civic issues /space.



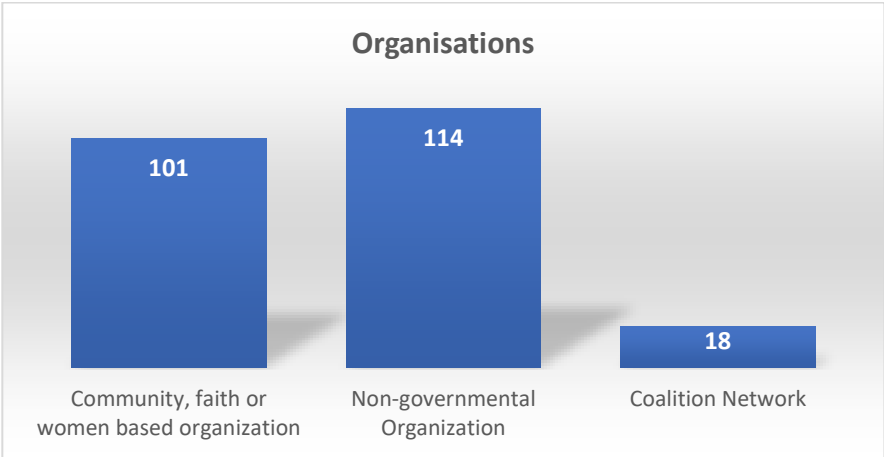


As is obvious from the graphic representation of the data, over 80% of the respondents are graduates, this is truly indicative of the level of persons who are aware, understand and consciously engage the civic space. It further shows that education plays a key role in determining the use of the civic space. 10% of respondents had basic primary education. During the KIIs and FGD, despite explanation, on issues of human rights, organising, inclusion, expression, use of internet, seeking information for instance on the budget from the government felt that such information can be easily handled by the educated; the observation with those present, was that those with less than university education see such issues as abstract and exclusive to those with higher levels of education.

This contributes to the reason why majority of persons are not asking questions. Due to lack of necessary level of education that equips one to ask or demand from the rights position. According to Statista.com, published by Simona Varella on September 8, 2021, about the Literacy Rate in Nigeria by zone and gender; it stated that in south-east, 86.7% males and 79.3% females respectively are educated. According to NBS/FMELP (2009) Nigeria produces an average of 600,000 graduates annually. This across 10 years is a total of 6 million graduates, if shared equally across 36 states will allocate an average of 16,600 graduates per state (approximately 83,333 for the south-east). This is a far-cry from the total population of 22,565,414 (2016 population) -en.m.wikipedia.org (List of Nigeria States by population). This is about 0.37% only educated and this is the bane of the development of the south-east and in Nigeria as a country.

It can be argued that the lack of access to educational opportunities has made managing the civic space cumbersome. This is because more of the population do not understand, cannot properly engage with governance processes and the only choice to respond to issues of bad governance and frustration would be violence as we see now. The population do not understand the appropriate use of power and the accountability of their leaders. They are easily threatened by the state actors and are afraid. The negative outcome of the fear is usually a situation of either silence or resolve to die fighting if that is the only option available. Consider that the education and awareness in the population can allow for a more robust engagement with various governments through dialogues, they may choose to use political powers and drive the process of who leads and who does not.

**Organisations and their involvement in human rights activities**



114 respondents worked with NGOs and whilst 101 with community, faith, or women focused organizations whereas coalitions and networks members are 18. The higher number of NGOs demonstrates that they are more often the catalysts to use the civic spaces. They mobilise citizens to participate in governance processes, they advocate on behalf of the people for inclusion, they use the media platforms extensively to create awareness, communicate, demand accountability, expose the anomalies in the society and act as watchdogs to the state actors. They organise for protests, demonstrations and facilitate access to various sustainable development programmes. They understand the civic space and are aware that the space is no longer safe because of the threats that they face in a bid to live up to the objectives for which they exist. This survey provides an opportunity to peek into their experiences anonymously.

**Conditions of civil society organisations and how they changed**



65% of respondents are sure that the working conditions of CSOs has deteriorated, and from the FGDs/KIIs conducted, the respondents corroborated that the conditions of the CSOs have gone from bad to worse. Across the states, especially Imo, Abia and Ebonyi States, respondents were afraid to participate in FGDs or the KIIs for fear of having state actors clamp down on the venues and have them punished. It had become public knowledge in these three states that no discussions are allowed regarding the government. Although no known verbal instructions or directives had been issued to this effect, some human rights defending individual or organisations have been punished by the state for sensitising or mobilising fellow citizens for action.

In Abia State, some drivers in the state drivers’ union were complaining about the bad condition of the Umudike road, they contributed to fill the potholes and very bad spots, just to ease movement on that road. This is typical of what CSOs do to ameliorate the challenges in their environment while advocating for intervention by the government. As the hired workers were working on the road, a team of policemen came in a van and arrested the workers. This led to a rampage and demonstration by the students of Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, who were seriously impacted by the deplorable condition of that road. Their action led to the eventual release of the road workers.

In Imo State, young men were randomly arrested by the state actors and majority of them did not return to date. It became an issue for discussion and with most independent media emphasising on the extrajudicial killing happening in the state. CSOs and the media were on the frontline campaigning against the abduction

and incessant disappearance of young males looking between 18 years and 40 years. A particular on-air-personality announced a demonstration and scheduled the date. He became most wanted by the security forces and was eventually forced to call off the planned demonstration of young males in Imo State.

Anambra and Enugu respondents were not harassed by the state actors or security forces for speaking out. However, in Enugu, people were being dispossessed of their landed properties without compensation from their state government. Any citizen that dared ask question or tried to resist the move was manhandled by the state actors. These situations bred fear among citizens and not even collectively as CSOs could they engage in any dialogue that could save the situation.

128 respondents stated categorically that CSOs conditions have deteriorated, and this is a negative indicator from the point of organising. CSOs engage for the good of all the citizens, in unfortunate conditions. In the past, as deduced from the FGDs and KIs, civil society is the space where we all dwell together, live cordially, communicate, do things together to help one another. A demonstration of this community civic experience was the history of the Igbos in many villages pooling resources to send the brightest indigent children to missionary schools<sup>62</sup> or supported each other to build their houses. There is an implicit recognition that civil society is every citizen, but most especially those who have brought themselves together as an organized group to provide humanitarian services. They can be associations of traders, professionals like nurses, pharmacists, doctors, teachers, lawyers, civil servants, faith-based organisations, students, etc.

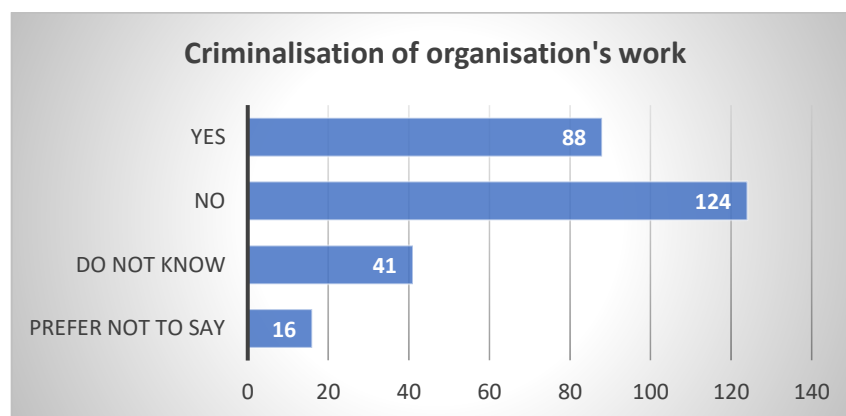
The civil society shares ideas, promotes human rights, promotes change. The society is covered with rule of law and protected by human rights, promoting participation and cooperation, champion their course and live in equality led by democratic principles without harassment. They fight for their rights collectively and represent the voice of the voiceless, vulnerable, and marginalised. They collectively advocate for the weak, independent of the government, although registered with the government to guarantee legitimacy, which ensures some level of coordination by the government. They hold the government accountable as watchdogs of the society and mediate between the government and the citizens as individuals. They are largely non-profit.

Currently, these ideals have become nearly impossible, with organisations operating in fear, looking over their shoulders to see who is watching before they can speak or act on issues affecting their communities. This is the reason for the negative changes in condition of CSOs tagged as deteriorated

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<sup>62</sup> S.I. Okoro, Ph.D, "The Igbo and Educational Development in Nigeria, 1846-2015", International Journal of History and Cultural Studies, Volume 4, Issue 1, 2018:65-80. <https://www.arcjournals.org/pdfs/ijhcs/v4-i1/5.pdf>

## Criminalisation of the work of human rights defenders



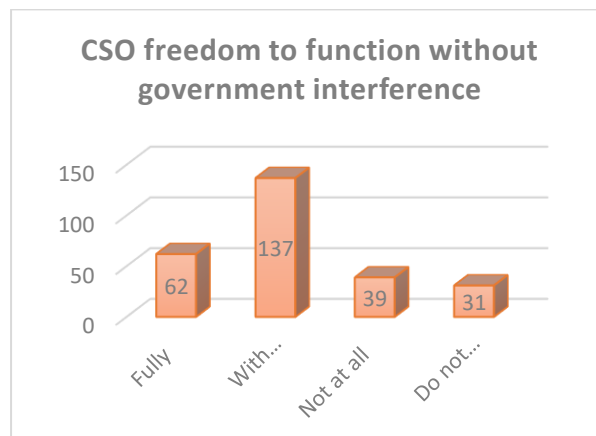
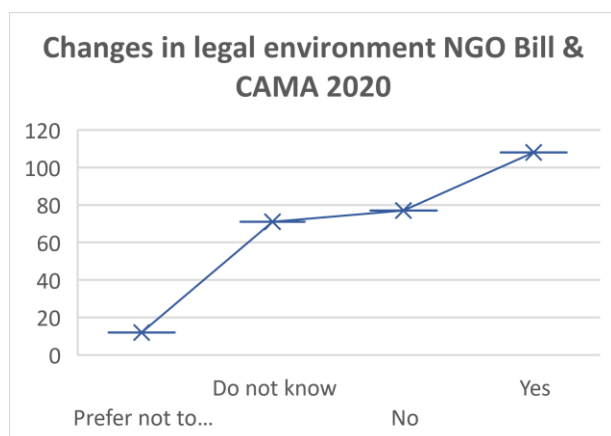
These unfavourable conditions, 88 respondents are of the opinion that the work of CSOs has become criminalised i.e., forbidden, and unlawful. Some of the reasons mentioned are

- a. Proliferation of NGOs: In the states, especially among the government officials, everyone owns an NGO. Each state's respondent expressed that each of the governors' wives own an NGO, which become veritable platforms for singing praises of their founding government officials. The citizens see these organisations as pipes for diversion of government funds and the organisations' have no impact on the citizens. Other organisations are suspected to have been established as avenues of laundering money from corrupt individuals or companies. They do not involve themselves in the traditional activities of human rights advocacy, watchdog responsibilities and the likes. They are however heavily involved in jamboree activities and philanthropy with so much media hype. As a result, any organisation or individuals defending human rights, demanding transparency and accountability becomes dissent, unacceptable and liable to be punished or silenced.
- b. Ostentatious lives of CSOs: Across the states, the respondents pointed out the very expensive lifestyles of NGO workers. It is that funding has become very difficult for the work of the NGOs. It becomes questionable to have some living in big expensive houses, riding expensive cars, sending their children to schools abroad and even when seen in meetings, they wield the most recent trending and expensive gadgets (phones and computers). This intensifies suspicion and accusations of CSOs involvement in corrupt activities that give them access to excess money to fund their lifestyles.

The consequences of these situations are that stringent and almost restrictive measures have been put in place for CSOs registration with CAC and for opening and running bank accounts with any bank in Nigeria. For instance, many of the CSO respondents across the states explained the difficult procedure for going through registration with EFCC special control unit against money laundering (SCUML). The rigorous process has deterred many from becoming legally functional and this is repressive.

We find 16 respondents who prefer "not to say anything", this position is indicative of fear and trauma, because they perceive that even responding to a unanimous questionnaire is unsafe and can eventually put them at risk. More worrisome, are the 41 respondents who are unaware and do not know that the work of

CSOs to a large extent are criminalised. Then, there is the 124 who state categorically that the work of CSOs are not criminalised. These would most likely be the organisations that are not involved in human rights defence or advocacy and those founded by the government officials, completely avoiding responsibilities of watchdog, whistle blowing and advocacy for good governance.



Over 100 respondents say that the legal environment of the NGOs in terms of the bills and policies on registration, existence, operation, access to finances, reporting procedures, relationship with donor organisations have all become very difficult. It is alleged by proponents supporting the regulation of NGOs that people with dishonest and unacceptable intentions have infiltrated the space, by using it to promote and engage in terrorism and other unwholesome activities. However, they have argued that it is pertinent to regulate NGO operating environment to identify those and prevent the abuse. Unfortunately, the attempt at regulation has been to stifle the voices of the citizens, the human rights provisions for peaceful assembly, demonstrations, demand of accountability, reacting to unfavourable policies or demanding inclusion in the "pretext" of regulating the NGO legal environment. NGOs are the watchdogs, and that role is key because they are non-partisan and unbiased but represent the opinion and wishes of the civil society, they ensure that democratic governance are on the right track to deliver good leadership and people-oriented programmes.

On CSOs freedom to function without government interference. 62 respondents establish that they function fully without government interference. These are mostly the organisations focused on direct services delivery to the citizens for instance rendering assistance in the provision of safe water, electricity, infrastructure and agricultural development; welfare support service for orphans, widows, physically challenged, internally displaced people and all categories of persons that may require social or economic rehabilitation and transformation. They are not involved in demand and promotion of human rights that triggers interference from state actors.

