

# AGENTS FOR CITIZEN-DRIVEN TRANSFORMATION

## KEY LESSONS FROM THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACT PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA



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## LESSONS LEARNED

### LESSON 1

**Background knowledge and understanding of the civil society context is critical to the success of any programme for CSOs.**

The principle that one should seek to understand others first before being understood was essential to the successful implementation of the ACT programme. Before the implementation of its interventions, ACT carried out a Political Economy Analysis (PEA) across its focal states. The PEA provided insights into the power dynamics, economic and social forces that could influence change in the Nigerian civil society space. The local contextual analyses and stakeholder mapping involved in the PEA deepened the programme's knowledge and understanding of the civil society sector in those states. The PEA provided a well-grounded contextual understanding of the environment that CSOs operate in, whilst gaining an understanding of the enablers of, and barriers to, the desired change in the sector.

In addition to the PEA, the programme facilitated an Organisational Capacity Assessment (OCA), which helped to measure the individual organisational capacity of a proportion of CSOs in the country. The OCA enabled the programme to gain a clearer picture of the organisational strengths and weaknesses of 203 CSOs in 10 states of Nigeria.

Without the PEA, OCA and other initial findings from stakeholders and desk reviews, the ACT programme would not have been adequately informed about the nature and scope of the challenges facing CSOs in Nigeria. In the same vein, ACT would not have been able to proffer appropriate interventions and strategies to support the organisational development of CSOs.

### LESSON 2

**Self-reflection and awareness by target beneficiaries will ensure acceptability of programme interventions needed for success and sustainability.**

A self-reflection and self-awareness exercise facilitated by the programme, through the OCA process, significantly contributed to the ownership of outcomes by ACT's CSO partners. The self-reflection methodology enabled the CSOs, CS Networks and Coalitions to individually identify their strengths, their limitations, and the need to address the challenges for their own benefit. The CSOs did not only identify their own specific challenges and how to address them, but the OCA process led them to make commitments to chart a pathway for their own organisational development. It was based on the findings of the OCA and the CSOs' capacity development pathway that ACT

responded by designing tailor-made capacity development support for each CSO. It was not surprising therefore that the CSOs enthusiastically welcomed and accepted the interventions of the programme. They could clearly see the benefits of the programme's interventions even from the outset and this contributed immensely to the ownership of the programme by the CSOs.

However, it is worth noting that the use of OCA for programme implementation requires caution. It is necessary to prepare and plan carefully to facilitate a self-reflection process, to guide the CSOs through each of the organisational development components, and seek evidence (through positive questioning) of possible assumptions being made by the CSOs. It is also necessary for the facilitator to understand the contextual analysis of each CSO being assessed.

### LESSON 3

**Flexible learning and adaptation proved to be a success factor in the ACT implementation for CSOs.**

Similar to the PEA and OCA activities of the ACT programme, the problem driven, iterative and adaptive (PDIA) approach adopted by ACT played an important role in its successful implementation. The PDIA is a step-by-step and flexible approach that allows users to break down the problems faced into their root causes and to identify early entry points for seeking solutions to those problems. ACT adopted the PDIA approach so that its CSO partners, having identified their own challenges during the OCA, could then participate in the design of solutions that fit their local contexts. This, together with the diverse organisational development support provided by ACT – training, coaching, mentoring and peer learning – ensured that the interventions offered by the programme were not only tailor-made, but flexible and responded to both current and emerging challenges. In other words, as problems were identified, appropriate solutions were designed and applied. This implies that focusing on problems and not only on solutions has its benefits in programme implementation, whilst also improving the capacity of CSOs. Furthermore, as this process was being carried out, ACT and its CSO partners were drawing important lessons for later incorporation into their programme implementation and organisational development.

### LESSON 4

**An integrated, tailor-made approach that includes training, coaching, mentoring and peer learning is required for effective and sustainable organisational development.**

Training alone is not sufficient for effective and sustainable organisational development. An integrated approach that also includes coaching, mentoring and peer learning is required for sustainable impact. Evidence from the OCA and



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PEA conducted by the programme showed that Nigerian CSOs vary in their stage of growth and development, hence they require different levels of capacity development support. However, training alone as an organisational development approach cannot effectively satisfy the individual differences, as it tends to be a more generic approach.

