

An aerial photograph of a large crowd of people, seen from above. A sharp diagonal line divides the image into two distinct color zones: a light beige area in the upper right and a deep blue area in the lower left. People are scattered across both zones, some standing in small groups and others alone. The overall effect is one of a large gathering that is visually split, symbolizing division or polarization.

# Divided We Stand?

**Interrogating Perceptions of Polarisation  
Among CSOs in Nigeria**





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# Operational Definitions

This policy brief uses the following operational definitions for key terms:

## Polarisation

In the context of this policy brief, polarisation refers to the unhealthy divisions and divergence of opinions, ideologies, and actions among Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), which hinder cohesion, collaboration, and the ability to achieve shared development goals.

## Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

For the purpose of the consultations and this brief, CSOs are defined as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), foundations, and grassroots organisations focused on development work. This definition excludes religious bodies/worship centres, trade unions, professional bodies, academia, humanitarian organizations and cooperatives.

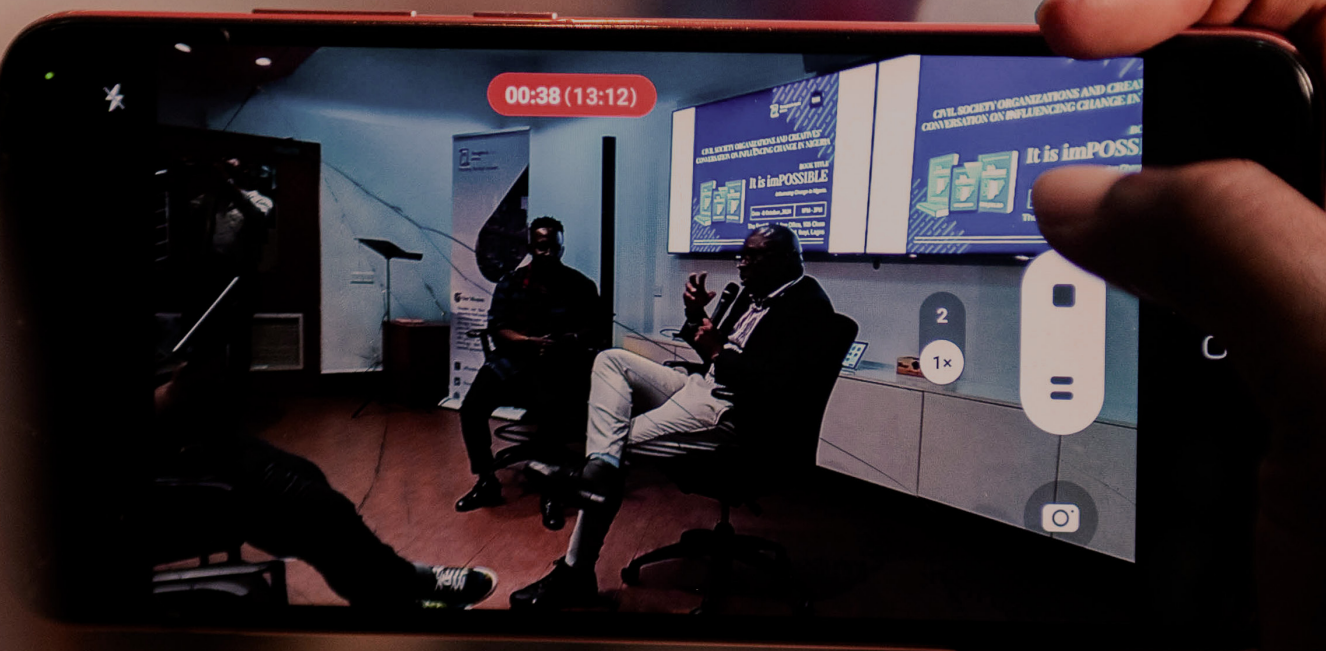
## Limitations of the Study

While the study focused on understanding the drivers, impacts, and potential solutions to polarisation among CSOs in the development sector, consultations were held with NGOs, foundations, and grassroots organisations operating within humanitarian assistance, long-term development, and advocacy for social change. Limitations include:

- Exclusion of Broader Civil Society
- Constraints with Data Collection
- Limited numbers of participants
- Humanitarian Organizations

Despite the limitations, this brief provides targeted insights and actionable recommendations for addressing polarisation and fostering collaboration among CSOs in Nigeria.





00:38 (13:12)

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND CREATING CONVERSATION ON INFLUENCING CHANGE IN SOCIETY

**It is impossible**

Panelists: [illegible]  
Moderator: [illegible]

2

1x





# Executive Summary

1

**While differences of opinion are inherent in a democratic environment, these must not escalate into toxic divisions that undermine the sector's collective goals.**

Nigeria faces increasing polarisation, as highlighted by the Nigerian Social Cohesion Index (NSCI) of 2022. Public perception reflects deepening societal divisions driven by ethnicity, political affiliation, and religion, posing a threat to national unity and stability. This polarisation is gradually extending to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Nigeria.