However, we have the chunk of 137 respondents that they face significant difficulty to function independently and free of government interference. These are the CSOs whose mandates and functions cut across promotion or defence of human rights, whistle blowing, creation of awareness for transparency in governance and electoral processes and exposing/questioning human rights violations. The CSOs engaging in the work shared experiences of harassments, disruption of meetings, directives from government not to converge in certain places, restrictions on demonstrations, insistence to collect police approval for peaceful demonstrations and arrest of citizens who demand rights

## State of the Media

Media is the primary means of communication for reaching the public. The most common platforms for mass media dissemination are newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and social media. The public typically relies on the mass media to provide information regarding political issues, social issues, entertainment, and news in pop culture.

Society is influenced by the media in so many ways. It is the media for the masses that helps them to get information about political scandals and other vexatious issues. The media allows for opinions to be formed and for us to make a judgment regarding various issues. It is the media, which keeps people updated and informed about what is happening around them and the world that everyone draws something from it. Media is considered as “mirror” of the modern society, in fact, media shapes our lives<sup>63</sup>.

It is for these reasons that majority of people depend on the media. In the Southeast, citizens rely on the radio to share and receive information now about our government, policies, programmes, and opinions of the people. In each of the five states, there is the presence of state-owned and controlled radio that disseminates government information including Imo Broadcasting Service (Orient FM) in Imo, Broadcasting Corporation Abia, Anambra Broadcasting Service, Salt FM Abakaliki, Ebonyi and Dream FM, Enugu. These stations are unpopular on human rights related issues. The CSOs also hardly use these media houses, except when they are somewhat affiliated to the government or are pro-government CSOs. When the CSOs programmes to be aired from these media platforms are sensitising on good governance and human rights, they air-time is pushed to late nights when listenership is reduced.

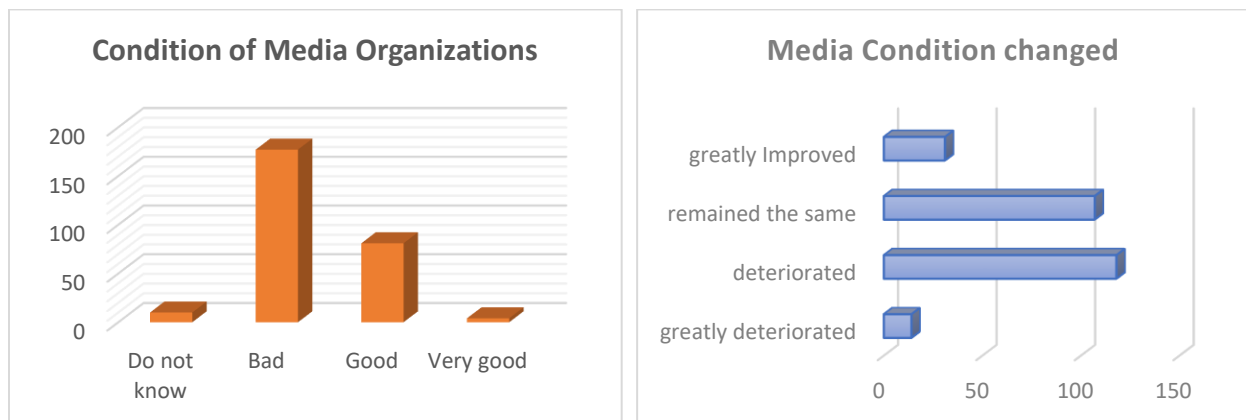
A CSO shared an experience of a funded project promoting civic participation including voter registration, issue-based voting and protecting the votes. The project had paid for three months slots of one hour phone-in programme in a government owned station in Imo State. After the first engagement which registered several callers, the state government bought off all the time and only allowed 9.00pm to 12.00pm for other programmes. It was a period between January and April, just before the elections. To ensure that the sensitisation and enlightenment was prevented, the spaces were taken up by government at the time. It almost became a battle, in which the media house refused to partake, for fear of putting their jobs on the line. Eventually, on insistence to refund payments or face legal process, some peak-time slots were released/recovered from the government time, enabling the CSO to continue and conclude their project.

Currently, each state has many private media houses on whose platforms that CSOs sensitise citizens on their rights and openly condemn poor governance. Often, citizens criticize the government and express their position on issues, through these radio stations in the south-east, thereby increasing opportunity for communication and expression. These media houses are accessible to all citizens to use at their discretion. As a result, state actors have engaged in efforts to ensure the media is restricted, regulated, and censored; all in the bid to limit what information is available to the general population or hear their opinion.

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<sup>63</sup> “Role of Media in Society”, SSIM, November 19, 2019, <https://www.ssim.ac.in/blog/role-of-media-in-society/>

They have identified certain comments as “hate speech”<sup>64</sup> and more recently have banned the social media platform twitter in Nigeria<sup>65</sup>. The reality has been those engaged in selling their products using twitter have suffered a major financial loss and it has been young people with businesses on social media who have been affected most.



But, beyond these, the condition of the media is termed “bad”. The stories abound across the south-east from the FGDs and KIIs; of unlawful arrest, and sometimes killing of media persons. Over 100 respondents think that the condition of media organisations has always been bad and has remained so, however, more than that number thinks it has deteriorated from bad to worse. They are manipulated to either publicize untrue information or have their true stories thwarted. Often, even on-air programmes, anchors receive threat calls, and are forced to stop a programme mid-stream. In Abia State, a media house faced sanctions from the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and was fined because a caller on a phone-in programme made comments on the poor state of governance and its negative impact. At some time, it becomes a big offence to interview an individual that is dissent to the state government or one they want silenced<sup>66</sup>. Media personnel have faced physical violence. An on-air personality in Enugu State had her home ransacked, and nothing taken away except the hard drive of her laptop. Another was forced to tender public apology for their reports, while some fled their homes for writing or airing certain government related issues that do not reflect positively on the government. Many have lost their jobs, and a few have fled the country to difficult locations, seeking asylum in third countries.

Some media personnel have been accused of only writing stories that benefit the government, singing their praises on every issue and being paid with brown envelopes to meet their financial needs. Some media persons have also lost their lives, a case in point is a young man in Ebonyi States who posted a comment on his Facebook wall that politicians would never empower the youth, instead they engaged them in thuggery when necessary and dump them afterwards. They would rather buy drinks for youths than set them up in

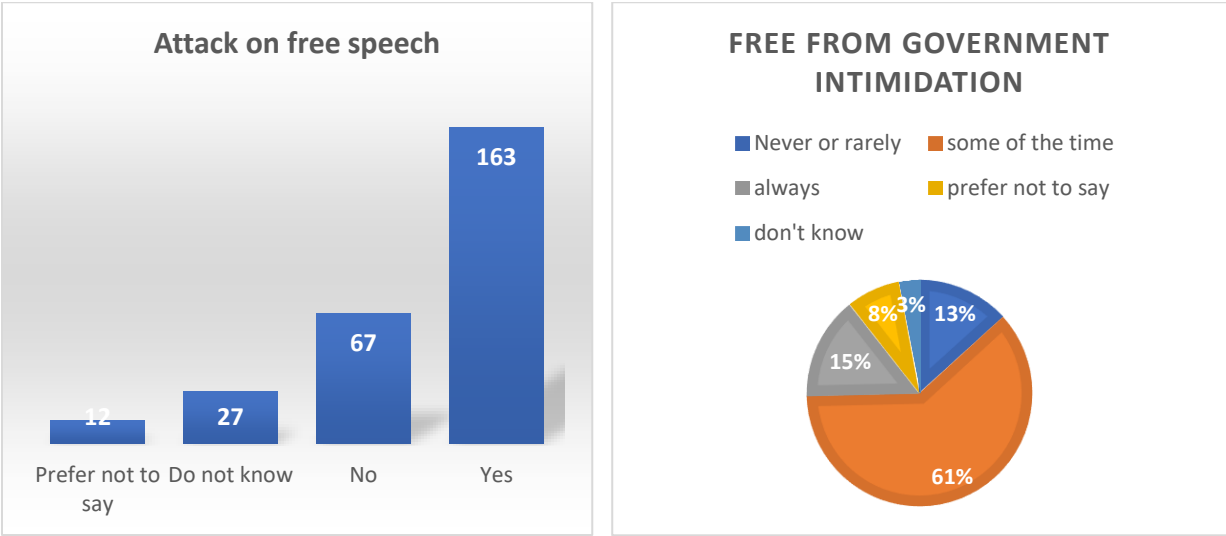
<sup>64</sup> “Nigeria: Bills on Hate Speech and social media are dangerous attacks on freedom of expression”, Amnesty”, Amnesty International, December 4, 2019 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/12/nigeria-bills-on-hate-speech-and-social-media-are-dangerous-attacks-on-freedom-of-expression/>

<sup>65</sup> Nimi Princewill and Stephanie Busari, “Nigeria bans twitters after company deletes President Buhari’s tweet”, CNN, June 5, 2021 <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/04/africa/nigeria-suspends-twitter-operations-intl/index.html>

<sup>66</sup> “Guild of Editors rejects ‘punitive’ NBC fine on Channels TV”, Vanguard Newspapers, May 7, 2021, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/05/guild-of-editors-rejects-punitive-nbc-n5m-fine-on-channelstv/>

business even to sell drinks. The post led to his being arrested, detained for several days, and received de-humanizing treatment for writing about the politicians, who are the ones in power. Granted that media freedom is not 100% anywhere in the world, but the level of harassment that the media face in the southeast is alarming. It was only in Anambra State that the FGD participants stated categorically that their government was not harsh on the media and citizens could express their opinions in whatever way they pleased without fear of retribution.

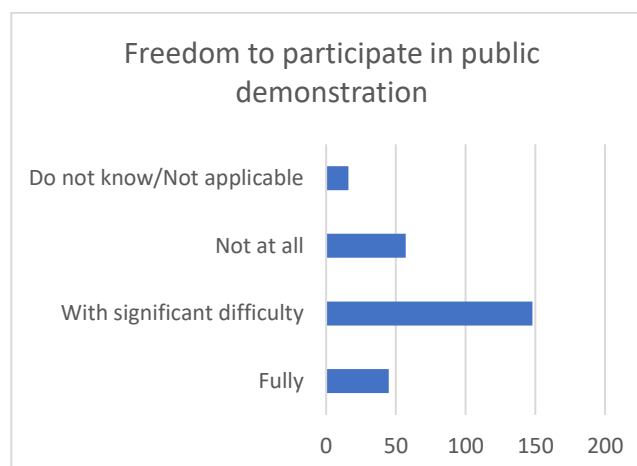
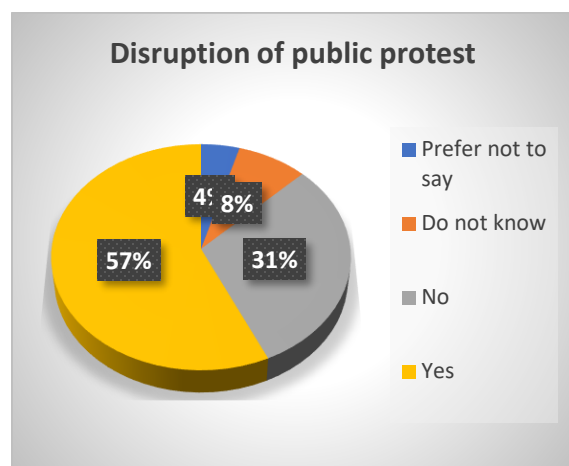
Attack on free speech and government intimidation



163 respondents confirm the attack on free speech, 61% say that it is only some of the time that citizens generally and particularly the media are free from government intimidation. This means that speeches are no longer free, talk that was adjudged 'cheap' can easily place you in danger as a result of expressing your views. Neither overtly nor covertly are citizens in the south-east especially free to express themselves about the poverty and difficulties they face because of bad governance. Citizens are not allowed to decry the horrible state of the roads and the implication on the cost of transportation and its effect of getting their produce to the markets, they are forbidden to openly express their dissatisfaction on the state of education or health services, the insecurity and unemployment. People are expected to bear the situations silently, and if anyone ventures to openly express oneself, it attracts some punishment because it is termed "hate speech" or a felony or disrupting the peace of the nation.



## Threats and attacks on the civic space

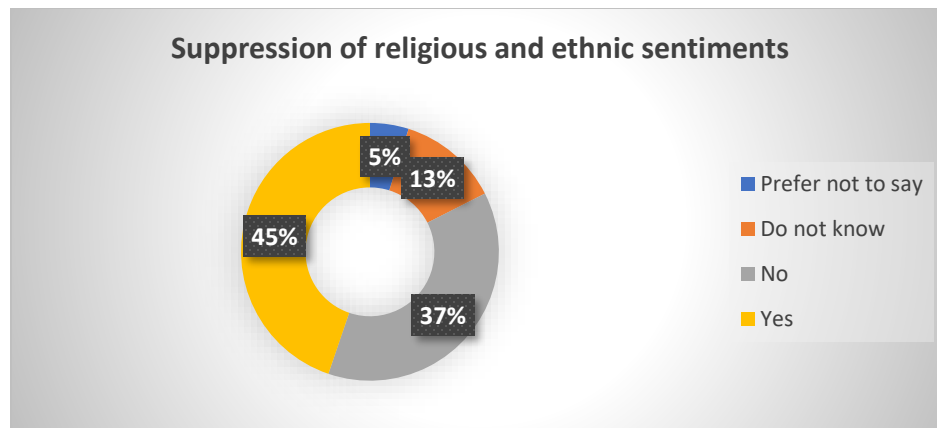


The 57% that stated that there has been regular disruption of public protests was confirmed by the conversations with FGDs and KIIs. In Imo State, a popular on-air personality for one of the radio stations has proposed youth organising and protests, has started receiving death threats to his life to the point of being invited by the DSS for his on-air views. The protest was called off to avert possible loss of life in the process. In Anambra State, a protest was called over the murder of a lawyer who succeeded in the conviction of two herders who attacked a community and raped several women. Lawyers went on a peaceful protest, lamenting that the kidnap and murder of lawyer was one too many, and that the lives of all lawyers in the state were at stake<sup>67</sup>. The government responded by unleashing the security agencies and roughly handled the lawyers in the state, bringing the protest to an abrupt halt with the lawyers running for safety and their lives.