Whilst recognising both the benefits and the limitations of training for effective organisational development, ACT therefore adopted a customised model that offered capacity development through coaching, mentoring and peer learning support. While the coaching (through the support of consultants engaged by the ACT programme) enabled the CSOs to develop their capabilities to achieve their organisational goals, the mentoring provided back-up support to those coached, and peer learning provided opportunities for emerging CSOs to learn from both developing and mature CSOs. It also provided opportunities for developing and mature CSOs to learn from each other and to build best practice into their organisational systems and approaches. In addition, mature and developing CSOs have been able to provide coaching and mentorship support to emerging CSOs, such as community-based organisations that are new in the civic space or those that do not yet have the capacity and resources to be sustainable.

An added bonus from the peer learning platforms has been the increased collaboration amongst CSOs, reducing competition, increasing conflict resolution, and leading to CSOs joining together to apply for, access and manage, grant funding. The integrated approach thus enabled a robust approach to the support required for sustainable organisational development for CSOs across the ACT states in Nigeria.

## LESSON 5

**All categories of CSOs can learn from one another – irrespective of different stages of development.**

Following the adoption of an integrated organisational development approach that included training, coaching, mentoring and peer learning, ACT discovered that valuable learning can occur when CSOs are provided with opportunities to learn from each other. The programme's experience shows that even very experienced CSOs also have a lot to learn from emerging or 'developing' CSOs. This was well demonstrated following the implementation of the ACT-supported Peer Learning Platforms in Adamawa state, where an ACT CSO partner initiated a Virtual Peer Learning Hub in the state. This has enabled non-ACT CSOs, who are often remote, to benefit from the experience of others. ACT's learning with this CSO subsequently led to other CSOs replicating this initiative across the other nine

ACT states. The ACT programme has demonstrated that learning can be mutually beneficial – it does not only flow from ‘big’ CSOs to ‘small’ CSOs, but equally and remarkably from perceived/emerging CSOs to larger and more experienced/mature CSOs. In other words, learning among CSOs takes place regardless of the number of years of experience.

## LESSON 6

**A one-size fits all regulation may not be appropriate for all levels of CSOs.**

There should be no assumption that all CSOs understand the requirements for regulatory compliance the same way. As in every country, CSOs in Nigeria vary in experience, growth, and capacity, with differing needs and expectations. Also, their understanding of national and state compliance requirements differs. Whilst the majority of CSOs in Nigeria perceive the CSO environment as strictly regulated, emerging and developing CSOs appear to feel more affected than more mature CSOs. The former group voiced being overwhelmed and disadvantaged by current regulations, in fact they consider their present structure of regulations as too demanding and unnecessary. Regulators need to be mindful, therefore, of this reality and approach the issue of regulations thoughtfully. Formal categorizations of CSOs may therefore be required for the effective administration of regulations. The ACT programme believes the civil society sector and

regulators can learn from the business sector which is categorised differently (e.g., as micro, small or medium enterprises) and treated accordingly (e.g., micro enterprises are exempted from specific regulations).

## LESSON 7

**Mere passion is not enough for CSO activities. Effective organisational structures and cultures are required to bring about sustainable change.**

ACT partnered with some CSOs – including those regarded as mature and experienced CSOs – who demonstrated a strong passion for civil society work but their organisational structures and cultures remained barriers to becoming effective and credible agents of change. The programme came across founders and leaders of CSOs with evident passion to drive change but whose organisations lacked the required internal, external and programme approach capacities to make a lasting impact in the civic space. It was only after their partnership with ACT and their resulting strengthened organisational structure and culture that they were able to translate their passion into sustainable change in their communities. While passion can spur individuals to dream and plan for change, it takes solid organisational capacity to make that change happen. CSO founders and leaders, passionate as they may be, should therefore be open to opportunities to strengthen their organisational development.



