AGENTS FOR CITIZEN-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION

PROMOTING COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY STAKEHOLDERS IN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the Agents for Citizen-driven Transformation (ACT) Programme started working with and supporting civil society organisations (CSOs), networks and coalitions in Nigeria to strengthen their internal, external and programme capabilities. The programme also started facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogues towards improving the regulatory environment for CSOs' operations in Nigeria.

After five years, at the completion of the programme in 2024, ACT had reached and strengthened the organisational capacity of at least **233 CSOs** in nine states (Adamawa, Borno, Edo, Enugu, Kano, Lagos, Plateau, Rivers, and Sokoto) and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Up to **2,808 personnel** of the CSOs and **1,302 network leaders** directly benefitted from the programme's support. Furthermore, CSOs, government agencies and other stakeholders gained a better understanding of civil society regulatory issues, leading to several key policy- and decision-makers committing to addressing identified issues.

Precipitating the programme's interventions was the need to address some critical challenges that had been limiting the full potential of Nigerian CSOs to become credible agents of sustainable change and development. One of these challenges was poor coordination among CSOs and between CSOs and other key stakeholders in the sector, including government and donor agencies. There was a tendency for CSOs to independently seek solutions to the issues faced by their constituents, without collaborating with other CSOs in their location or sector, or with key leaders or government agencies.

This paper presents ACT's experience as a programme to promote coordination and partnership among stakeholders in the civic space in Nigeria. The paper includes the approaches adopted by the programme, initial results, lessons learned, and a few recommendations for deepening the gains of stakeholder collaboration.

ACT'S APPROACH AND INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE STAKEHOLDER COORDINATION

ACT employed a range of proven approaches, including the adoption of a problem driven, iterative, adaptation approach (PDIA) towards achieving its objectives. With respect to stakeholder coordination, the programme focused on establishing and strengthening CSO organisational capacity development, improving CSO self-regulatory frameworks, strengthening donor coordination for CSOs, and improving CSO regulatory frameworks and agency coordination.

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> The Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA): Local solutions, for local problemsPDIA is a 'learning by doing' approach. It helps organisations break down problems into their root causes, identify entry points, search for possible solutions, act, reflect upon what has been learned, adapt and then act again. This process is dynamic with tight feedback loops that allow teams to build their own solutions to problems within local contexts. "

Coordination mechanism for CSO capacity development

For CSO organisational capacity development, the programme supported the establishment of CSO Peer Learning Platforms (PLP). The ACT PLPs were established in **nine states** (Adamawa, Borno, Edo, Enugu, Kano, Lagos, Plateau, Rivers, and Sokoto) **and the FCT**. A total of 195 CSO partners participated actively in the platforms across the states. Each PLP group was comprised of experienced and less experienced CSO members to encourage a supportive and collaborative learning environment. ACT used this approach on the premise that if CSOs learn together, share practices and experiences, then foundations for future collaboration to bring about long-term change will be established. Regular sessions encouraged CSO partners to learn collaboratively; share methodologies, systems and procedures; encourage cross-CSO teamwork; address problems and issues together; and support the building of best practice in organisational development. An outcome of the PLP process has been that CSO members have now established their own Virtual Peer Learning Hubs at state level, to share and learn from each other on virtual/remote platforms in a sustainable way.

Coordination mechanisms for CSO self-regulatory framework

National conference: ACT co-organised two national conferences to coordinate stakeholders on CSO self-regulation. The first edition of the conference in September 2022 focused on the need to mainstream gender and social inclusion and adopt a rights-based approach to

improving the regulatory environment for CSOs in Nigeria. The second edition in November 2023 was an opportunity for CSO-donor coordination and funding support for CSOs as it recorded participation from the international development community that shares similar goals and interests in supporting an enabling regulatory environment for CSOs in Nigeria. Among those represented were the European Union, the British High Commission, the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO), the French Development Agency (AFD), the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Steering Committee on the Civil Society Regulatory Environment

ACT was actively involved in the establishment of the Steering Committee on the Civil Society Regulatory Environment. The committee was established as a coordination mechanism to scrutinise the African Commission on Human and People's Rights to Freedom of Association to develop guidelines to measure its current adoption within the domestic framework and to offer suggestions for the enhanced implementation at national and sub-national levels. Under this arrangement, over **30 CSOs** and **nine international organisations** coordinated through a steering committee to implement a CSO-led roadmap of action on the CSO regulatory environment in Nigeria. Several initiatives on the roadmap have been implemented including: (1) a webinar series on various aspects of the civil society regulatory environment; (2) research by a CSO partner (Centre for Democracy and Development – CDD) on impact and contribution of CSOs to national development; and (3) national conferences on the civil society operational environment.