In Ebonyi State, the outgoing governor had employed one hundred people with disability, one month before the end of his tenure, the new governor on assumption of office stopped that employment asking why the predecessor had employed them when he was about to handover government. In their frustration, the PWDs embarked on a peaceful demonstration to the government house, they were met by security agencies who flogged them with canes, forcefully pushed them out of the environment and severely abuse them physically. Abia State is not an exception and in Enugu, protest or demonstration is not an option, if ventured, all involved will be arrested and forced to bail themselves with large amounts of money. Currently the norm in the south-east, is that no one is allowed to demonstrate or protest, regardless of the issue or unfavourable situation they experience.

<sup>67</sup> Chioma Unini, "NBA to protest incessant killings in Anambra", The Nigerian Lawyers, March 20, 2021, <https://thenigerialawyer.com/nba-to-protest-incessant-killings-in-anambra-monday/>

## Religious and ethnic sentiments



45% believe that religious and ethnic sentiments are suppressed, 37% did not think that there was any suppression whilst 13% said they did not know and 5% preferred not to say. It can be argued that in the south-east, the suppression is along the lines of ethnicity<sup>68</sup>. The south-east is the home of the Igbo ethnic group, the origins of the 1967 – 1970 civil war<sup>69</sup>. The reasons for that initial agitation<sup>70</sup> and war have not been addressed<sup>71</sup>, and if anything, has reached alarming levels<sup>72</sup>. Despite the hospitality to foreigners living in Igbo land, the singling out of Igbos to massacre anytime there is a religious crisis in other parts of Nigeria is a sore point of contention. The government has also heavily militarised the south-east zone<sup>73</sup>, with the python dances 1 and 2 ending, a new practice of arbitrary arrests and the extra-judicial killing has been normalised in many communities<sup>74</sup>. The situation deteriorated further following the #ENDSARS national campaign and the IPOB was declared a terrorist organisation. Young men have been arrested for no reason, detained for a very long time, treated in in-human ways and a few executed without any judicial process. The fear of any of these calamities has caused the citizens to go about their lives silently and ‘mind one’s business’.

<sup>68</sup> Adaobi Tracia Nwaubani, “Remembering Nigeria’s Biafra War, that many prefer to forget”, BBC News, January 15, 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-51094093>

<sup>69</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigerian\\_Civil\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nigerian_Civil_War)

<sup>70</sup> The Background : The Nigeria – Biafra War <https://rememberingbiafra.com/background>

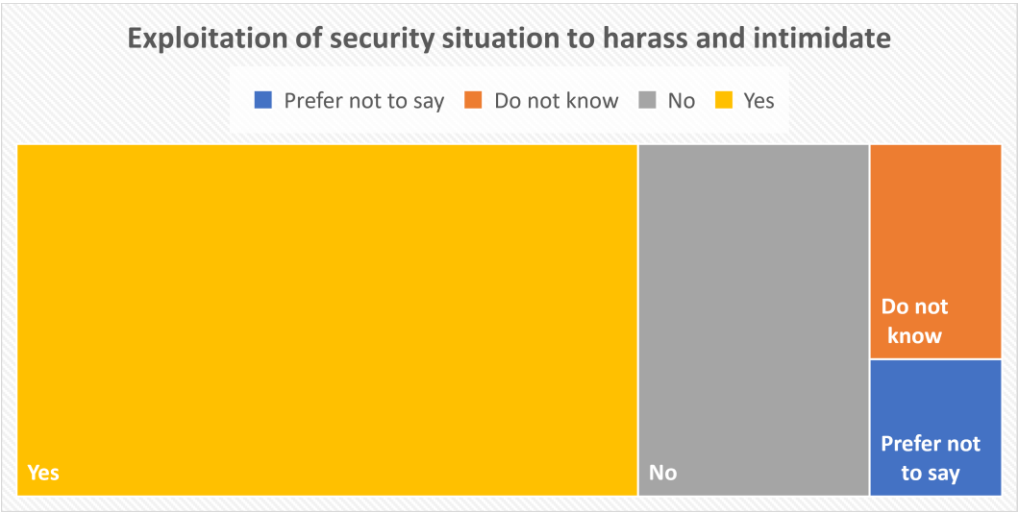
<sup>71</sup> Lawrence Okwuosa, Chienyere Nwaoga & Favour Ukoko, “The post-war era in Nigeria and the resilience of the Igbo communal system”, *Journal of Disaster Risk Studies*, 2021; 13(1):867

<sup>72</sup> Chukwuemeka Uwanaka, “The national security strategy 2019 and Nigeria’s security challenges”, *The Cable*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.thecable.ng/the-national-security-strategy-2019-and-nigerias-security-challenges>.

<sup>73</sup> Clifford Ndujihe and Luminous Jannamike, “Get military out of the s’east to douse tension – Anambra gov candidates, Igbo elders forum”, *Vanguard Newspapers*, November 3, 2021. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/11/get-military-out-of-seast-to-douse-tension-anambra-gov-candidates-igbo-elders-forum/>

<sup>74</sup> Amnesty International “Nigeria: At least 115 killed by security forces within four months in country’s south east - investigation”, August 5, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/08/nigeria-at-least-115-people-killed-by-security-forces-in-four-months-in-countrys-southeast/>

Harrasment and intimidation from State Actors



Furthermore, the alarming levels of insecurity in the region created the opportunity for harassment and intimidation by security agencies. When IPOB was declared a terrorist organisation and #ENDSARS ended the way it did, young people rioted and burnt down several police stations. A profile image of young male became the target – young male, dreadlocked, ripped jeans, driving a flashy. Result was that any young man who is out and about after 7pm is at risk of being arrested, beaten, and if care is not taken, be killed. A group of young men found in any place as groups, perhaps partying will be arrested, falsely accused of being cultists, then mandated to reach out to relative to come and bail them. This has become an avenue for the extortion of citizens. Uguchi Unachukwu, a Germany-based businessman was killed by soldiers on May 31, at a checkpoint near Owerri airport on his way out of the country<sup>75</sup>. The police are yet to investigate the crime.

The state of insecurity has been exploited by those with criminal intent, as well as unknown gunmen and security agencies, resulting in the mortuaries of the Federal Medical Centre Owerri being overrun with more than 50 corpses of hitherto vibrant young men, all with bullet wounds<sup>76</sup>. Whilst IPOB issued a strongly worded statement against the FMC conducting a mass burial without clear identification of whose son's and fathers lie in their mortuary<sup>77</sup>. A 21-year-old Glory Okolie, who has been in detention since 2021 over her alleged relationship with members of the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra, IPOB, and its

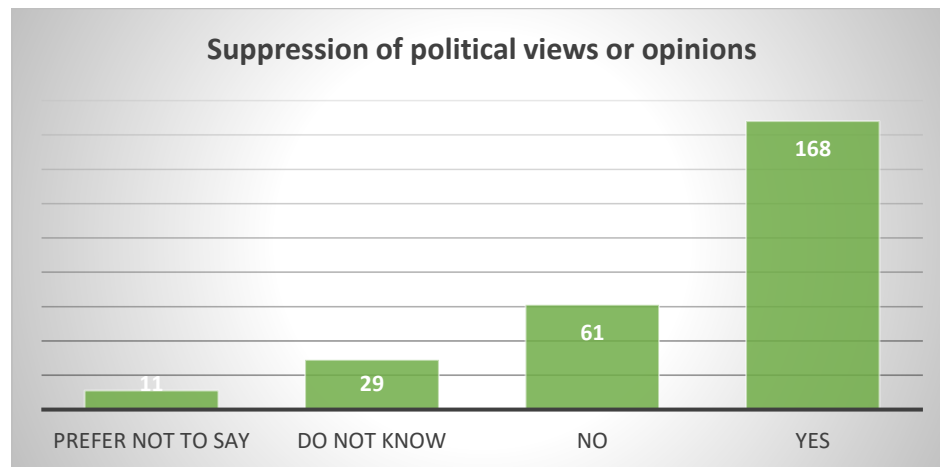
<sup>75</sup> Chinonso Alozie, "Murder: My children watched their father shot dead by air force officer-wife cries out", The Vanguard, June 5, 2021, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/06/murder-my-children-watched-their-father-shot-dead-by-air-force-officer-wife-cries-out/> accessed November 19, 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Tessy Igomu, "FMC Owerri to conduct mass burial for unclaimed corpses after Punch investigative report", The Punch, October 3, 2021, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/06/murder-my-children-watched-their-father-shot-dead-by-air-force-officer-wife-cries-out/> accessed November 19, 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Stanley Uzoaru, "IPOB rejects mass burial of unclaimed corpses at FMC Owerri", The Sun, October 4, 2021. <https://www.sunnewsonline.com/ipob-rejects-mass-burial-of-unclaimed-corpses-at-fmc-owerri/>

militant wing, the Eastern Security Network<sup>78</sup>. In Abia state, several young men left homes for work, and never returned and their whereabouts unknown till date. In Ebonyi state, a young man's home was raided because he was accused of being linked to IPOB. He was shot and killed instantly, alongside his friend who had visited him the previous night. His younger sister sustained gunshot injuries and was taken to the hospital by the security forces that attacked their home and paid for her treatment. The mother of the children is yet to recover from the traumatic experience and people in this community constantly live in fear of a repeat of the incidence, wondering who could be the next.

### Suppression of political views and opinions



Political views and opinions are personal and must be always respected. Political opinions and views are a broad category of attitudes that people might have on matters that concern their state, their government, or their society for example whether people think the way power is achieved and used in a country or society is good, bad, right, or wrong. In democratic societies like Nigeria citizens are ideally expected to have opinions on a wide range of issues that affect their live either directly as individuals or collectively as citizens. Peoples' views and opinions are the product of their social conditioning, life experiences and reflections, the nation they live in, their educational level and social class. Very importantly, individuals all differ in views and opinions on the use of power in leadership, and each should be respected as their ways to understand their society. No citizen deserves to be harassed, intimidated, or have their rights trampled upon based on their political views and opinions. (Harrison & Boyd 2018)

However, what is happening currently in the south-east Nigeria is a situation where the opposition is allowed in principle but not in practice, because of the individualistic disposition of the opposition, there has not been a collective and institutional check against the excesses of the party in power. As a result, some of the weaknesses associated with ruling parties also exist in political opposition groups across the country, including absence of internal democracy, marginalisation of women, weak financial accountability, and lack of effective representation. Therefore, the opposition is faulted for lacking the moral fibre that would have presented it as a viable alternative and this is the basis for the strong suppression of any divergent political views or opinions (Olasukanmi 2014).

<sup>78</sup> Sunday Ejike, "Human Rights Commission Decries Gloria Okolie's Illegal Detention by Police", Nigerian Tribune, August 24, 2021 <https://tribuneonline.ng/human-rights-commission-decries-gloria-okolies-illegal-detention-by-police/>

The context in the south-east, shows that leading political figures and their supporters are moving from one political party to another, contesting for elective positions, indicating lack of trust in their political views, opinions and ideologies. As a result, the party in power usually disempowers the opposition. From the FGDs and KIIs, discussions centred around the actions of certain governments in power who go to the extent of destroying the properties of the opposition, seal facilities where opposition parties hold meetings or gathering, arrest, detain and maltreat opposition members just to weaken their capacity to oppose. The media that engages with the opposition is usually worse hit. This shows how opposition groups are suppressed in south-east Nigeria.



This graph shows that 179 (62%) of respondents confirm unlawful arrests or detention, while 135 persons confirm physical attacks, that often lead to extrajudicial executions; 12 respondents prefer to say nothing about the physical attacks. In May 2021, the Imo State Government announced the arrest of at least 400 people allegedly linked to the violence<sup>79</sup>. Amnesty International's investigation indicated that most of them were randomly picked-up from their homes, off the street and had nothing to do with ESN. Some victims told Amnesty international that they were arrested while walking on the street, at a public bar or simply for having birth marks or tattoos on their body.

On July 23, 2021, soldiers from the 82 divisional headquarters of the Nigeria Army, Enugu, invaded Akpawfu, Amagunze and Akpugo communities in Enugu State and arrested at least 20 residents after gunmen killed five soldiers and burnt their vehicle near the community days earlier<sup>80</sup>. Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International that dozens of soldiers moved from house to house, arresting youth on suspicion that they had links with ESN militants.

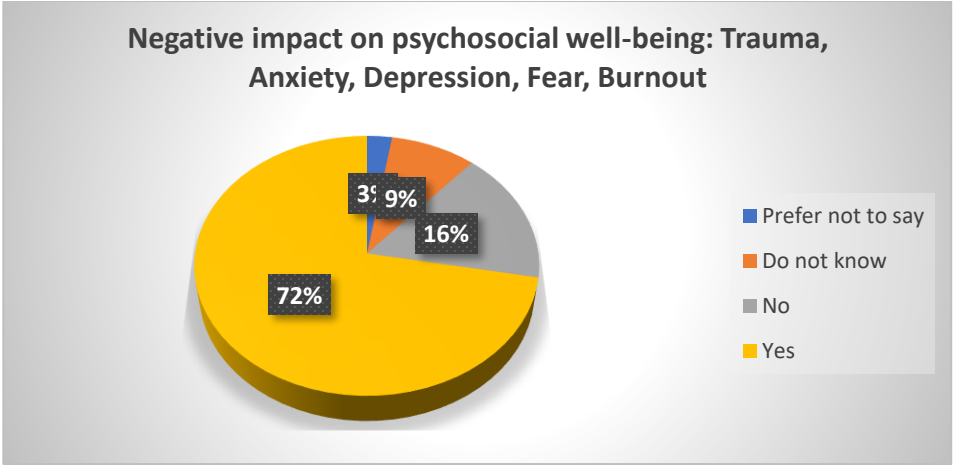
Amnesty International reported that 115 people were killed and 500 arrested in the south-east region of the country by Nigerian security agents in four months. The police said ESN fighters killed 21 of its personnel in

<sup>79</sup> "No Fewer than 400 people arrested over security threats in Imo, says Uzodinma", The Vanguard, May 24, 2021. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/05/no-fewer-than-400-people-arrested-over-security-threats-in-imo/> accessed November 20, 2021

<sup>80</sup> Emmanuel Uzodinma, "Killing of policemen: homes deserted as soldiers storm Enugu community in search of gunmen", The Daily Post, July 23, 2021 <https://dailypost.ng/2021/07/23/killing-of-policemen-homes-deserted-as-soldiers-storm-enugu-community-in-search-of-gunmen/>

Imo state alone. The security agents haunted south-east residents who they believed were part of the ESN that have killed their men and attacked government infrastructural facilities.