The civil society sector in Nigeria plays a pivotal role in promoting democratic governance, fostering social progress, advocating for human rights and social justice, and advancing sustainable development. However, there are cases of fragmentation and polarisation in the sector, arising from: competition for resources, ideological differences, intergenerational dynamics, interpersonal conflicts, and external pressures. These divisions can hinder collaboration, weaken

advocacy, threaten cohesiveness, and reduce the sector's overall effectiveness and impact on beneficiaries and national development. While differences of opinion are inherent in a democratic environment, these must not escalate into toxic divisions that undermine the sector's collective goals.

This policy brief highlights the critical need for deliberate efforts to address these challenges by promoting inclusivity, fostering inter-organisational trust, and encouraging collaborative advocacy. It outlines actionable recommendations for CSOs, donors, and the government to mitigate polarisation and strengthen the sector's capacity to deliver on its collective mandate of social and common good.



**81.95%**  
respondents

**Approximately eighty-two per cent (81.95%) of respondents observed disagreements within CSOs, primarily due to competition for funding, ideological differences, and interpersonal conflicts.**

## 1.1 Statement of Problem

Historically, CSOs have been key players in mitigating societal fragmentation, yet they are vulnerable to the same divides. Challenges such as

misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and social distrust hinder CSOs' ability to mobilise effectively, undermining their legitimacy and influence.

Some of the key issues contributing to polarisation include:

- Breakdown of traditional institutions politicised for regional and political agendas.
- Trust deficits and economic hardship exacerbate competition and rivalry within the sector.
- Generational mistrust, limiting intergenerational collaboration.
- Gender bias and exclusivity create barriers in advocacy spaces.
- Partisan affiliations, undermining credibility and unity.
- Leadership and hiring practices often lack diversity and inclusivity.
- Tensions between secular and religious CSOs occasionally lead to ideological demonisation.

The polling exercise by Thoughts and Mace Advisory and SBM Intelligence in 2024 reveals:

- Approximately eighty-two per cent (81.95%) of respondents observed disagreements within CSOs, primarily due to competition for funding, ideological differences, and interpersonal conflicts.
- Most respondents perceive moderate to high levels of fragmentation and siloed operations within CSOs.

While differing opinions are necessary in the civic space, the intensity and nature of these divisions may risk undermining collaboration and shared values. If unaddressed, polarisation could weaken CSOs' capacity to advocate for democracy, human rights, and development effectively. Proactive measures are essential to address these challenges and safeguard the sector's critical role in Nigeria's progress.

**Competition for funding, ideological differences, generational gaps, political affiliations, and regional or ethnic tension contribute to divisions within the sector.**

## 1.2 State of Polarisation in the CSO Sector

The Nigerian civil sector is marked by both challenges and opportunities for collaboration. A mixed methods study conducted by SBM Intelligence and Thoughts and Mace Advisory analysed polarisation within the sector in 2024, identifying drivers, consequences, and opportunities for unity. While divisions exist, most respondents reported these challenges as moderate or low, suggesting optimism for enhanced collaboration.

Competition for funding, ideological differences, generational gaps, political affiliations, and regional or ethnic tension contribute to divisions within the sector. These consequences are manifest in reduced cooperation, duplication of efforts, resource conflicts, diminished advocacy impact, strained donor relationships, and negative public

perception. However, there are promising prospects for collaboration and some fundamentally shared values around social justice, human rights, and democratic governance. CSOs have, over the years, created opportunities for dialogue in multi-stakeholder forums and have embarked on collaborative project developments. These reinforce willingness to work together and existing opportunities that can be built upon to address polarisation.

Stakeholder consultations highlighted the generational disconnect and trust deficits as critical factors. Polarisation is currently moderate but potentially escalating. Addressing these issues through targeted interventions can foster unity and enhance the sector's collective impact.



## 1.3 Key Drivers of Polarisation and Impact on CSOs.

The drivers of polarisation are multifaceted. Internal factors are one set of drivers. These include issues around leadership conflicts and strained interpersonal relationships, competition for funds, and an insular organisational outlook, often resulting in siloed operations. External factors also play a role in driving polarisation. Issues around donor influence, especially duplication of efforts and limitation of scope for collaboration by grantees, contribute to fragmentation. Political interference, undue influence (from external government players), and sociocultural dynamics are additional division drivers. Furthermore, structural issues and operating framework (i.e., the means by which CSOs manage and administer their human resources and personnel) for CSOs pose a challenge. Stifling regulatory framework, capacity deficits within

the sector and limited coordination mechanisms are also identified as drivers of polarisation.

The impact of these divisions is consequential with short- and long-term repercussions. Polarisation leads to operational deficits, limiting the effectiveness of the work of CSOs. It contributes to the erosion of public trust, triggers fragmentation of service delivery by CSOs, and weakens the capacity for joint advocacy and coalition building around policy change. In the long term, it is a major challenge to the sector's sustainability. It diminishes the collective voice of CSOs, stagnates innovation and weakens impact of projects on beneficiaries. When CSOs do not punch within their weight, citizens suffer.