Technical Committee on Civil Society Legislative Engagement

ACT supported the Technical Committee on Civil Society Legislative Engagement, a committee drawn from vibrant CSO groups, government agencies and development partners. This committee coordinated and organised multiple stakeholder forums and public consultations on civil society regulatory frameworks/environment to drive conversations on widely acceptable guidelines for the operations of CSOs in Nigeria and to receive inputs on a standard model of operations for the civil society sector. Participants included relevant stakeholders in the civil society sector as well as the National Assembly and relevant agencies of government working on areas relating to the operations of CSOs. Topical issues that were central to the operations of CSOs and good governance were discussed and recommendations made.

Civil Society National Self-Regulation Council

ACT collaborated with the USAID-funded Strengthening Civic and Local Engagement (SCALE) programme through joint funding and technical support for over 40 civil society (CS) Networks. The CS Networks formed what is now known as the Civil Society National Self-Regulation Council, with a management / implementation sub-committee, known as the National Working Group (NWG). The platform drove the planning and advocacy for the establishment of a model CSO self-regulatory framework, and led to the institutionalisation of self-regulation for improved CSO credibility and legitimacy in Nigeria. The self-regulatory framework has been well-received by CSOs and other stakeholders since it was launched in 2022.

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Donor coordination mechanisms for CSOs

ACT considered donor coordination on CSO engagement as a key process of strengthening interaction and experience sharing amongst donor agencies and international development partners that are supporting the work of CSOs in Nigeria.

Donor coordination platform

ACT facilitated the establishment of a donor coordination platform to provide the opportunity to compare approaches of engagement, share lessons of best practice, and to collectively incorporate common principles, values and ethics on how CSOs are engaged by donors in Nigeria. The programme also coordinated with the European Union Delegation in Nigeria to host coordination meetings with representatives from donors and multilateral agencies including USAID, FCDO, EU and MacArthur Foundation to build on the CSO operational context in Nigeria. ACT undertook an in-depth examination of what the donor community is doing (or could do more of) to improve coordination, information sharing and learning, and resource allocation for effective support to expand CSO development in the country.

Communications coordination across regions

ACT maintained communication and coordination with other EU programme implementers to ensure continuous synergy and avoid duplication. Within the programme implementation period, ACT hosted coordination meetings with EU programme implementers which helped in knowledge-sharing and provided opportunities to provide technical updates of ACT programme implementation with CSOs working in the EU thematic areas. Coordinating with EU programme implementers afforded the programme the opportunity for cross-learning and sharing lessons which were mutually beneficial across the programmes and EU in terms of the reach and spread of its funding across sectors and thematic areas.

Funding mechanism coordination

ACT maintained leadership coordination with the Joint Civic Defence Fund (JCDF) – a funding mechanism funded by OSIWA, the Ford Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation, to enable a civic space/regulatory environment for CSO operation in Nigeria. This jointly funded initiative from ACT and JCDF provided technical and financial support to CSOs to establish an online portal that will help to increase their self-compliance responsibility to existing regulations. In addition, through backend technical support, it will provide continuous support to CSOs to maintain credibility and respond to legal requirements for their operations in Nigeria.

Coordination of government regulatory agencies

ACT coordinated all key regulatory agencies together and supported them to facilitate compliance training for ACT CSO partners, CS Networks across **36 states (plus FCT)** and **11 capacity development providers** (CDPs). The regulatory agencies include the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC), the Federal Internal Revenue Service (FIRS), the National Pension Commission (PENCOM), and the Special Control Unit Against Money Laundering (SCUML). The training has been highly appreciated by the beneficiaries. It was the first time all key agencies had come together, not just to interact with the CSOs, but to offer practical explanations on how the legislation under their purview can affect the work of CSOs.

RESULTS AND IMPACT OF ACT'S COORDINATION MECHANISMS

Launch of a Civil Society Compliance Platform

The coordination with JCDF (driven by CSOs) led to the establishment of a civil society compliance platform (csocomplaince.org.ng), which was launched in December 2022. The platform has several features and tools to help CSOs to better understand the regulatory requirements and thus improve their compliance. The features include the development of a simplified compendium of regulatory frameworks with aspects that CSOs are expected to comply with (CAMA, pension, tax, money laundering prevention, etc). There is also the establishment of an Advisory Hotline to receive and address enquiries from CSOs on compliance issues and challenges. By May 2023, **46 CSOs** had registered on the web platform while **75** have taken advantage of the advisory hotline.

Institutionalisation of self-regulation for improved CSO credibility and legitimacy

Through ACT's coordination with SCALE, and technical and financial support, over **40 CS Networks** across the **36 states and FCT** have collaborated to develop and launch a robust framework to operationalize self-regulatory procedures for CSO operations in Nigeria. This landmark milestone followed the strategic coordination of the National Technical Committee (NTC) on Self-Regulation. The structure, which developed the CSO-led self-regulation initiatives through which mapping, consultations and studies were carried out. The outcome of this process led to the development of a model gender-responsive self-regulatory framework with six modalities that CSOs and CS Networks can voluntarily sign up to, adopt or adapt to suit their different operational contexts.