Heightening Insecurity



On heightening insecurity in the south-east, 72% of respondents acknowledged that the current insecurity and constant attacks from security agents, their representatives have made them and their families more anxious. FGD and KIs discussions revealed that respondents knew relatives and colleagues suffering from PTSD, depression. Some have constant fear about what would happen next and many suffering from burnout. However, 16% did not think there was any negative impact on psychological well-being. Worrisome, was the 3% equalling 7 people who ticked the “prefer not to say” box.

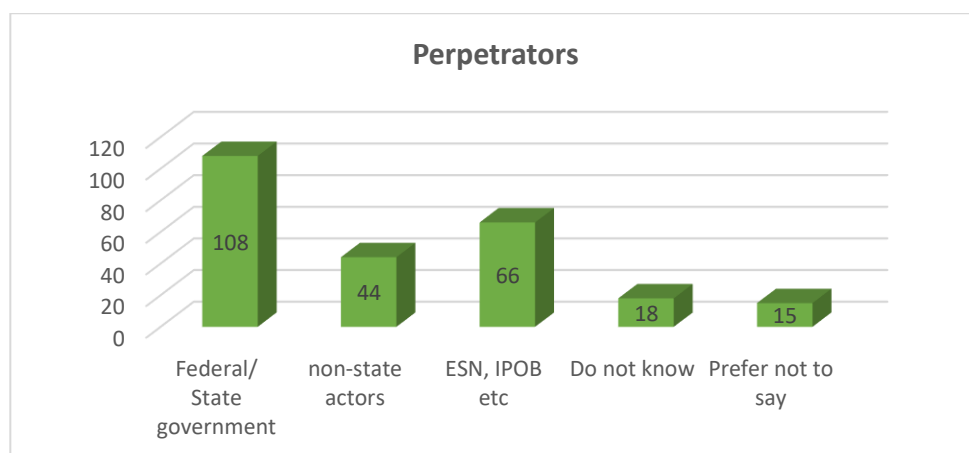
If security and welfare of the people is the primary purpose of government, with the spate of unbridled killings across the country, the government at all levels has failed in its duty and responsibility to citizens. The assurance offered by the government cannot provide succour to citizens whose safety in their bedrooms, schools, farms or places of worship is no longer guaranteed. The various attacks, too numerous and the perpetrators of these criminal acts are becoming more brazen, emboldened by the ineffective posture of security agencies. The result is the regular stampede at schools, markets, and roads; businesses are shut in panic once shooting starts, causing people to respond fear, trauma, poverty and hunger with shops, malls, and filling stations locked. People who feed from daily income are anxious for provisions for their families.

In Imo state, a woman running from the gunshots in Orji market fell into the gutter, broke her legs, sustaining bleeding injury. Meanwhile, she had no money and was afraid for her life as she bled. It took the organising of the market association to take her to hospital and pay her bills for treatment.



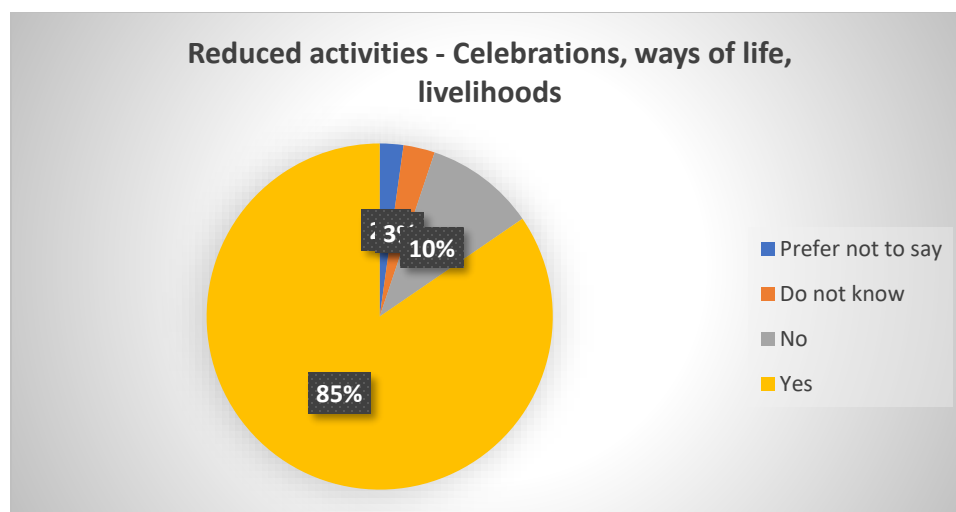


## Perceived perpetrators



On the perception of who the perpetrators of violence are, 108 respondents believe that the federal and state government actors are responsible for the human rights abuses, insecurity, and activities that are shrinking the civic space in the south-east. 66 respondents named the ESN/IPOB, a typical example is the gruesome murder of Dr Chike Akunyili, the husband of the late Chairman of Nigeria's National NAFDAC, Prof Dora Akunyili<sup>81</sup>, and 15 respondents prefer not to say, however, 44 think it is the ordinary civilians that are responsible. These responses show the heavy handedness and force the federal and state governments are deploying in addressing the issues of IPOB earlier, and in the guise, they have arrested, detained and extrajudicially executed many young men in the south-eastern region.

## Impact of the shrinking civic space on the lives of citizens



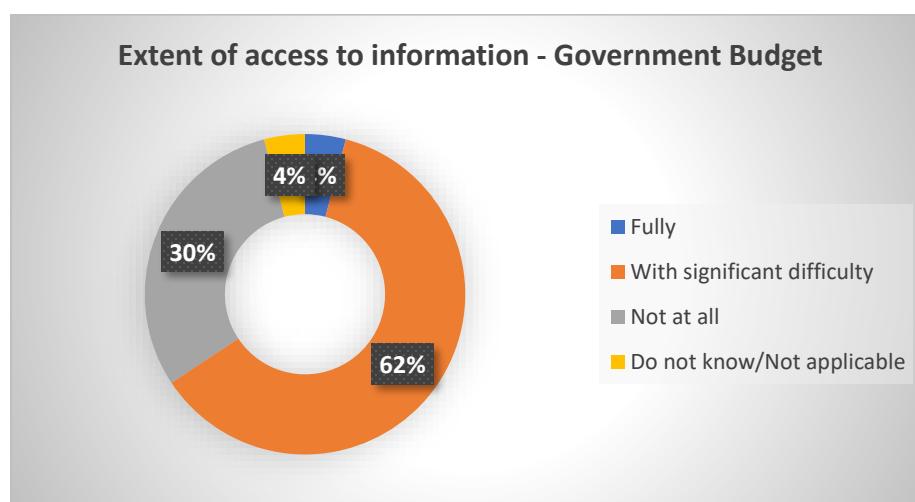
<sup>81</sup> BBC News Pidgin "Dora Akunyili husband Dr Chike Akunyili death plus timeline of odas wey die on di same 'bloody' day in separate attacks for Anambra state" September 29, 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-58738377>



The respondents of the group discussions expressed how life changed suddenly for the worse. The situation of unrest has affected everything negatively, schools, events, celebrations, religious activities, engagement in livelihood activities and daily lives have been thwarted to suit the changing times. For over two years, Monday has become a day for sit at home, this means that nothing happens in the state-no school, no trading, no-banking inside bank facilities, no transport, no mall activities, no street foods, and no restaurant services. All activities in the state halts. After two or three weeks of upholding the order, citizens became tired and wanted to get back to their usual lives; the step was met with serious attacks to the people<sup>82</sup>, referred to as “against the Igbo action”.

Some secondary schools were attacked in Orlu, disrupting West Africa Examination Certificate on the day students were writing English Language examination, a compulsory subject that would automatically cause the victims to re-write the examination the next year. In Mbaise, stalls were razed down, and buses burnt to ashes, some persons were beaten mercilessly all in a bid to force people to key into the movement. In Anambra, Saturday became Monday, so that no working day is lost within the week, banks, schools and formal working places operated fully on Saturdays and obeyed the sit-at-home order on Monday, for peace to reign and in solidarity.

### Access to information



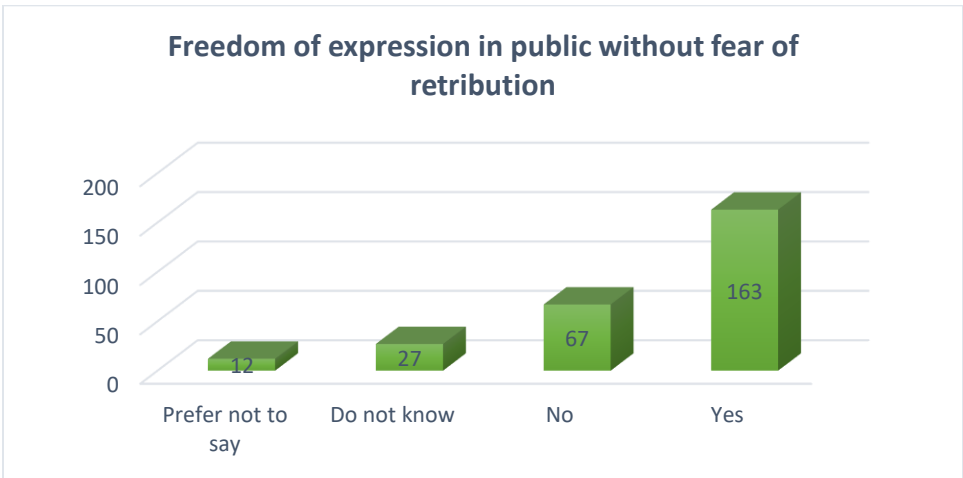
On citizen's access to information 62% of respondents across the five south east-states stated clearly that it is almost impossible for a citizen to access information such as the government budget. Except in Anambra State when ActionAid Nigeria through the 'Voice to the People' (V2P) project, built the capacity of citizens to track the state budget, engage with elected officers and monitor their development projects based on state budgets because they had open budget; ROLAC has also implemented a transparency and accountability project in Anambra State and the access to budget for monitoring will continue. Other states have no open budget and make it impossible for their citizens to access or monitor.

<sup>82</sup> Tony Okafor, "IPOB orders arrest of Monday sit-at-at enforcers", The Punch, November 11, 2021, <https://punchng.com/ipob-orders-arrest-of-monday-sit-at-home-enforcers/>

When citizens ask questions or engaging in advocacy to the government, such a person or an organisation becomes a target for attack, threat messages from security personnel, receiving visits of warning to desist from engaging in high level discussions or questioning the actions of leaders. Often, the person or organisation representative is arrested, detained, and tortured – which is often referred to as “receiving executive touch”. After this, the organisation or individual goes silent on government and leadership related matters.

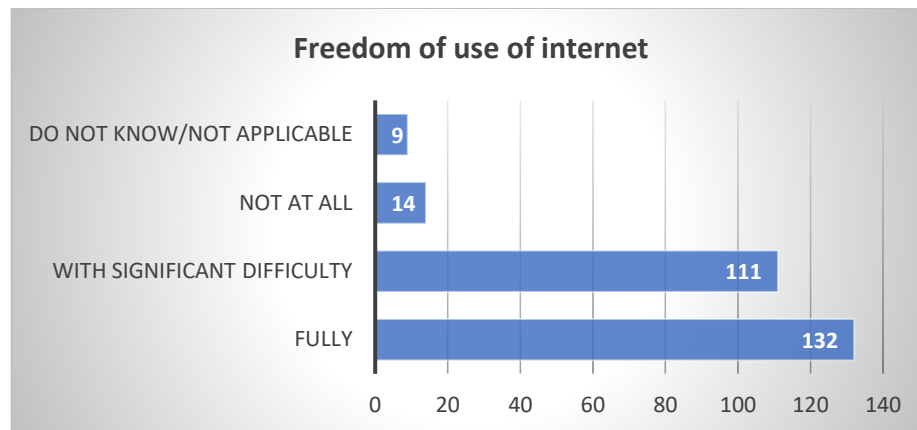
The benefits of opening government information have been linked to ending corruption and promoting economic development in addition to its fundamental effects. One statement from the World Bank noted that accountability, transparency, and the freedom of the press are inextricably linked to development, and therefore necessary for economic growth and stability. (Darch, 2010).

**Freedom of Expression**



On freedom of expression, 67 respondents are of the opinion that there is no freedom of expression in public without fear of retribution. 12 persons who prefer to say nothing are validating the obvious fear that majority face, apparently, no one wants to be caught saying anything even when it is anonymous. The capacity for freedom of expression is not available and the option to expression of oneself in public is often misplaced anger and dissatisfaction with how things are but leaving little room for dialogue. This is an indication of a shrunk civic space.