**When CSOs do not punch within their weight, citizens suffer.**

## 1.4 Key Recommendations

Our findings indicate that the level of polarisation among Nigeria's CSOs is currently moderate. Yet, if left unchecked, it will become critical given its trajectory. By fostering unity, promoting inclusivity, and strengthening organisational capacity, CSOs in Nigeria can overcome divisions and maximise their potential as catalysts for social change and development.

These recommendations aim to create a more resilient, cohesive, and impactful civil society that effectively serves its beneficiaries and contributes to national development. To strengthen Nigeria's civil society sector and mitigate divisions, the following actions are recommended:

### Civil Society Actors

**1. Build Consensus around Shared Values:** Create a framework supporting the development and adoption of guiding principles for collaboration, ensuring that differences are managed constructively.

**2. Address Dangerous Dynamics:** Frontally tackle gatekeeping, demonisation, power dynamics, and other divisive practices through mediated engagements and open dialogue.

**3. Invest in Training:** Equip members with conflict resolution, diversity management, and leadership skills to navigate differences effectively.

**4. Prioritise Collaboration:** Foster partnerships and joint initiatives to leverage collective strengths and resources.

**5. Understand Personal Biases:** Acknowledge individual differences and motivations to build mutual respect and cooperation.

**6. Strengthen Intergenerational Relationships:** Through programs that help bridge generational divides, institutionalise knowledge-sharing initiatives and collaborative platforms.

**7. Engage Communities:** Work closely with grassroots organisations to build trust and address the root causes of polarisation.

**8. Promote Diversity in Hiring:** Develop inclusive recruitment practices that reflect Nigeria's cultural, religious, and social diversity.

**9. Eliminate Gatekeeping:** Create an open and inclusive environment to encourage broader participation and innovation.

**10. Encourage Healthy Disagreements:** Foster an environment where constructive debates can thrive without undermining unity.

**11. Build and Sustain Trust Among CSOs:** Foster transparency and mutual understanding through open communication channels, trust-building activities, and conflict resolution initiatives.

**12. Broaden and Innovate Funding Strategies:** Reduce reliance on international donors by leveraging local philanthropy, corporate partnerships, and social entrepreneurship.

**13. Ensure Non-Partisanship and Neutrality:** Reinforce ethical guidelines that prioritise neutrality and revise the Harmonised Code of Conduct for CSO self-regulation to uphold these principles.

## Donors

**1. Avoid Duplication:** Promote complementarity in funding to reduce unhealthy competition among CSOs.

**2. Support Capacity Building:** Enhance resource mobilisation skills to diversify funding sources for CSOs, thereby reducing tensions.

**3. Facilitate Partnerships:** Incentivise collaboration through demand for joint grant applications and portfolio/program designs.

**4. Promote Relationship Building:** Convene platforms for dialogue, conflict resolution, trust building, and shared learning.

**5. Understand Sector Dynamics:** Engage deeply with the civil society landscape to better support collaboration and avoid divisive practices.

## Policy Makers | Government Stakeholders (Regulators, Legislators, Executive)

**1. Promote Social Cohesion:** Address Polarisation through inclusive policies, equitable governance, and civic education.

**2. Foster Constructive Partnerships:** Engage CSOs as partners in development and avoid practices that undermine their credibility such as sponsorship of bogus organisations to push a specific pro-government agenda.

**3. Support an Enabling Framework:** Protect CSO operations through policies that enhance their work while exposing exploitative practices.

## Beneficiaries and Citizens

**1. Foster Community Trust and Dialogue:** Encourage open dialogue with communities to address misunderstandings and promote unity, serving as bridges between polarised groups.

**2. Promote Civic Engagement and Advocacy:** Actively participate in civic activities,



engage with CSOs to express community needs, and collaborate on inclusive solutions.

**3. Hold CSOs Accountable:** Demand transparency and participate in feedback mechanisms to ensure CSOs align with community priorities and deliver impactful results.

**4. Combat Misinformation and Disinformation:** Verify information before sharing and participate in awareness campaigns to counter divisive narratives.

**5. Support collaborative Initiatives:** Advocate for and engage in programs that unite diverse CSOs around shared goals, reducing fragmentation and fostering cohesion.

**6. Promote Equity and Inclusion:** Advocate for equitable representation in CSO activities, ensuring all voices, including marginalised groups, are heard.

**7. Enhance Grassroots Advocacy:** Mobilise local networks and co-create solutions with CSOs to address root causes of polarisation and societal challenges.

By implementing these recommendations, Nigerian CSOs, donors, and the government can create a more cohesive, resilient, and effective civil society sector. Beneficiaries and citizens can be empowered to actively foster unity, amplify CSO impact, and drive sustainable societal progress. This collective effort is essential to ensuring that CSOs are strengthened to continue to act as change agents for national progress and social transformation.