## LESSONS 8

### **Mainstreaming gender and social inclusion in a patriarchal culture is challenging.**

Social norms in relation to traditional practices are challenging to address. For instance, leadership in Nigeria is often regarded as a male role, therefore CSOs continue to be male-dominated. Attitudes are often seen as irreversible, which perpetuate inequalities and contradict government (and often CSOs) policies on equality and diversity. Attitudinal and behavioural change takes time, requiring long-term engagement and commitment by CSOs to bring about sustainable change through gender and social inclusion (G&SI) mainstreaming. However, many CSOs, of all levels of experience across all sectors, have the mistaken belief that G&SI is a 'women-focused' issue only affecting CSOs working in the gender sector. It is not recognised that inclusion is an issue across genders, ages, ethnicities, etc. Nevertheless, ACT's support with G&SI mainstreaming across all organisational components (e.g., within internal systems, programme approach and external relations) has demonstrated that with sustained engagement, change is possible to improve the understanding of attitudes towards equality and have reduced male domination in CSOs and community engagement. Even though the breadth of outcomes to date is minimal in terms of the critical mass required to change attitudes and behaviours across all states, by advocating for G&SI as an integral responsibility of all in Nigeria, CSOs remain a change agent for mainstreaming G&SI. Since receiving ACT G&SI mainstreaming support, CSOs across the 10 ACT states have developed and improved their G&SI policies, increased the diversity in their staff, ensured that their community development support is reaching those who have been traditionally excluded, and advocated for the rights of women and people with disabilities.

## LESSON 9

### **Constructive engagement is possible between CSOs and other stakeholders (government agencies, donor programmes, etc.) when platforms and opportunities for engagements are facilitated.**

Some of the results of the ACT programme were due in part to the existence of platforms for multi-stakeholder coordination and collaboration. This ensured that efforts were synergized towards a common goal, rather than duplicated or at cross-purpose. Such 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.

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.

## LESSON 10

### **Policy change takes time, often beyond the lifecycle of a development programme.**

Donors of development programmes, including civil society programmes, as well as implementing partners should be mindful that changing policy often requires considerable time, especially in developing countries where the process for policy development, policy monitoring and the adoption of a rights-based approach is weak. Policy change, such as envisaged within the CSO regulatory environment in Nigeria, involves a multitude of factors including political considerations, stakeholder interests, legal frameworks, and societal norms. These complexities make the process inherently time-consuming and difficult to navigate. For instance, ACT facilitated stakeholder engagement and advocacy with relevant legislators in the 9th National Assembly of the Federal Republic of Nigeria towards improving specific policies and laws regulating CSOs in the country. This intervention happened from about the inception of the programme in 2019 until the expiration of the 9th Assembly in May 2023. However, the constitutional dissolution of the 9th Assembly in May 2023 while the engagement and policy development process were still going on implied that the policy process had to start afresh with the 10th Assembly that was inaugurated in June 2023. This was a loss of time and efforts on the part of the programme and other stakeholders. ACT has however leveraged its experience to set the agenda for improved regulations for CSOs with the 10th Assembly. Stakeholders hope to reach this goal before the end of its lifecycle in June 2027.



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## CONCLUSION

The emerging themes drawn from the lessons learned by ACT are that a strong background knowledge of the civil society context coupled with a self-awareness of the challenges faced by the CSOs themselves are critical for any development programme to meaningfully support CSOs in Nigeria. It is equally important to note that an integrated, tailor-made approach that encourages flexibility and adaptation and allows all categories of CSOs to learn from one another will make a world of difference in supporting CSOs to become true agents of development. Furthermore, while mainstreaming gender and social inclusion in Nigeria, a patriarchal culture, is challenging, and a one-size fits all regulation may not be appropriate for all levels of CSOs, it is good to know that these challenges could be addressed through constructive and persistent engagement with relevant policy and decision makers. However, it should be noted that policy change takes time, often beyond the lifecycle of a development programme like ACT.

Looking ahead, ACT hopes that donors, implementing partners, government agencies and other key stakeholders will take forward the lessons in this brief to strengthen Nigerian CSOs to become credible and effective agents of change.

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**Find out more**

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