## Use of the internet



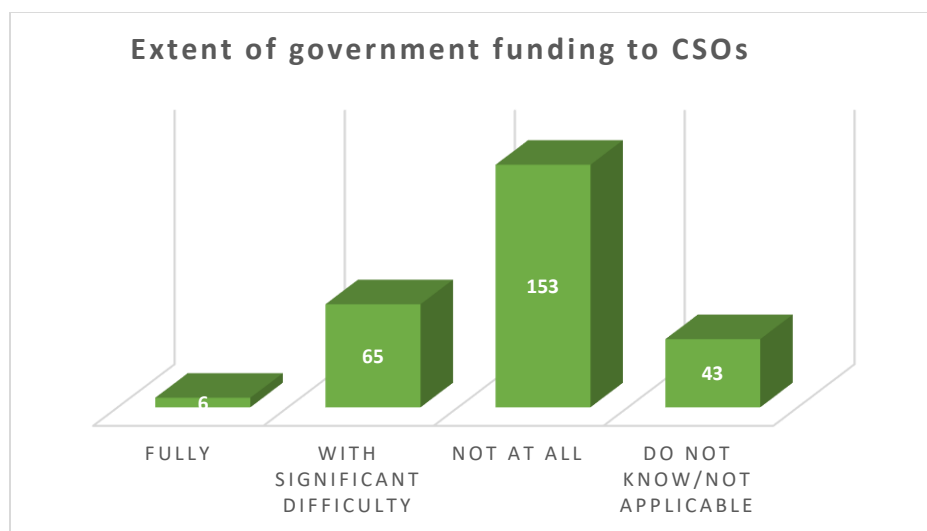
The concept of access to information is essential in a democratic society. The core idea of access to information in government rests “on the necessity for citizens to pay attention in order to identify and correct occasional or even frequent instances of incompetence, dishonesty or ignorance in governments.” (Darch, 2010); It is important for citizens have access to the internet so that they can pay attention to trends and be able to hold government accountable. Access to technology can put this information in the hands of those who need it.

It is undeniable that the internet has exponentially expanded the availability of government information and the ability of the public to communicate their views to the government, however, the Internet is on the one hand constrained by the reach of technology and the ability of the public to use it, generally referred to as the “Digital Divide.” (Robison, 2010); but on the other hand, governments are increasingly putting restrictions on freedom of expression in online platforms. As citizens, journalists and CSOs increasingly use the internet and social media to share information, these platforms have become the new frontiers for restrictions on freedom of expression by governments around the world. Governments use shutdowns on the internet as a tool for social control and censorship.

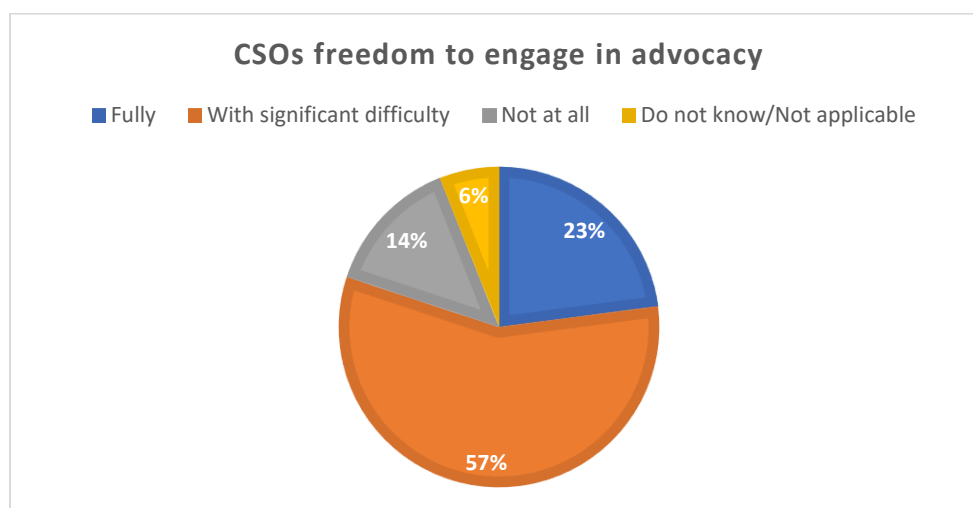
This is the situation in the south-east, journalists, bloggers, and their likes, have constantly been accused of terrorism, sabotage and cybercrime, arrested, detained and punished, often without trial, using the Cybercrime Act and Terrorism (Prevention) (Amendment) Act 2013 against them<sup>83</sup>. In Ebonyi, an online media person was assaulted for message he posted online for the way our leaders use youths to perpetrate ill-intended political vices and do not want to empower them.

<sup>83</sup> Chioma Agwuegbo, “Reclaiming Nigeria’s Shrinking Civic Space: A Collective and Sustainable Civil Society Approach to Protect Liberties”, March 12, 2021, <https://yaraduafoundation.org/files/Reclaiming%20Nigeria's%20Shrinking%20Online%20Space.pdf>

## Rights of Assembly and Association



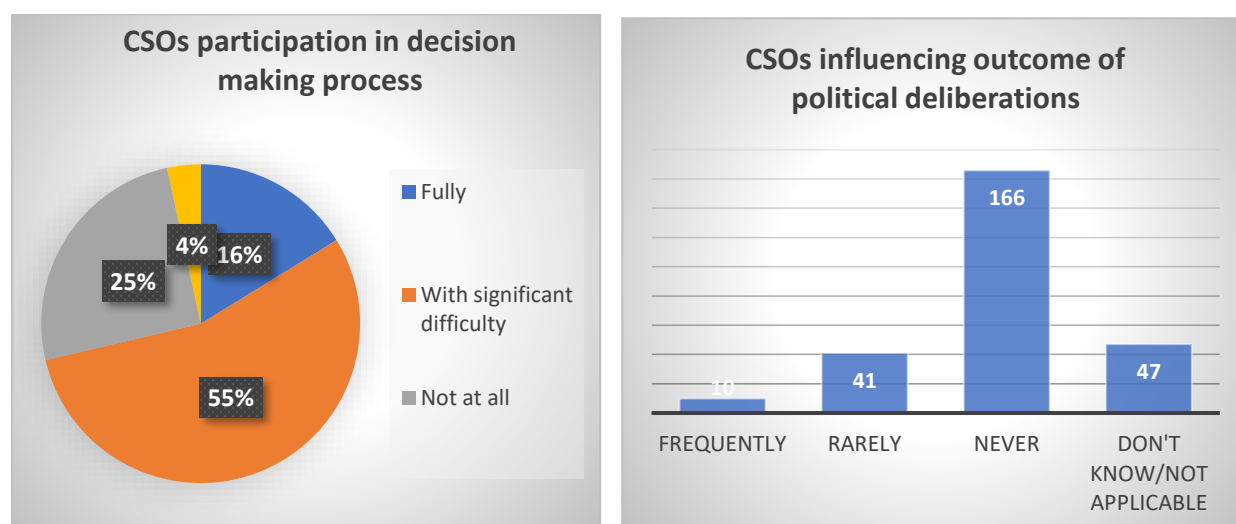
The government hardly fund programmes of civil society organisations, however, some donors or bilateral institutions come into Nigeria to implement development programmes with specific projects, which often require the government to partner with counterpart funding. In order to draw down on the counterpart funding from the bilateral institution, the government will partner with a CSO. Beyond this, there is no time that the government funds CSOs. This is indicative from the 153 respondents who categorically stated “not at all”.



Civil society organisations plan advocacy activities but often succeed when the strategies are not heavily dependent on physical engagement with the state actors because they hardly agree to any schedule and always have reasons to avoid interface with CSOs. However, other strategies such as the use of old and new media, engaging with grassroots communities, sharing data on the issues, using digital tools all work better, especially to mobilising stakeholders towards taking more interest on the issues which often pushes

the state actors into taking necessary actions. However, so many considerations are made to ensure the messages are not portrayed as attacking the government, if it does, there is a risk of attack from the powers that be and that results in the response that 57% of respondents' perspective is that CSOs have significant difficulty on the freedom to engage in advocacy.

## Participation in decision making and influencing outcomes of political deliberations



The desire of citizens is to participate in decision making processes, and this means an individual or collective action, with an aim of identifying and addressing issues of public interest. Citizen participation is a process where citizens organise themselves and their goals at the grassroots level and work together through non-governmental community organisations to influence the decision-making process. Participation in decision-making means an opportunity for the citizens, CSOs and other stakeholders to influence the development of policies and laws that impact them<sup>84</sup>.

Some of the decision-making processes include: voting in elections, signing a petition, writing letters to elected representatives, contributing money to a party or candidate, lobbying for laws that are of special interest, demonstrations and protests, boycotts, sit-ins, or other forms of protest, running for office, holding public office, serving the country through military or other service, disobeying laws and taking the consequences to demonstrate that a law or policy is unjust, participating in public hearings of the legislature, just to mention a few<sup>85</sup>.

These processes are not as citizen engaging as it used to be, elections are conducted, and citizens participate but often have their mandates overturned by the court as was recently the case in Imo State

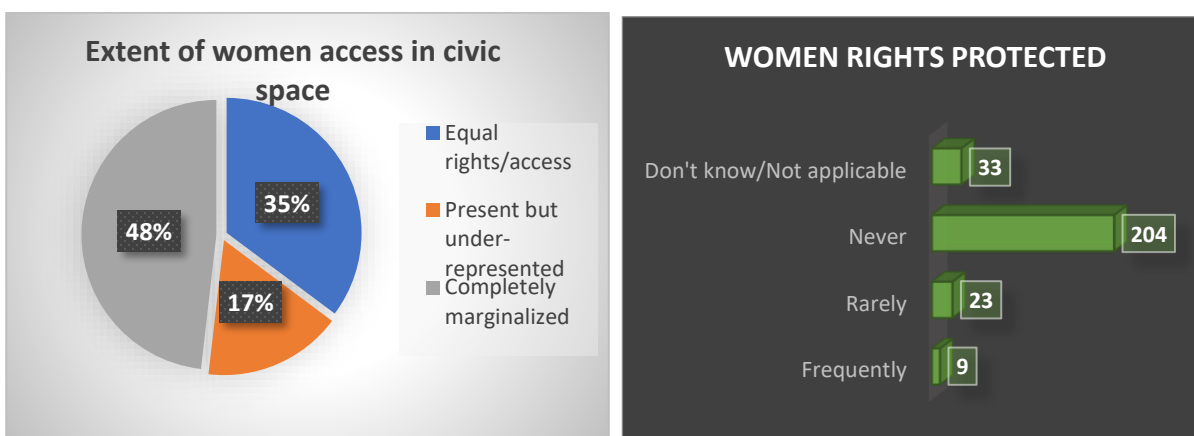
<sup>84</sup> Citizen participation in decision making <https://www.kcsfoundation.org/en/information-capacities/frequently-asked-questions/citizen-participation-in-decision-making/>

<sup>85</sup> How can citizens participate? <https://www.civiced.org/lessons/how-can-citizens-participate>

according to FGD and KII participants<sup>86</sup>. When constituents write letters to their representative, they are completely ignored, often they have limited interactions with their elected representative until the next campaign for new elections. Budget processes have become rituals that do not involve the citizens and after they are passed, especially the state budgets become mysteries so that the government in power are never accountable throughout their tenure and utilise public funds at their discretion and interest; never prioritizing the needs of the masses.

Running for public offices now belong to those who can afford the high costs, not necessarily those with the capacity and quality; and appointments are based on relationships with the powers that be, not on capacity and ability to deliver, public hearings are hardly publicized to create awareness and mobilise citizens to participate, because majority of the bills passed are mostly beneficial to leaders in power and any demonstration is aborted by security forces. All of these demonstrate the significant difficulty which limit CSOs participation in policy and decision-making processes.

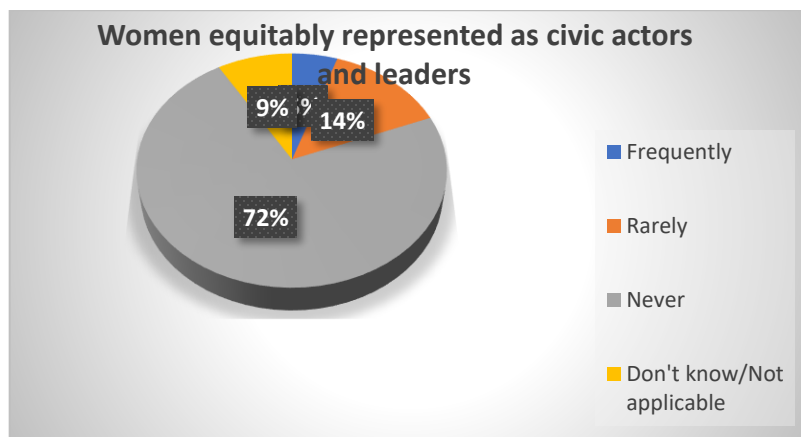
### Gender equality and social inclusion



Shrinking civic space has affected the involvement of key players, especially women, vulnerable groups, and minorities. Civic space creates and empowers structures necessary for social, economic, and political mechanisms necessary for organised participation and societal growth. The excesses in government's arbitrariness tilt heavily against women's participation, especially in the conservative patriarchal environments of the south-east. Clampdowns on social media, unbalanced quota systems, societal stereotypes and lack of enabling environments to have restricted the participation of women, especially in the area of politics, governance and leadership. Women's voices are stifled and restrained, and political parties are not ready to actualise their mandates regarding the candidacies of women politicians<sup>87</sup>. Equal gender participation is a facade on paper, just waved by Nigerian politicians and policymakers to restrict dissent and throw crumbs at women affected by the shrinking space they have found themselves in.