Polarisation within Nigeria's civil society sector presents both a challenge and an opportunity. By proactively addressing divisions, fostering inclusivity, and building trust, CSOs can reclaim their pivotal role as catalysts for social progress, democratic governance, and sustainable national development. Collaborative action among CSOs, donors, and the government must ensure the sector remains close-knit, adaptive, and potent. With intentional efforts to strengthen unity and shared purpose, Nigeria's civil society can overcome polarisation and continue championing the common good, driving national progress and transformation.

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**By proactively addressing divisions, fostering inclusivity, and building trust, CSOs can reclaim their pivotal role as catalysts for social progress, democratic governance, and sustainable national development.**





# Background and Context

## 2

**In Nigeria, CSOs encompass a diverse range of entities, including advocacy groups, community-based organisations, religious bodies, professional associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social welfare groups.**

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Nigeria have profoundly shaped the nation's socio-political landscape, operating as a bridge between the state and the people. These organisations have championed democratic values, promoted human rights, and responded to societal needs that were either ignored or inadequately addressed by the government. Historically, CSOs emerged to fill a significant gap left by a state unable to provide essential services and accountability to its citizens. They act as intermediaries that voice citizens' concerns, push for transparency and advocate for governance that prioritises the public's interests. CSOs have provided society an outlet for expressions of varying degrees, whether they be concerns about government actions, the need for the protection of human rights, misgivings about the influence of external players and actors and the promotion of togetherness and unity. Without CSOs having played this role and their continual involvement, society will stagnate as citizens groups may not be able to surmount the hard-nosed collective action problems and the government would have no group to rigorously hold it accountable in the interests of the wider society.

In Nigeria, CSOs encompass a diverse range of entities, including advocacy groups, community-based organisations, religious bodies, professional associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social welfare groups. This diversity reflects the sector's adaptability to Nigeria's complex socio-cultural and political environment. CSOs engage in numerous fields, such as education, health, poverty eradication, environmental protection, women's rights, the arts, science and technology, among others. Together, they form a crucial part of the civic infrastructure necessary for a functional democracy. CSOs organise platforms for better government engagement, conduct research that breaks down complex information, meet citizens where they are to better understand their challenges, serve as vehicles for the translation of donor projects and generally provide information for citizens to enable them make better decisions regarding their governments. CSOs are able to move beyond the overstated and overemphasized differences and cleavages that prevent citizen groups from properly organising and achieving success in engagement with government. CSO groups work in multiple dimensions, bringing together persons of

differing ages, genders, religious affiliations and ethnic persuasions to advocate, demand for and contend with the government. CSOs are the lifeblood of society and by virtue of their networks and access are able to speak directly to the government and place clear demands for better government and, by extension, better governance.

It is the above roles and the mediation and amplification functions that CSOs carry out that requires them to be regularly assessed and appraised. This is in addition to the fact that countries (especially in the developed north) appear to be more right leaning and the others (especially the underdeveloped south) are making less than satisfactory progress in their economic and political development. An investigation into the structure, motivations, drives, challenges, difficulties and consciousness of CSOs is necessary in order to better

understand where CSOs see themselves and where they hope to see themselves. This report aims to unpack and evaluate the foregoing as a means to update knowledge about the CSO sector from its own perspective. As the midpoint between citizens and the government, CSOs are key to articulating the needs of citizens and critical to holding the government accountable. Therefore, this report is intended for not just CSO activists and practitioners but also citizens, the government, the donor community and the wider global community. The report serves to hold a mirror to CSOs, it serves as a documentation of the internal state of CSOs for citizens to view, it serves as an “x-ray” of CSO consciousness for government to understand the CSO perspective and serves as a map of the internal challenges of CSOs for the donor community.

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**Civil society has occupied the gap left by inefficient government and a compromised opposition in addressing fundamental societal and governance gaps.**

## **2.1.1 Evolution of CSOs in Nigeria: From Colonial Era to Return to Democracy in 1999**

The roots of Nigeria's civil society can be traced to the pre-colonial and colonial eras. In pre-colonial times, community-based organisations like age-grade societies, religious institutions, and craft guilds served social and economic functions that promoted communal well-being. With the onset of colonial rule, CSOs began to take on a more organised form, with various groups and associations emerging to resist colonial policies, advocate for independence, and promote the welfare of the local population. By the early 20th century, nationalist movements and professional organisations like the Nigerian

Union of Teachers and the Nigerian Youth Movement were vocal against colonial injustices, laying a foundation for civil engagement and activism.

During Nigeria's military rule (1966-1999), CSOs became pivotal in resisting authoritarian governance and advocating for human rights. The repression and lack of political freedom under successive military regimes led CSOs to shift from social service roles to assertive political activism. Organisations such as the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) and Campaign for Democracy (CD) emerged as vocal advocates, rallying citizens against military rule

and championing democracy. This period saw CSOs increasingly adopt a rights-based approach, with advocacy focused on human rights, press freedom, anti-corruption, and the restoration of democratic governance. Their work drew significant support from the international community, which provided resources and visibility, further strengthening their impact.

