

# Strengthening Civic Participation: Key Takeaways from Elevating Youth Voices, Building Trust, and Civic Cohesion



## INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations, youth refers to individuals aged 15 to 24 years. This age group represents a critical period of transition from childhood to adulthood, marked by significant physical, emotional, and social development.

In Nigeria, youth constitutes about 32% of Nigeria's population, while they make up 23% of the population in Enugu State and 18% of the global population. Youths are central to the nation, playing a key role in its socio-economic and political landscape. Their involvement in every aspect of society will shape the country's future direction.

Since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, there has been a gradual increase in civic deserts and the National Development Plan (2021 -2025) acknowledges the lack of youth participation in governance and this has contributed to the social exclusion of young people in local democracy which negatively impacts national development.

In Eastern Nigeria, the lack of youth involvement has caused a trust gap between young people and their leaders, leading to disengagement and lack of participation in local governance. This is slowing down development and weakening democracy in the region.

To tackle this, it is crucial to acknowledge the constructive role of youths as partners in fostering development and maintaining peace. By becoming actively involved in local and national decision-making processes, providing them with real authority, resources, and support to actively participate in and shape policies and programs, young people can influence and drive sustainable initiatives.

Network of Youth for Sustainable Initiative (NGYouthSDGs) with funding from LEAP Africa through the Nigeria Futures Fund grant responded to these gaps by piloting a nine (9) months project “Elevating Youth Voices, Building Trust and Civic Cohesion” in Enugu East Senatorial District.

The overarching goal is to drive meaningful youth engagement in governance by increasing youth participation in local democracy, enhancing civic education, and building trust between young citizens and their elected officials.

## **IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY**

**Recruitment of community-based youths:** In order to develop the capacity of young civic campaigners and empower them to influence, mobilise and meaningfully engage young people and lawmakers to increase the coherence of government interventions in favour of the youths, five community-based youths were recruited as civic champions from the three local government of implementation (Nkanu West, Enugu North and Enugu South LGAs). This approach made it easier to build rapport and encourage greater participation from locals, as they are seen as part of the community and are more familiar with how to engage their peers.

They were trained through a one-week comprehensive virtual capacity-building session led by carefully selected experts, followed by a two-day residential training designed to equip these young civic champions with the knowledge and skills needed for active citizenship and to lead project activities in their community.

Each civic champion selected five young people from their local government areas to serve as volunteers. These volunteers were trained through a peer-to-peer approach, where the civic champions passed on what they learned on civic responsibilities and meaningful engagement with the government.

Consistent supportive supervisory visits and weekly review meetings were conducted to identify gaps and provide on-the-job training to correct these gaps and thus, improving leadership skills.

**Identification and engagement with legislators:** Focusing on building and maintaining partnerships with community leaders and lawmakers, we identified and engaged 4 community leaders and 3 Honourable members of the State House of Assembly across the three LGAs. This effort strengthened the connection between civic champions and policymakers, encouraging meaningful dialogue and collaboration on youth-centered initiatives. Additionally, providing mentorship and resources to civic champions enhanced their advocacy skills, ensuring sustained engagement with legislators.

**Conduct Insight Gathering Activities:** We conducted insight-gathering activities, including focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and key influencer interviews, to understand perceptions of civic engagement, the causes of civic deserts and apathy, and ideas for fostering civic cohesion. We also engaged lawmakers to gain insight into their views on young people and the reasons for low meaningful youth engagement in local democracy. This activity was carried out by the civic champions and their volunteers, with 135 youth and 4 lawmakers interviewed. Additionally, it served as an opportunity to educate young people in these communities about the power of their voice, how they can work with the government to develop their communities, and promote civic cohesion in areas marked by high levels of civic apathy and distrust.

**Town Hall Meeting:** To build trust and bridge the gap between young people and lawmakers, fostering meaningful engagement and community empowerment, we organised the first-ever town hall meeting in Enugu East Senatorial District. The meeting brought together 52 youth stakeholders, including community leaders, lawmakers from the district, civil society representatives, youth group leaders, and young people, including persons living with disabilities (PWDs). Discussions addressed critical issues such as civic apathy, mistrust, and corruption, while exploring actionable solutions to strengthen youth involvement in governance. The meeting concluded with key recommendations, commitment from a lawmaker, and a renewed optimism for youth participation in democracy.

**Impact sharing session:** To amplify the impact of the project and empower other organisations to replicate and scale similar initiatives, we organised an Impact Sharing Session with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), youth groups, and youth stakeholders from across Nigeria. The session was designed to foster collaboration, facilitate knowledge exchange, and share best practices from our initiative, equipping participants with the tools and strategies needed to adapt and implement successful youth engagement models in their own communities.

## **OUTCOMES/KEY SUCCESSES**

- A total of 5 civic champions and 25 community volunteers were successfully recruited, onboarded, and trained. As a result, their knowledge and skills in community engagement, participatory governance, and leadership have significantly improved.
- A total of 774 youths were directly impacted through participation in events and activities such as the International Day of Democracy, insight gathering, impact-sharing sessions, and YouTube views on training sessions, among others.
- The project reached over 40,000 individuals through a strategic partnership with Dream FM Enugu. These efforts have effectively raised awareness about youth involvement in civic matters, resulting in higher turnout and greater engagement across Enugu East Senatorial District and beyond.
- Partnerships were established with 5 youth-centered organisations to expand the project's reach, ensuring that key messages about youth engagement in local democracy were effectively communicated to diverse youth groups across the Enugu East Senatorial Zone.
- The project engaged and collaborated with 4 community leaders and 3 honorable members of the State House of Assembly to strengthen local support and foster collaboration on youth engagement initiatives.
- The insight gathering provided the project with a deeper understanding of key issues such as governance, youth disengagement, and community needs. By actively listening to community voices, the project was able to align its objectives and activities with local realities, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness.
- The project successfully organised a town hall meeting, marking the first intentional citizen engagement between youth and elected lawmakers from Enugu East Senatorial District.
- The success of the town hall meeting as a groundbreaking platform resulted in one lawmaker committing to organising a similar town hall for her constituency in 2025.

## **LIMITATIONS**

- Some stakeholders were inaccessible, unresponsive, or unavailable, limiting opportunities for collaboration and support.
- Some local stakeholders and youth participants were more focused on financial incentives, which sometimes limited their full participation.
- Rising inflation increased costs, making it harder to fully achieve some deliverables due to limited resources.
- The commitment levels of civic champions and volunteers varied, which affected how consistently they participated.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

1. Sustain partnerships and foster collaboration with community leaders, lawmakers, and youth-centered organisations by establishing regular engagement mechanisms, such as town hall meetings or similar platforms, to facilitate meaningful interactions between citizens and their representatives.
2. Engage lawmakers early and secure their commitment to address accessibility and stakeholder engagement challenges. Also, create flexible engagement schedules to accommodate stakeholders who may be unavailable due to time constraints.
3. Design targeted media campaigns that highlight youth success stories to inspire more participation in civic activities.
4. Consider potential economic challenges, such as inflation, when designing project budgets. Incorporate contingency plans to ensure deliverables are met even in the face of rising costs.

# Get in Touch with Us

For any questions or concerns about this policy brief, kindly reach out to us. Also, feel free to stay connected to us for more exciting opportunities and updates on our work via any of the following means:

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