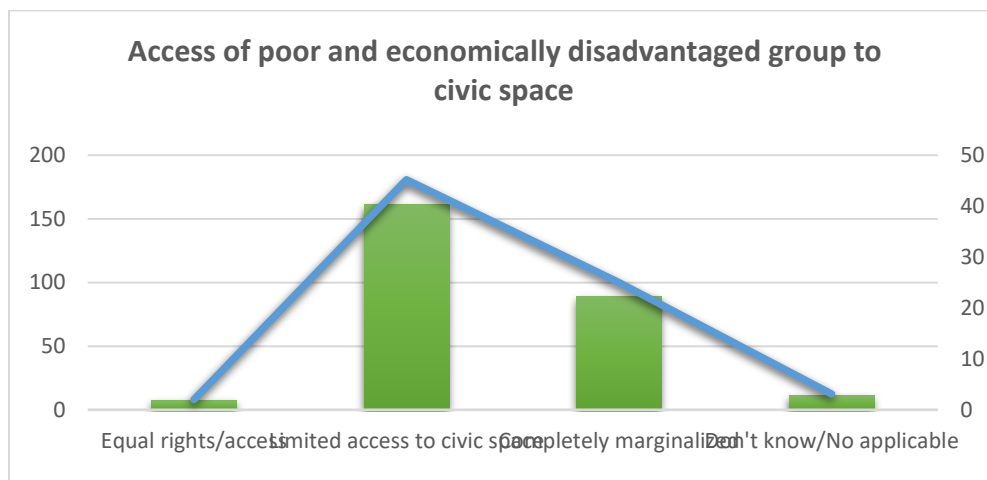
<sup>86</sup> Halimah Yahaya, "Our ruling on Imo State governorship will haunt Nigeria for a long time – Supreme Court Justice" Premium Times, March 4, 2020. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/380133-our-ruling-on-imo-governorship-will-haunt-nigeria-for-long-time-supreme-court-justice.html>

<sup>87</sup> Abideen Olasupo, "Civic space in Nigeria is shrinking, and it's affecting women's participation", The Cable, October 31, 2021 <https://www.thecable.ng/the-civic-space-in-nigeria-is-shrinking-and-it-is-affecting-women-participation>



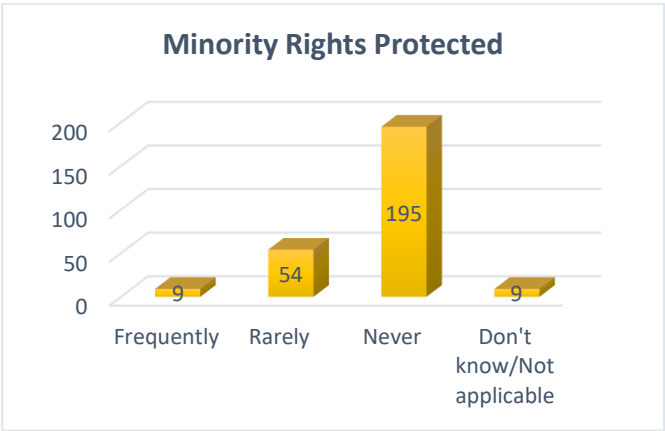
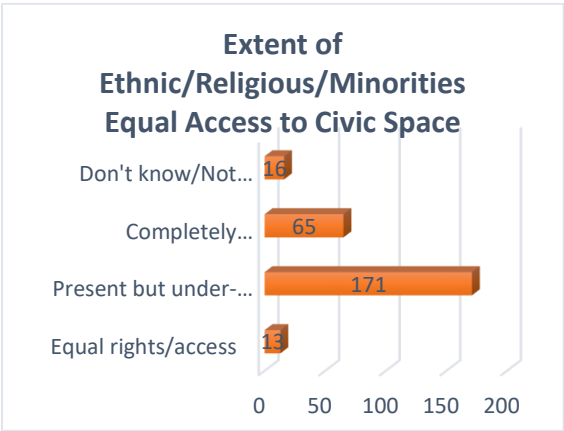
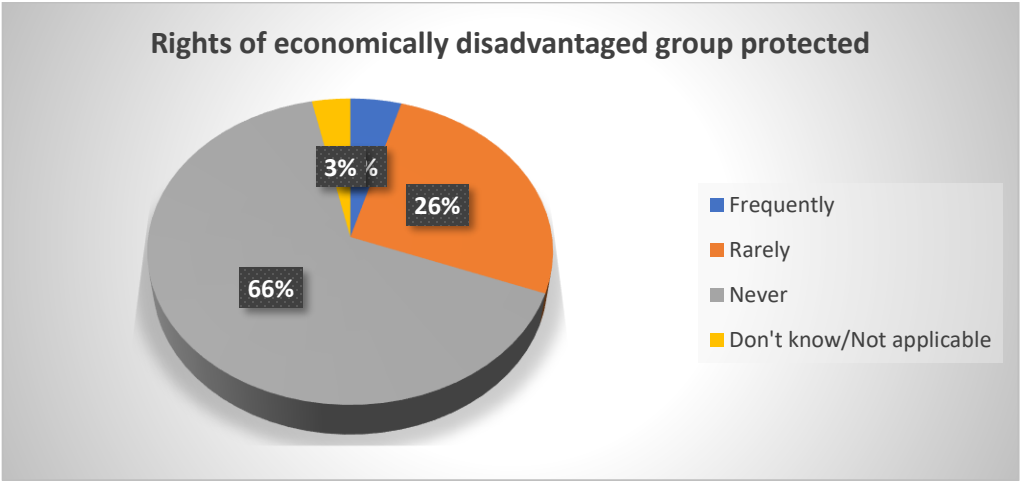
From the survey, 48% are clear that women are completely marginalized in the extent of their access of civic space while 204 respondents state that women's rights are never protected. The reason is not far-fetched as the south-east has no female as governor or deputy governor. There are 2 female senators in Anambra, 2 in the house of representatives from Abia and Anambra States respectively. In the state houses of assembly, Imo has 2, Abia has 0, Ebonyi has 0, Enugu has 2 and Anambra has 2 female members. The key positions have an insignificant number of women, and this is the reality facing women's active participation in governance in the south-east. Protecting and campaigning for the rights of women is therefore fraught with apprehension, as 72% of respondents do not think women are equitable represented as civic actors and leaders.

The poor groups are an integral part of our society, and majority of the stakeholders within this group are mostly persons with disability. They have very limited access to civic space and their rights are reported as never protected by over 150 and 66% respondents respectively. The Disability Law was graciously passed recently by the national assembly and assented by the President, necessitating the establishment of their commission, but some states are yet to domesticate the law and then implement the contents.



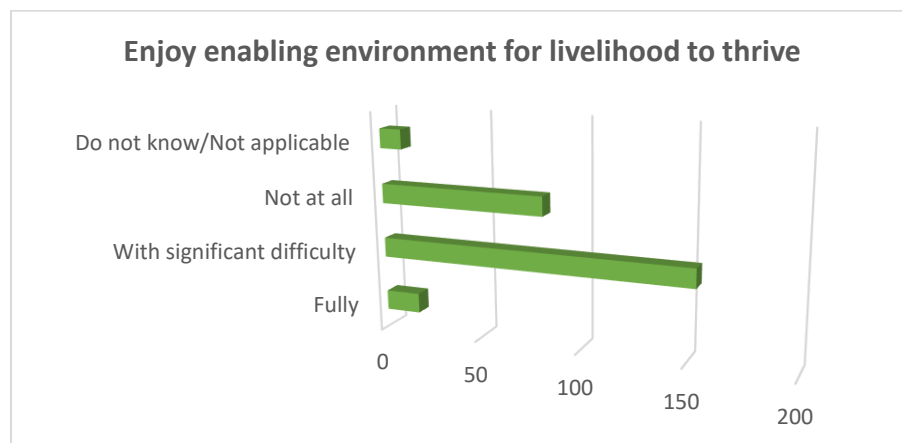


Poor people have limited opportunities for appointments to government positions, they are not considered in political parties for elective positions, and they are hardly employed in offices. They have no access to banking halls, public buildings because none are disabled friendly. In Imo State, they were ignored several times on their advocacy visit to the government and in Ebonyi State, Governor Umahi stopped the employment of 100 PWDs made by Governor Elechi, and whilst they led peaceful protest security agencies beat them up like criminals. These are the harsh realities that poor people face, constantly, worsened by the spate of insecurity and shrinking civic space.



During the FGD and KIs discussions, participants said that the ethnic/religious/minorities did not have equal access to the civic space and their rights are not protected. This is mostly the point of view of 171 and 195 respondents respectively.

## Impact of insecurity on livelihood



The high level of insecurity in the entire south-east, has put the region in a state of helplessness, as people are killed in large numbers daily, with wanton bloodletting, atrocious destruction of businesses and means of livelihood. Apart from the insecurity situation, livelihoods in the south-east are affected drastically by lack of access to capital and credit, as entrepreneurs, especially women engaging in petty trading find it difficult to raise capital for their start-ups. In addition, lack of services such as electricity affects the ability to effectively run a profitable business as one would spend money on buying diesel to power a generator. There is also Government regulations to content with government revenue collectors imposing penalties arbitrarily on businesses. Civil servants are usually owed several months' salaries.

In Imo State, Governor Rochas Okorocha pulled down the main market in Owerri and dispersed the traders, keeping them unsettled for months. He forced them to occupy alternative locations, which were incomplete. He dislodged the Orji mechanic village to enable him to acquire the property for himself and some victims of the forceful eviction of their long years' businesses died of heart attack. This was a general experience across Imo State, major markets and business people, especially women traders were affected. Respondents of the FGD and KIs recalled how lives were lost, poverty increased, and things have not improved since then. When the government embarked on a road expansion project, people's homes and shops who were supposedly within the marked areas were destroyed, rendering additional people homeless and increasing the number of socially insecurity people in the state.

People in Ebonyi State faced the same situation when the new international market complex was said to have been completed<sup>88</sup>. Businesses at micro level, for instance pepper sellers, food vendors, fruit sellers who just carry their wares around, could not afford the cost of the stalls and were therefore banned from entering the market. During the FGD a story was shared of a female food vendor who was attacked by the task force, her food was poured directly into the gutter. The victim cried that the rice and stew condiments were usually bought on credit to repay the next day, before taking new stock. It took the grace of a good spirited individual to give her money to repay and buy the next time for cooking.

<sup>88</sup> Mbam Ogodo, "Ebonyi completes new international market; Traders begin relocation", The Nigerian Voice, January 27, 2020. <https://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/284698/ebonyi-completes-international-market-traders-begin-relocat.html>

In Anambra State, the roads are dilapidated, and the current roadblocks does not allow for the ease of traffic and movement. In different locations, people have to park their cars and trek very long distances, and this is not favourable to business people, especially women who are bearing the brunt of the situation. In Abia state, people have lamented the terribly dilapidated roads, which has led to over one hundred percent increase of transport fare, affecting the level at which communities producing food bring it to the markets. In addition, is the situation of the Ariaria Market, begging for attention with rickety buildings, lack of access and flooded road path, no electricity and multiple taxation collected by government representatives. People of Ebonyi State are in the same situation whilst in Enugu state citizens in business mostly have to grapple with the land usurping tendency of the incumbent government. FGD responders in Enugu state alleged that soon as an identified land is located, everyone around the area must vacate, irrespective of the businesses thriving in the area, they will abruptly stop and the implication is loss of livelihood and hardship on the citizens.

The respondents noted that the business and economic livelihood environment in the south-east is presently unfavourable. Respondents from all communities noted that the conditions are further affected by the reduced patronage by buyers as majority of the citizens are civil servants from Imo to Abia (Umuahia area) to Enugu and Ebonyi, and salaries are owed in several months. Only Aba part of Umuahia and Anambra are mostly involved in buying and selling, and this they are also not finding easy. Overall, women are the most affected.

### **Impact of COVID-19 on human rights, livelihoods and education**

Government poor response to COVID-19 caused human rights abuses<sup>89</sup>, In fact, we had a pandemic of human rights abuses with further shrinking the civic space. Using the pandemic as a pretext, government authorities of the south-east deployed heavy-handed security responses and emergency measures to crush dissents, criminalize basic freedoms and restricted the activities of non-governmental organisations. Some of the human rights abuses resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic include:

**Policing and Surveillance:** the lockdowns introduced the most expansive police and military presence around the south-east states. They were tasked to enforce lockdown, and majority were not trained to do the work. As a result, there were incidents of excessive use of force. It also provided opportunity to silence opponents and critics of the government.

**Increased Sexual and Gender Based Violence:** Human rights frontline workers reported escalating rates of intimate partner violence because of they are unable to maintain safe distances to protect themselves; being vulnerable to their abusive partners. Sex workers who must continue to work to survive experienced heightened vulnerability, and had to contend with the risk of arrest, extortion and abuse linked to expanded police powers.