The transition to democracy in 1999 marked a new era for Nigerian CSOs. With the end of military rule, CSOs expanded their focus to include issues related to

democratic governance, electoral integrity, and socio-economic development. They played a critical role in monitoring elections, advocating judicial reforms, and pushing for anti-corruption initiatives, all of which were essential to establishing democratic norms. Over time, the work of CSOs has increasingly diversified to address more complex issues such as environmental justice, gender equality, climate change, economic policy, and social welfare, reflecting the growing needs of Nigerian society.

## 2.2. Introduction

Disagreements are not inherently bad if they are healthy. In a democratic environment, there should be space for multiplicity of opinions and plurality of objectives. Sometimes, these objectives may not necessarily align. The Nigerian civil society space can and should embrace diversity of opinions. Such divisions can be managed within rallying principles and values that ensure disparate views and approaches coalesce for the common good of Nigerians. Toxic divisions or chronic polarisation, on the other hand, stifles the ability of the sector to play the important role it has been playing over the years.

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) play a significant role in social service, promoting good governance and protecting rights in Nigeria. Civil society has occupied the gap left by inefficient government and a compromised opposition in addressing fundamental societal and governance gaps. Their role is fundamental. However, they function in a polarised society and

have to grapple daily with challenges these societal divisions create. In the context of this brief, polarisation refers to the unhealthy divisions and divergence of opinions, ideologies, and actions among CSOs, leading to reduced cohesion and collaboration.

In 2022, the Nigeria Social Cohesion Index (NSCI) dropped by 4.6% to 39.6%. After one of the most contentious and litigated general elections, it is likely to have dropped even further. The Africa Polling Institute's NSCI measures perception of how effectively united people are using various indicators, including polarisation. In 2022, 53% agreed that Nigeria is more polarised, and the reasons are ethnicity, political affiliation, and religion (in order of ranking).

Polarisation impedes the way democracy functions. It aids disinformation, fuels hate speech, and creates obstacles to an effective organisation by citizens and civil society. In heterogeneous,

**53%**  
respondents



**In 2022, 53% agreed that Nigeria is more polarised, and the reasons are ethnicity, political affiliation, and religion (in order of ranking).**



hyper-politicised societies like Nigeria, the effects of polarisation are magnified. With its history of a devastating civil war fueled by ethnic and religious schisms, Nigeria has had a dangerous history of virulent and fatal polarisation along ethnic, tribal, religious, generational and class lines. Understanding the drivers, triggers and responses to these tendencies has been challenging. Sadly, the manifestations have weakened Nigeria's social fabric, undermined governance, and fueled insecurity.

Within this context, CSOs are not immune from the impact of polarisation. They also grapple with the seepage of polarisation and division into the CSO space. Understanding the nature and impact of polarisation within the CSO domain is the primary focus of this brief. Specifically, this brief provides a comprehensive analysis

of polarisation within Nigeria's CSOs, examining its root causes and manifestations. This includes a detailed assessment of how ethnic, religious, political, and generational divides affect the sector based on findings from recent consultations and surveys. It identifies the vulnerabilities posed by unhealthy divisions, especially in the context of weakened capacity for inter-CSO collaboration. While acknowledging that polarisation within the CSOs zone is not alarming yet, the brief makes a case for urgent and consistent interventions to help build trust and bridge divides. It identifies helpful lessons from other jurisdictions, and positive practices within the sector and offers a set of recommendations to help promote constructive collaboration and honest conversations within the sector.

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**In the context of this brief, polarisation refers to the unhealthy divisions and divergence of opinions, ideologies, and actions among CSOs, leading to reduced cohesion and collaboration and impacting the achievement of beneficial goals.**

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**While acknowledging that polarisation within the CSOs zone is not alarming yet, the brief makes a case for urgent and consistent interventions to help build trust and bridge divides.**

# Character, Types, and Functions of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Nigeria

# 3

With a dynamic mix of grassroots, regional and national organisations, CSOs in Nigeria range from small, community-based groups to large, well-established non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

With a dynamic mix of grassroots, regional and national organisations, CSOs in Nigeria range from small, community-based groups to large, well-established non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This diversity in structure and function allows CSOs to effectively respond to Nigeria's complex social, economic, and political needs, often stepping in where government resources and services fall short.

CSOs in Nigeria can be broadly categorised into several types, each serving distinct roles within society:

## **1. Advocacy Organisations:**

Advocacy-oriented CSOs are dedicated to influencing policy, raising public awareness, and promoting social justice.

**2. Service Delivery NGOs:** These organisations provide essential services directly to communities, often filling gaps in healthcare, education, and welfare services.

**3. Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs):** Faith-based CSOs leverage religious platforms

to promote social welfare, provide charitable services and advocate for ethical governance.

## **4. Community-Based Organisations (CBOs):**

CBOs are typically smaller, grassroots organisations rooted within local communities. They are essential for local development as they address specific needs such as clean water, sanitation, agricultural support and women's empowerment.

**5. Professional Associations:** Professional associations such as the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) and Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) represent the interests of specific professional groups.