In 2022, the design and development of the regulatory framework was completed, and validated by CSOs and other stakeholders, including government and donor agencies. Although the initial concept was for the NTC to operate as an ad hoc CSO working group for 18 months, by April 2023 it had evolved into a fully-fledged initiative with its name changed to 'CSO National Self-Regulation Council' and a governance framework has also been developed to guide the management of its affairs. The self-regulatory framework has been well received both by CSOs and other stakeholders since its launch in 2022.

Robust collaborative policy and legislative reforms at national and sub-national levels

ACT's achievements included the Draft Non-Profit Organisations (NPO) Bill developed by the ACT-facilitated Technical Committee on Civil Society Legislative

engagement made up of CSOs, National Assembly committees on CSOs, regulatory agencies, etc. The bill is expected to be introduced during the next 10th Assembly of the National Assembly.

Development of the integrated national NGO database

ACT achieved the successful development of the integrated national NGO database, the first multi-stakeholder driven database (especially at the inter-agency level) that will interface with the databases of the major regulatory agencies. This will make it easier for stakeholders to access and collaborate with CSOs in a more coordinated manner.

PLP platform increased CSO capacity for partnerships to leverage resources

As a result of ACT's CSO PLP support, and other capacity development initiatives, selected CSO partners have since demonstrated improvements in accessing donor funding to sustain their organisational programmes/projects, demonstrate their improved skills and confidence to contribute to critical policy discussions/debates, and improve citizens' engagement in governance process (with recent examples seen during the 2023 election). When surveyed, feedback on the PLP by the CSO participants was positive, with much shared learning and increased collaboration. In Plateau state, following the engagement of PLP groups, several CSO partners joined together to apply for consortium grant awards. Before the PLP CSO collaboration was weak, and it was unlikely such cooperation would have happened. Feedback from the participating CSOs shows a commitment to their continued engagement with the PLPs through the establishment of their CSO coordinated Virtual Peer Learning Hubs.

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Plans for amendment of CAMA 2020 and draft proposal for a Non-Profit Organisation Commission/Agency

One of the recommendations of the Technical Committee on Civil Society Legislative Engagement led to the proposal for the amendment of CAMA 2020 and a draft proposal for the establishment of a Non-Profit Organisation Commission/Agency. With the help of the technical committee, a proposal for a Non-Profit Organisation Bill was drafted in a way that can best serve the non-profit community and not in the manner suggested over the years by the legislature that demonstrates limited understanding of how the civil society sector works. The proposal will be used as an academic exercise that will serve as a model that could be used when new bills to regulate CSOs are introduced by the legislators.

Increase coordination and collaboration

The PLP helped the ACT programme and other partners to consolidate resources to support the CSOs in ways that focus on a judicious use of donor funds, expanding/scaling up impact, avoiding duplication of activities, and developing partnerships while still achieving individual programme objectives/results.

CHALLENGES

During the life of the programme, ACT could not facilitate all of the planned donor coordination meetings due to demands on time and clash of commitments by participants.

ACT's initial intention was to leverage the EU programme implementers as part of the monitoring framework to assess the impact of ACT's capacity development support to CSOs. However, the dynamic implementation context of ACT made this difficult. In addition, the partnerships between CSOs and the EU implementers had varied timeframes that were not aligned with the ACT timeframe, so monitoring the effectiveness of ACT inputs was not workable for many.

Conflict amongst CSO Networks and Coalitions working on the CSO self-regulation initiative delayed implementation of the self-regulation adoption process.

ACT experienced some resistance to coordination from some CSOs who believed that sharing information or working in partnership with other CSOs would affect their comparative advantage in, what is often, quite a competitive environment not only for available funds, but also – and increasingly – for available beneficiaries.

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LESSONS LEARNED

Constructive engagement is possible between CSOs and government agencies when platforms and opportunities for engagements are facilitated

However, successful coordination mechanisms require active engagement and ownership from all relevant stakeholders. There is a need for inclusive decision-making processes, regular communication and consultation with stakeholders to enable partnerships and collaboration for leveraging resources and expertise.

Coordination needs to be flexible and adaptable to the changing circumstances and emerging needs

This requires open feedback, learning from experience, and making necessary adjustments to improve coordination efforts. Building trust and relationships among stakeholders is also essential for successful coordination. This can be achieved through frequent communication and dialogue between stakeholders so that they can better understand each other's perspective and concerns, and appreciate the mutual benefits that coordination brings. This has helped to overcome and address challenges in improving the regulatory environment.

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