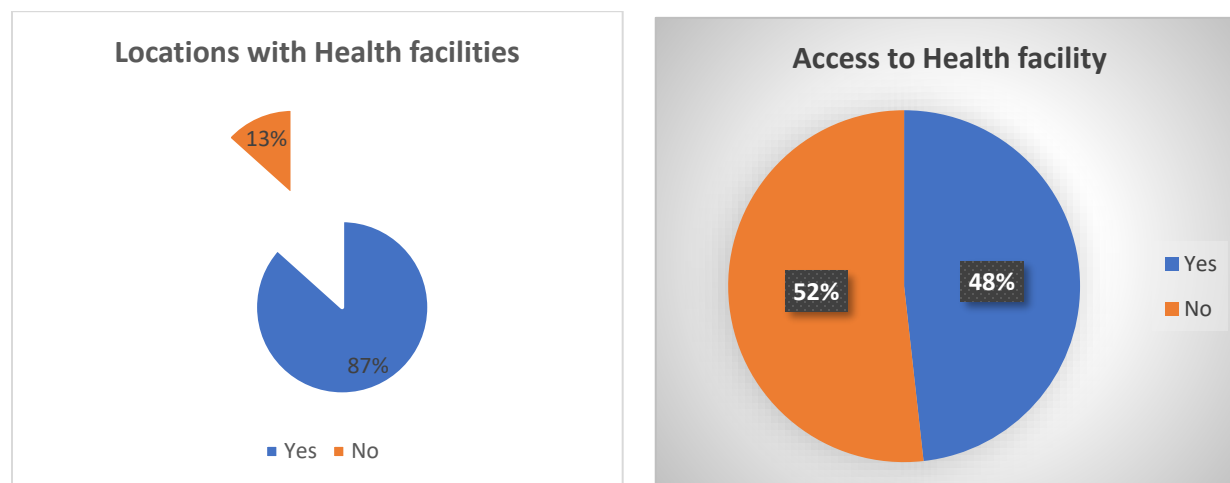
**Abuse of Right to Health:** It is the responsibility of the state to provide healthcare. Apparently, due to lapses on the health care system, there was scarce knowledge and preparation to manage the pandemic, leading

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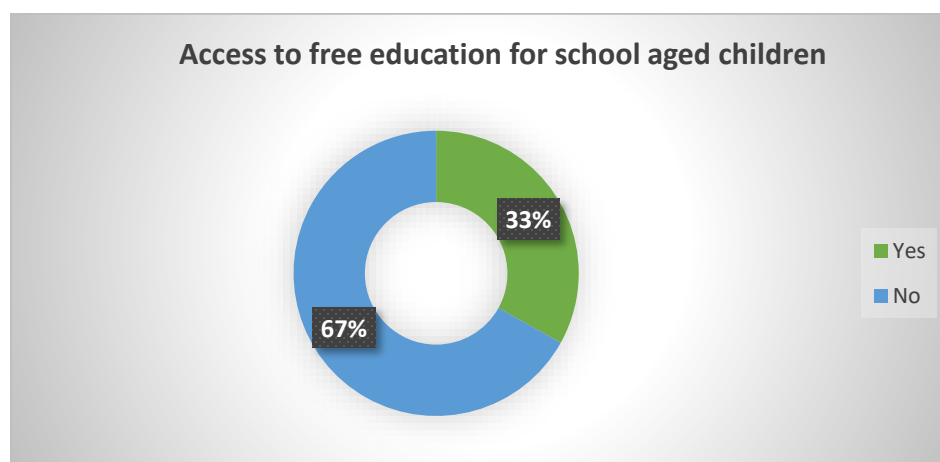
<sup>89</sup> National Human Rights Commission Press Release, "Report of Alleged Human Rights Violations Recorded between 13<sup>th</sup> April – 4<sup>th</sup> May, 2020 following the extension of the lockdown period", May 11, 2020 <https://www.nigeriarights.gov.ng/nhrc-media/press-release/104-report-of-alleged-human-rights-violations-recorded-between-13th-april-to-4th-may-2020-following-the-extension-of-the-lockdown-period.html>

to panic measures instituted around the country and especially across the south-east to control the spread. These measures impinged on the rights of victims. For instance, for the fear of contracting the virus from patients, healthcare providers were reported to have absconded and abandoned their duty posts. The government was alleged to have failed to provide the essential personal protective equipment that would shield the healthcare service providers from infection. The beds in isolation centres were inadequate and lacking sanitation with shortage of testing and treating materials. In many locations, quarantine was more of punishment than a preventive measure for prevention and containment with the quarantined complaining of ill treatment and hunger.

Socio-economically, the COVID-19 pandemic led to loss of unemployment for majority of the formerly employed men, their wives became the sole providers and have had to find an alternative source of income with many resorting to petty trading to meet the family needs with their meagre earnings. Women traders who participated in the interactions painted very disturbing and vivid pictures of the difficulties that they face and any effort to engage with elected leaders led to some punishment from the powers that be.

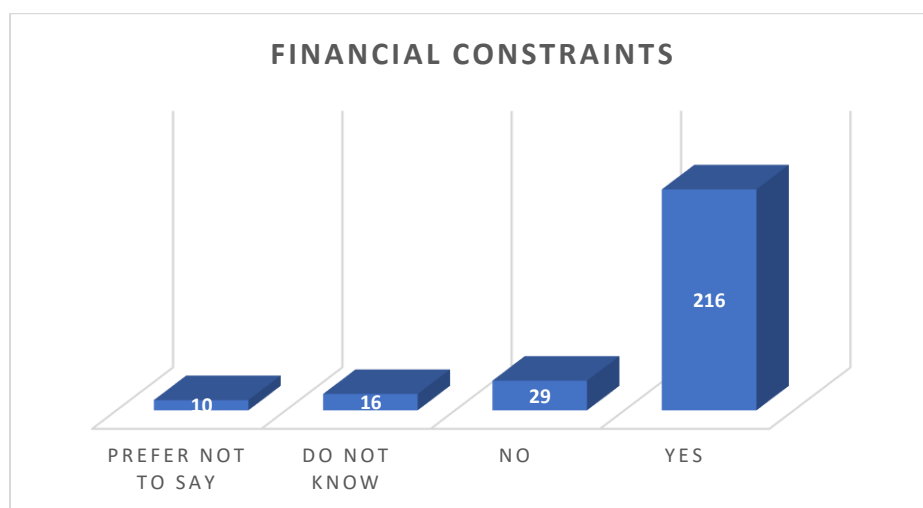


These are the most basic and important facilities promoting socio-economic development and welfare of the people that states can provide. 87% confirmed that their communities and states have health facilities. However, during the FGD interaction, respondents described the health facilities as empty without equipment to handle the serious health cases, or the necessary medical personal such as specialist doctors to handle the challenges of patients. In the same vein, 48% of the respondents confirm that they have access to those health facilities, leaving 52% not accessing health facilities and services. This is one of the reasons why a citizens have lost faith in those in leadership positions in the south-east states.



According to 33% of respondents access to free education is accessible while 67% confirmed that it is not accessible. Consideration for access to free education for school aged children comprises free tuition, books, uniforms, and all required for school from primary one to junior secondary three. In their explanation, the FGD and KII respondents said that over seventy percent of the government owned schools have been relinquished to missionaries as mission schools. The mission schools have their own school management policies, which 33% of respondents is usually challenging for parents, who are already facing economic hardship to meet up with. The home-grown school feeding programme has been terribly abused and roughly managed in many states. It is alleged that mission schools charge exorbitant school fees for books and materials, making it difficult for majority of families to benefit from the opportunity of accessing free education for school aged children.

### CSOs access to finance



Access to resources is an integral part of the right to freedom of association, as defined in Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other human rights instruments. However, favourable resource-related legal frameworks and policies have strengthened the effectiveness and facilitated the sustainability of organisations. Conversely, repressive frameworks have subjugated them to a dependent

and weak position. Therefore, undue restrictions on resources available to CSOs also undermine their rights and the work that they do.

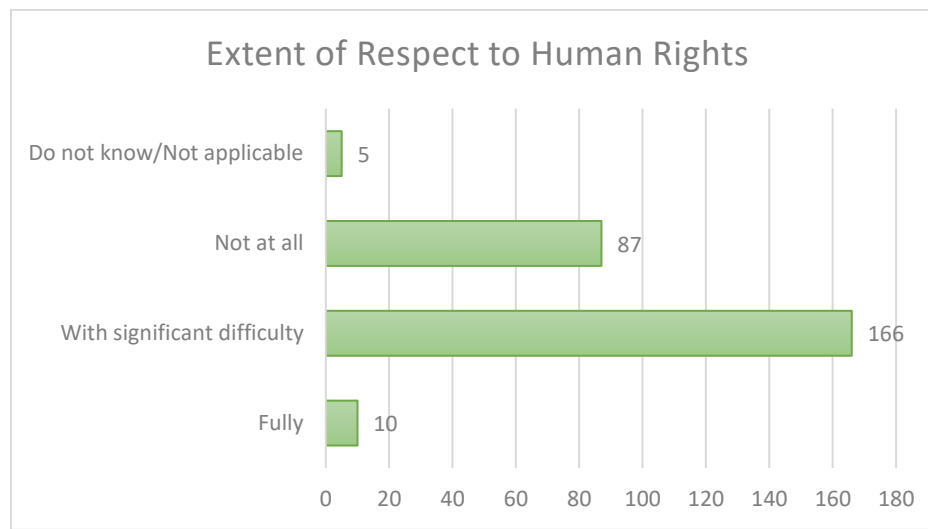
CSOs rely on resources ranging from financial assistance to material resources, received from a variety of sources including international organisations, individual donors, foundations and philanthropies, corporations and (self) income-generating activity; to do their work. In the process of conducting this research, across south-eastern Nigeria, the human rights focused CSOs expressed various resource mobilisation challenges including:

1. **Shrinking funding for human rights-related work:** The rate of funding hitherto received from donor agencies to support the work of human rights defenders have shrunk tremendously. The donors that still available are more focused on social services and welfare-related interventions. The donors are moving away from funding functions on watchdog, promotion and protection of fundamental rights, and strategic litigation which is crucial to achieving positive changes in the field of human rights.
2. **Negative media and smear campaigns against CSOs:** With the proliferation of CSOs, some of whom are involved in corrupt practices, it has become commonplace in the states to accuse all CSOs of being a front for money laundering or terrorism. The human rights defenders are tagged unpatriotic for asking questions and publicly condemning poor governance. This negative publicity and smear campaigns have drastically reduced access to resources for the CSOs.
3. **Short-term funding:** Some available funding hardly exceeds six months of implementation without administrative costs or infrastructure funding. This condition prevents the CSOs from long term strategic planning, functioning and sustainability. When the organizations can no longer meet their needs including payment of staff salaries, rent and other logistics expenses required to fulfil their obligations, the organisations close outrightly.
4. **CSOs capacity to competing for the same funding:** This challenge, often overlooked is a major limitation to CSOs' access to resources/funding. Several organisations lack the capacity to engage in this competitive field, although they are quite clear on how to intervene as human rights defenders. Without funding, it is harder to attract and retain highly experienced and skilled experts and this is the bane of many of the CSOs.

On the general population, the funding constraints are also biting hard on them. The government has not been responsive to developmental demands thereby exposing the financing gap crisis in our developing location. The margin between the available funds and the actual funds needed for social development is significantly wide. This has attracted the philanthropy of the industrialised countries providing funds to aid service delivery in the for us. Poor governance has led to misallocation of resources and by extension has caused the financial constraints being experienced across the south-east region.

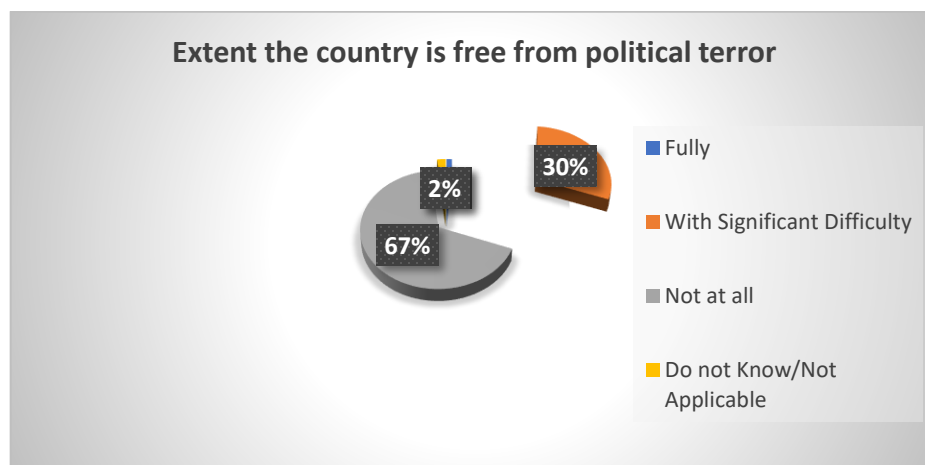
Businesses have been disrupted, with the alarming level of unemployment, disabling livelihood environment, with inconsistent and bad government policies, multiple taxation, lack of infrastructure and all others. All of these forms the basis for the demand by citizens for equity and equality, further fuelling the secessionist movement and creating the insecurity being experienced. 216 respondents decried the financial constraints that they face constantly, and this explains the state of the region. The level of hardship in the region is rising, so is the cost of living and will require several years to recover.

## Respect for human rights



87 respondents insist there is no respect for human rights. While 166 are of the opinion that we access our human rights in the region with significant difficulty. Citizens who responded to this survey expressed that they face significant difficulty in accessing the respect for human rights. The survey and research findings have constantly demonstrated that the inalienable rights conferred on individuals as human beings is an indicator of serious shrinking civic space.

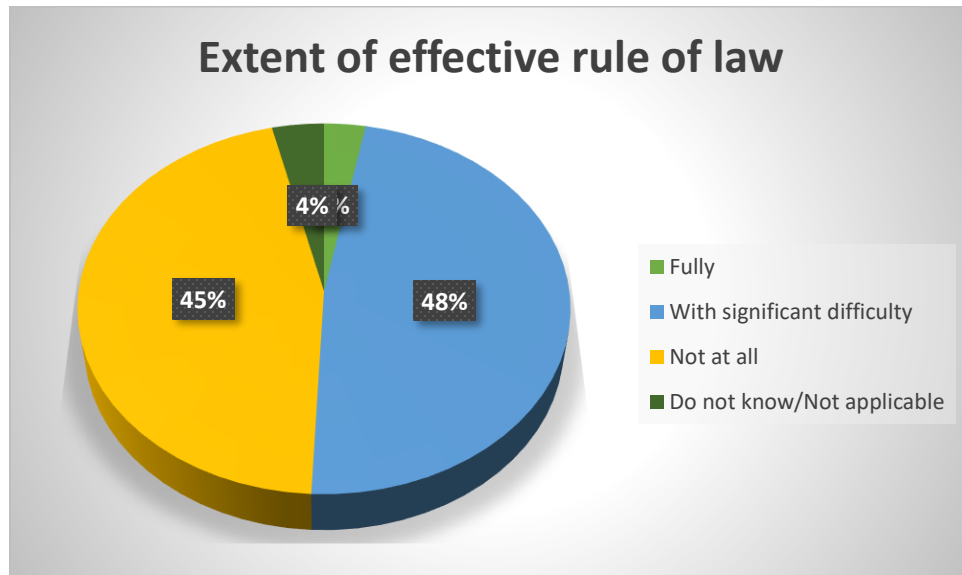
## Political terrorism



On the extent to which the country is free from terror, 67% respondents think the country as a whole is not free in any way from political terrorism. The style of leadership currently available has created the might is rights style, harassment for expressing opinion on governance, media assault, electoral related crimes, and repression of opposition with the use of force. We are indeed not free from political terror, with accusing fingers strongly pointing at the state actors as being the tools in the hands of the government across the region to instil fear and by extension insecurity in the region. Political terrorism has been normalised in the south-east and that is the disheartening part.