**6. Media:** These encompass traditional broadcast and print media as well as emerging online media.

**7. Academia:** The community typically concerned with the pursuit of research, education, and scholarship.

**8. Youth and Student Organisations:** These are organisations that promote the

welfare of youth and students and are run by them.

### **9. Membership Organisations:**

These are associations based on self-selection to cater to member interests.

The diverse roles and functions of CSOs highlight their significance in Nigeria's socio-political landscape. CSOs are pivotal in amplifying public voices and representing the interests of the people, particularly those of marginalised groups. In so doing, CSOs ensure that governance is more inclusive and responsive to the needs of the populace. They also

foster an environment where citizens can actively engage in governance, participate in policy discussions, and hold leaders accountable, thereby strengthening democratic values. Furthermore, CSOs contribute to social stability by addressing critical social needs and bridging the gap between the government and citizens. Their capacity to mobilise resources, advocate for change, and implement community projects is essential for social cohesion and economic progress. CSOs remain indispensable in Nigeria's development journey, promoting a balanced relationship between the state and society.

**In addition to advocacy, CSOs in Nigeria provide essential services, particularly in regions where government service delivery is weak or nonexistent.**

## **5.2 Roles of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)**

### **Advocating for Rights, Filling Service Gaps, and Promoting Accountability**

CSOs in Nigeria fulfill multiple roles that contribute to societal development and democratic governance. Primarily, they serve as advocates for citizens' rights and voices, championing causes that may be neglected by the government or deemed politically sensitive. Their advocacy spans crucial areas such as human rights, gender equality, environmental protection, anti-corruption, and economic reform.

In addition to advocacy, CSOs in Nigeria provide essential services, particularly in regions where government service delivery is weak or nonexistent. These services cover a wide array of sectors including healthcare, education, and poverty eradication. For instance, during health crises like the Ebola outbreak and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, CSOs mobilised resources, educated communities, and provided health services that complemented government efforts. Several organisations have been

instrumental in delivering maternal and child health services, while other CSOs focus on providing clean water, sanitation, and education in underserved rural areas.

CSOs act as watchdogs, promoting transparency and accountability within the government and private sector. They conduct research, produce reports, and raise awareness on issues like corruption, electoral misconduct, and misuse of public funds. This role has been significant in shaping public opinion and pressuring the government to implement reforms. For example, organisations like the Budget Foundation and the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) have leveraged digital platforms to enhance fiscal transparency, demand accountability and bring attention to issues of public interest.

### **Increasing Influence in Policy and Governance**

The influence of Nigerian CSOs extends to the policy and governance spheres. Many CSOs work closely with government



institutions to advise on policy matters and contribute to legislative processes. For example, CSOs were instrumental in advocating for the passage of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act in 2011, which expanded citizens' access to government information and promoted greater transparency. Similarly, CSOs have been key stakeholders in Nigeria's anti-corruption framework, supporting agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and contributing to the development of national anti-corruption policies.

The prominence of CSOs in Nigeria has also increased due to advancements in digital technology and social media. These tools have allowed CSOs to broaden their reach, mobilise supporters, and facilitate real-time monitoring and reporting. Social media platforms like Twitter (now X) and Facebook have enabled CSOs to amplify their messages, mobilise public opinion, and hold government officials accountable. The #BringBackOurGirls campaign, which called for the rescue of schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram, demonstrated the power of digital advocacy in galvanizing international attention and prompting government action.

#### **Contextual Challenges: Political Instability and Socio-Economic Barriers**

Despite their contributions, Nigerian

CSOs operate within a challenging environment marked by political and socio-economic constraints. The country's political landscape, with its history of authoritarian rule, has often created a restrictive space for CSOs, particularly those critical of government policies. CSOs frequently face harassment, legal restrictions, and threats to their operations, especially when advocating for contentious issues like anti-corruption and human rights. Additionally, socio-economic issues such as widespread poverty and unemployment have heightened public expectations of CSOs, placing additional demands on their resources and capacities.

Nigeria's civil society also faces structural challenges, including competition for limited funding, donor dependency, and internal divisions along ethnic, religious and ideological lines. These challenges have fostered a fragmented sector, where resource scarcity and political pressures can hinder collaboration and limit CSOs' effectiveness. Furthermore, regulatory measures introduced by the government, such as the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) 2020 and the Nigeria Not-for-Profit Governance Code, have imposed tighter controls on the operations of CSOs, sparking concerns about government overreach and the potential stifling of civic engagement.

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**CSOs act as watchdogs, promoting transparency and accountability within the government and private sector.**

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**Social media platforms like Twitter (now X) and Facebook have enabled CSOs to amplify their messages, mobilise public opinion, and hold government officials accountable.**

# Statement of Problem

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**The growing fragmentation reflects a vulnerability within civil society that, while not yet at a crisis level, could lead to significant disruptions if divisions continue to deepen unaddressed.**

According to the Nigeria Social Cohesion Index (NSCI) in 2022, Nigeria is polarised. The drop identified (referenced above) in this polling exercise—in addition to growing public disaffection and social tensions—are indicative of societal divisions and diminishing national unity. This reduction, as measured by the Africa Polling Institute, reflects a growing public perception of fragmentation in Nigeria's social fabric, primarily driven by deepening divides in ethnicity, political affiliation, and religious beliefs. The current level of divisions in Nigeria is deemed critical; it underscores an emergent vulnerability within the nation, one that could threaten Nigeria's stability if not addressed.