## Rule of Law



The respect for the rule of law is non-existent for the rich and powerful with access to the police or judicial system. 48% of the respondents say that rule of law is significantly difficult in the region while 45% insist that there is no rule of law at all. During the FGD and KII conversations it was revealed that the perpetrators of violence especially sexual violence against women and girls, should have been identified and made to face the judicial system. Respondents express that rules are made for the poor because evidence provided the rich can always buy their way out. Rule of law appears on paper, not in practices and the citizens no longer have confidence in the rule of law.

In Ebonyi State, a young man and his mother and sister, in addition to a guest from another location that passed the night in their home were woken on a fateful morning with sound of gunshots in their compound. The guest was shot to death, his sister sustained a terrible gun shot injury on her stomach. Their rooms were ransacked by the security personnel who visited them that early morning. They carried away the corpse of his guest, arrested and locked the young man in the cell to release him a few days later after heavy interrogation of his involvement with a "terrorist" group and dumped his bleeding sister in the hospital for treatment.

Eventually, upon his return, when he tried to seek help to access justice, he was completely discouraged by everyone including his mother and extended family and community members. He was advised that "he has no one to help him, being from a poor home". Giving that the perpetrators came in police uniform and were not questioned by the police when they had him locked, nor did the hospital refuse to treat his wounded sister. They all complied as if they were all working together. Up to the day of the discussion, where this pathetic story was shared, nobody wanted to involve himself or her self in the case. For lack of contact, he swallowed his pain, to the point of not knowing who to go to for the corpse of his guest. There is in fact no rule of law concluded the respondents.

## STATE OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FROM THE RESEARCH

In conversations around civic space, what is fundamentally at stake is the respect for democratic principles, rule of law and accountable governance. It is about ensuring inclusive development and counteracting the growing exclusion of people and inequality as it is happening now through a combination of forces. The human rights defenders, found across our states and in fact across the globe, are the ones that act to promote or protect civil and political rights in a peaceful manner towards the realisation of economic, social, and cultural rights.

The human rights defenders investigate, gather information and report on human rights violations. They employ strategies to bring their reports to the attention of the public and of key political and judicial officials with a view to ensuring that their investigative work is given consideration and that human rights violations are addressed. Some provide professional legal advice and represent victims in the judicial process, others focus exclusively on ending impunity for violations while advocating in support of democratisation, an end to corruption and the abuse of power, through training citizens on how to vote and why their participation in elections is important. They work to make human rights a reality.

In the course of their work, they are exposed to risks and difficulties. In monitoring the limitations that the human rights defenders' situation, our research captured information on the dimensions across the south-east with the rating:

Open	Narrowed	Obstructed	Repressed	Closed
10-8	8-6	6-4	4-2	2-0

### Explanations:

- **Open:** the state both enables and safeguards the enjoyment of civic space for all people
- **Narrowed:** The State allows individuals and CSOs to exercise their rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, although violations of these rights also take place
- **Obstructed:** Civic space is heavily contested by power holders, who impose a combination of legal and practical constraints on the full enjoyment of fundamental rights
- **Repressed:** Significant constraint where active individuals and civil society members who criticise power holders risk surveillance, harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, injury, and death
- **Closed:** A complete closure - in law and in practice - of civic space

### Summary of Findings:

S/No	Dimension	Score	Rating
1.	Regulatory Framework	5	Obstructed
2.	Access to Funding	4	Repressed
3.	Administration and Bureaucracy	5	Obstructed
4.	Safety and Wellbeing of People	4	Repressed
5.	Access to Information and Public Voice	5	Obstructed
6.	Freedom of Assembly, Association and Dissent	4	Repressed
7.	Dialogue and Consultation	4	Repressed
8.	Access to Justice and Legal Services	4	Repressed
9.	Civil Society Legitimacy and Accountability	7	Narrowed

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The effects of COVID-19, continues to linger in the country, the south-eastern states, local community and at personal levels. The impact of the pandemic exacerbates the poor conditions of families, provision of services including, overcrowded hospitals and poorly equipped health workers, insecurity, high cost of food, and basic needs, and the increased rate of sexual and gender-based violence across the south-east.

Civil society organisations have been in the forefront in the provision of frontline critical support and services, and despite the clampdown on their institutions by governments have remained in place to pick up where the state has failed. Shrinking civic space is the albatross around the necks of human rights defenders and part of a wider pattern of democratic recession and authoritarian resurgence.

The challenge for all stakeholders in tackling the shrinking civic spaces in the south-east is its intentionality and collaborative strategic objective. Freedom of association, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression cannot be compromised to the whims and caprices of an authoritarian democracy. It is time for all hands-on deck as we all have a role to play in ensuring the protection and safety of human rights defenders, as well as in halting the shrinking civic space trend.

Based on the findings of the study from key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and their responses to the kobotoolbox survey questionnaire, the following recommendations are put forward to these different actors to reclaim the shrinking civic space in the south-east:

### Federal and State Governments

- a. Demilitarise the south-east – the soldiers need to return to the barracks. The large number of check points manned by military personnel has made it difficult to conduct legitimate business and heightened the fear communities are experiencing. The role of the military is to defend the nation against external threats and not against the people.
- b. Equip the Nigerian Police Force with support to address the insecurity in the south-east states and engaging in effective community policing as a strategy for engaging with the community whilst allaying their fears and addressing criminal elements.
- c. Regulate the role of the police and increase their accountability during the conduct of citizen demonstrations by introducing oversight mechanisms and introducing laws that limit the excessive use of force.
- d. Address the infiltration of the Nigerian Police Force of rogue policemen who are unaccountable, untraceable, and thereby evade justice.
- e. Strengthen privacy laws to prevent unwanted digital surveillance of journalists, activists, and human rights defenders. Surveillance mechanisms even within the context of a health emergency such as COVID19 (or any future crisis) must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate. Citizens must be able

to discuss and share their ideas free of surveillance or fear of retaliation by the state or non-state actors.

- f. The processes and procedures for active citizen participation should be utilised effectively to allow CSOs to engage officials in advocacy activities to understand the challenges that citizens encounter which governments can address. How best can communities be served through active citizens engagement.

### **Global Partners and Friends of Nigeria**

- a. An intentional support and preparedness financial plan for human rights defenders who often have to leave their location quickly and, in a hurry, needs to be prioritised, and be available.
- b. It is important to broker and strengthen relationships with a broad coalition of civil society partners, working across different issue areas in the south-east. Diversity and inclusivity are key to developing strategic commitments that respond to the needs of the community and advance civic space priorities. For example, human rights defenders across the sector, the PWD, Albino, LGBTQ and women's rights communities are vulnerable.
- c. Women's rights issues and the protection of women's human rights defenders who are likely to suffer human rights violations specific to their gender should be prioritised and plans made to recognise this factor.
- d. Provide professional mental health support pathway and access for human rights defenders, to address the intense pressure and adverse consequences of shrinking civic space, intimidation, and harassment that they are facing.
- e. Identify policy entry points for civic space across issue areas, from justice to digital governance, taxation to civic participation, that are contextual to the south-east states. Intersectionality across individual state action plan commitments can complement one another to build a stronger, enabling environment for civic space to thrive in the region.
- f. Build the capacity of human rights defenders to be aware of their personal security, how they store information, how they document and protect themselves against government surveillance.
- g. Research is the way forward in providing additional critical analysis on what is happening to minority groups in the south-east and in designing adequate strategic and intersectional interventions with partners on the ground.

### **Civil Society**

- a. Demand for the establishment as stipulated by the Commission of Inquiry Laws by governors of the south-east a Judicial Commission of Inquiry to investigate, fact find, hold responsible, accountable and prosecute those state and non-state actors involved in actions of impunity and gross human rights violations.

- b. Protection of human rights defenders to ensure that violations against human rights defenders committed by state and non-state actors are promptly and impartially investigated and that those responsible are held accountable and prosecuted.
- c. Establish a Community of Practice as a coalition to ensure database management of atrocities and human rights violations.
- d. Campaign for and understand the needs for professional mental health pathway and check-in for human rights defenders to avoid mental health crisis as we have experienced recently.
- e. Establish a coalition of civil society actors to work on ensuring the domestication of the Disability Act across the south-east states to bring a level of protection and access to resources for PWD citizens and their defenders.
- f. Campaign and advocate for the domestication of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition bill in the south-east states that have not got such a law. Which will encourage an enabling environment, to address, make accountable and provide access to justice for victims of sexual and gender-based violence.
- g. Engage extensively with traditional and community groups to rebuild the faith of the citizens towards political participation and engagement which is key as a positive solution to addressing the security issues in the south-east.

## CONCLUSIONS

From this study, it is obvious that citizens in the south-east have lost confidence in the democratic process, in the kind of governance they are experiencing, in the leadership and in participating in the civic space, and even when a choice is made to participate in the civic space, they engage the space with some level of fear. The Focus Group Discussion was telling, although it was anonymous several respondents did not believe we would not share their names and locations, and therefore kept their responses neutral as best they could. The study has demonstrated that the civic space is shrinking and having an adverse effect on society, and the human rights defenders who are often the first victims.

The untold economic hardship has created an alarming level of poverty which has created secondary effects on families and communities fuelling an increase in such vices as teenage prostitution, transactional sexual relations, drug taking, selling, and growing of narcotics, and an increase in sexual and gender-based violence. Families are struggling to hold it together.

The south-east however is essentially not different from what is being experienced in other parts of Nigeria, issues of incompetent governance and leadership, and a complete disregard for human rights and the rule of law. The peculiarity of governance in the south-east and the way several governors came to power has demonstrated that they are uncomfortable with dissent and do not allow alternative opinions or opposition in any form. As a result of this, the governments in the south-east have chosen to respond with brute force to

any divergent viewpoint instead of dialogue. The south-east is clearly a conquered and occupied region with the military leaving the barracks and manning all checkpoints on all major roads in and out of the south-east. The role of protecting the citizens has been lifted from the police.

Discussions around the separatists' agitation was tinged with fear because whilst respondents did not support what the various separatists' groups were agitating for, it was felt and perceived that the northern groups got more sympathy and tolerance from the federal government whilst engaging in a draconian manner with IPOB and the military wing ESN. Before now, IPOB was not violent but because of government attacks, the group became very violent, heightening insecurity across the south-east. Often, citizens are agitated when they feel that instead of democratically elected leaders, they have imposed leaders as in the case of Imo State, this destabilised the peace, security, and calm in the environment, with the attendant negative implications as we have seen from the study.

South-east Nigeria needs effective leadership, that can give hope to the citizens; the zone survived the ethnically charged Biafran war over 50 years ago and is still struggling to recover from how much that war plundered the region; this is why the region cannot afford to experience another war. The groups that are forcefully enforcing the ongoing sit-at-home orders in the south-east, which often results into killing of citizens who are going about their legitimate businesses are clearly practicing criminality. They should be held accountable and brought to justice.

It is obvious from the mode of operation of current IPOB members that they are mostly disillusioned, and angry young people without recourse to history. The south-east states having failed to offer young people hope for the future has seen them resort to a more aggressive engagement instead of strategic engagements that can proffer results and peaceful resolutions that will be beneficial to every citizen. The insecurity in the south-east is the war between the government, the separatist group known as IPOB with the security arm known as ESN, unnamed gunmen and criminals taking advantage of the situation to cause even more mayhem.

With the allegation that the unnamed gunmen are agents of the sitting governors. The offensive refusal and reactions from all state and non-state actors and groups has jeopardized the human rights of citizens and there seems to be no end in sight. In addition to the violations, is the alarming level of poverty, weakening the already fragile and struggling-to-survive structures of the south-east.

Gender based violence is rife in the south-east due to heavy militarisation, increased levels of poverty and low awareness on issues of gender-based violence and gender equality. Attaining gender equality is important and strategic for any form of sustainable development to take place in the South-East zone. The level of sexual and gender-based violations against women and girls is alarming and unprecedented with girls under 18 years. There's increased domestic abuse and experience of intimidation and violence due heavy militarisation. Issues of violence against women requires immediate redress.

Reported cases of gender-based violence are perpetrated by both state and non-state actors and are usually not adequately addressed. This is mostly due to deep rooted patriarchy, poor investigation, and protracted judicial processes. It is critical to continue to promote access to formal education to reduce the level of

illiteracy and build the confidence that citizens require to make demands from those in authority, resist bad leadership and demand the human rights of all citizens.

It is evident that citizens feel intimidated and fearful about engaging in any form of dissent. Their voice is stifled, and many have abandoned the civic space to focus on securing their source of livelihood. The civic space is essential for citizens to be able to raise their voices and influence decisions that affect them. It is important that citizens speak up about important issues and pressure governments and the private sector to better serve them. For instance, promoting electronic voting, utilising the social media for mobilising, dissemination of information in a manner that addresses and creates awareness at all levels.

The civil society must recognise its strategic role as a rallying point for action, hone its advocacy capacity and discourage individualistic politics. It is important that it takes the opportunity of this strategic role to bring critical players together, build strategic connections, and strengthen the connective tissue between civil society, government, and the private sector to increase civic engagement in all areas of governance and socio-economic life of the south-east.

Most importantly, they must assume some level of responsibility towards achieving the common goal of peace, security, and prosperity for the region, ensuring that all stakeholders are made to participate effectively, being held accountable, recognising and lending voices as necessary. That is the indication of a thriving civic space that brings good to all. It is the space that adheres to the universally accepted rules, allowing people to organise, participate and communicate with each other freely and without hindrance.

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