These underlying social fractures do not exist in isolation but threaten the effectiveness of Nigeria's CSOs; a sector historically seen as a bulwark against societal fragmentation.

Recent signs suggest that civil society is itself susceptible to the broader societal divides, which could hinder its capacity to operate as a cohesive force for positive change.

Notably, polarisation within Nigerian society, fueled by historical and contemporary divisions, creates an environment conducive to disinformation, hate speech, and social distrust. This, in turn, impedes the ability of civil society to mobilise effectively. The legacy of Nigeria's civil war, marked by ethnic and religious conflict, continues to cast a long shadow over the nation, reminding stakeholders of the potential for conflict escalation if current tensions are left unresolved. This historical context accentuates the urgency of addressing divisive trends within the CSO sector, as polarisation threatens to weaken collaborative networks and undermine efforts to address national issues holistically. The

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**Civil society is itself susceptible to the broader societal divides, which could hinder its capacity to operate as a cohesive force for positive change.**



growing fragmentation reflects a vulnerability within civil society that, while not yet at a crisis level, could lead to significant disruptions if divisions continue to deepen unaddressed.

The nuanced challenges within the CSO sector reflect broader societal trends. As divisions in ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation worsen, civil society's mission to unite citizens around common causes grows more complex. If ignored, this polarisation could not only impair the sector's ability to work together but also jeopardise its legitimacy and influence in the eyes of the public. An environment occasionally characterised by rivalry, ideological divides and mutual distrust makes it increasingly difficult for CSOs to maintain a unified voice on pressing social issues. Consequently, these shifts present a unique threat to the sector's capacity to influence policy, advocate for human rights and strengthen democratic governance in Nigeria.

One of the studies on the sector, conducted by Nana Nwachukwu for the National Democratic Institute (NDI) states that some of the significant challenges facing CSOs in Nigeria include, internal divisions, lack of trust, and competition for resources. While this study was not focused on polarisation, it provided helpful insights into the deeper challenges facing the sector.

These three challenges mentioned in the NDI report are elements and

symptoms of polarisation. For instance, there is a perception within the sector that ethnic and religious divides in Nigeria are reflected in the workforce hiring patterns of civil society where the ethnicity and/or religion of the head or founder of an organisation, determines employees and partners. Other widely held assumptions include belief that philanthropies are also unwittingly influenced by social divides, donor funds are sometimes inimical to collaboration and members of civil society are sometimes partisan. Essentially, the prevailing notion from our initial engagement within the sector is that there is a problem within the sector fueled by elements of polarisation. While this may not rise to the level of toxic or dangerous polarisation, if undetermined, they may create fundamental problems in the future. Following the consultation with CSOs and the polling exercise we conducted:<sup>1</sup> these are some of the outlined challenges facing the sector that can adversely exacerbate divisions.

**While this may not rise to the level of toxic or dangerous polarisation, if undetermined, they may create fundamental problems in the future.**

**1. Breakdown of traditional institutions:** Some basic systems and institutions that come together to address different issues affecting local communities have become politicised and weaponised by politicians to serve their agenda. Historically, politics in Nigeria has been regionalised, and those regional divides persist, as people often still think of Nigeria through regional lenses.

**2. Trust deficit and a failed economic model:** As things get worse in the country, with increased

1. T&M held a consultative meeting with CSOs in Abuja and Lagos. Roughly 50 participants drawn from CSOs, funding organisations and media participated in these consultative forums. Desktop research on polarisation within CSOs in Nigeria was prepared and used as a background document to facilitate conversation. The consultations were an initial step to review the background paper developed on polarisation in the CSO space, interrogate how participants perceive polarisation within the sector and generate ideas on how to better unpack this phenomenon.

2. The #EndSARS protest was a mass youth-led movement in Nigeria that began in October 2020, demanding an end to police brutality perpetrated by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The latter, a police unit notorious for widespread human rights abuses, including extortion, torture, and extrajudicial killings. The protest called for the dissolution of that unit, accountability for harm and major reform in the criminal justice system. Sparked by social media campaigns and fueled by frustration over systemic police brutality and governance failures, the protests drew massive attention both home and abroad. The young protesters were not very comfortable working with the older activists and took steps to distance the protest from them.

distrust in the sector, hunger, and harsh economic realities have heightened the contestation for scarce resources and rivalry breeding division. There are claims of reputational harm done by colleagues within the sector to weaken other organisations' ability to raise funds.

**3. Clear tendency of unhealthy generational mistrust:** Younger people think the older generation 'do not care' or are part of the 'problem', while the older generation think the younger generation does not 'get them' or appreciate their sacrifice. The #EndSARS<sup>2</sup> protest was one example where this intergenerational mistrust and polarisation played out poorly and contributed to limiting what would have been one of the biggest social movements in Nigeria.

#### **4. Gender Bias and Exclusivity Claims:**

There is also gender bias and exclusivity claims within the sector. People who do not belong to a particular group are seen as interlopers, lacking the credibility/legitimacy to take on certain issues. For example. Women's rights, disability rights etc. Some people or organisations feel threatened or undermined and question the credibility of certain people/organisations to get into a particular field of advocacy.

#### **5. Political Affiliation and Access**

**Prioritisation:** This played out in the 2023 elections, where there were accusations of unhealthy partisanship and perceived closeness of some CSOs to political parties or candidates. This adversely affected credibility and created divisions within the sector.

**6. Leadership Style:** Some heads of organisations are more comfortable having people they are most familiar with in their organisation. This means hiring mainly from their part of the country (even when their operations are national), working with people of similar faith and not creating a diverse office environment for learning and interactions across divides. This limits the opportunity for partnerships and collaboration.

#### **7. Participants in the CSO consultations acknowledged**

tensions between secular and religious CSOs, where they not only disagree on certain issues, such as gay rights, but demonise the other and see them as a threat to their values. However, this was not noted as a widespread case.

According to the polling conducted by Thoughts and Mace Advisory and SBM Intelligence:

**1. Most respondents** (81.95%) have observed disagreements or differences within their CSO sub-sectors, while a smaller portion (18.05%) did not. **This high percentage of affirmative responses suggests that internal conflicts and differing opinions are common within the CSO sub-sectors in Nigeria.**

**2. The data** indicates that the most observed disagreement among CSOs is competition for funding or resources (25.6%). Ideological differences (17.5%) and personal or interpersonal conflicts (14.9%) are also significant sources of conflict. Differences in strategies or approaches and political affiliations account for 14.7% of the disagreements, while regional or ethnic tensions represent 12.4%. Competition in programs and activities is the least observed, accounting for only 0.3% of the total. **This distribution highlights that competition for resources and ideological differences are the primary sources of conflict within the CSO sector in Nigeria, with personal, strategic, and regional issues also playing notable roles.**

**3. Most respondents** rated the ideological and political differences among their CSO and others as moderate (43.4%). A significant portion also rated these differences as high (25.3%) or very high (14.5%). Meanwhile, 11.1% of respondents perceived the differences as low, and 5.8% viewed them as very low. **This distribution suggests that most respondents perceive a moderate level of ideological and political**

#### **differences within the CSO sector in Nigeria.**

**4. Most respondents** (42.1%) described the level of fragmentation and siloed operations within their CSO and other familiar ones as moderate. A significant portion (25.6%) rated the level high, while 17.3% considered it low. Additionally, 9.8% of respondents described the level as very low, and 5.3% as very high. **This distribution indicates that fragmentation and siloed operations are perceived as a moderate to high issue within the CSO sector in Nigeria, suggesting that while there is some degree of collaboration, many organisations still operate independently, leading to potential inefficiencies and missed opportunities for synergy.**

The findings from the polling validates and complements the outcome of CSO consultations in Lagos and Abuja. Differing opinions within CSOs are not bad. The

CSO space cannot and should not be homogenous. There must be differences and healthy disagreement around approaches and ideas. However, it is the character of those differences and their intensity that could lead to concerns: especially where there is no shared value or a clear common value-set to which most organisations subscribe and respect. The polarisation seen in Nigeria (though not as manifestly present within CSOs) has the tendency of seepage into the operations of CSOs. The need for vigilance and proactive steps cannot be overstated. This brief contends that the issue of polarisation, while not yet at a critical stage in the Nigeria CSO space, presents a clear and present danger to the effectiveness and sustainability of the CSO sector. Ignoring this growing problem risks undermining the vital role CSOs play in advancing democracy, human rights, and development in Nigeria.

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# Methodology and Framework: Our Polling Exercise

# 5

**The jointly implemented polling exercise polled 134 CSO leaders and 908 CSO beneficiaries about perception, triggers, manifestations, and recommendations on polarisation within CSOs in Nigeria.**

SB Morgan Intelligence (SBM), in partnership with Thoughts and Mace Advisory conducted an exploratory mixed method study in 2024 to investigate polarisation among CSOs in Nigeria in order to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. The jointly implemented polling exercise polled 134 CSO leaders and 908 CSO beneficiaries about perception, triggers, manifestations, and recommendations on polarisation within CSOs in Nigeria. The study, which started with a comprehensive review of secondary data sources on CSO polarisation, included academic literature, government reports, CSO publications, and media articles. The data sources were selected based on the relevance to research objectives, credibility of sources, and timeliness of the information. The secondary data review informed the development of the primary data collection instruments and contributed to triangulation of findings. The study set out to accomplish the following:

- **Determine the extent of polarisation.**
- **Identify the drivers of polarisation.**
- **Identify the consequences of polarisation.**
- **Propose strategies for mitigation.**
- **Explain areas of common ground.**

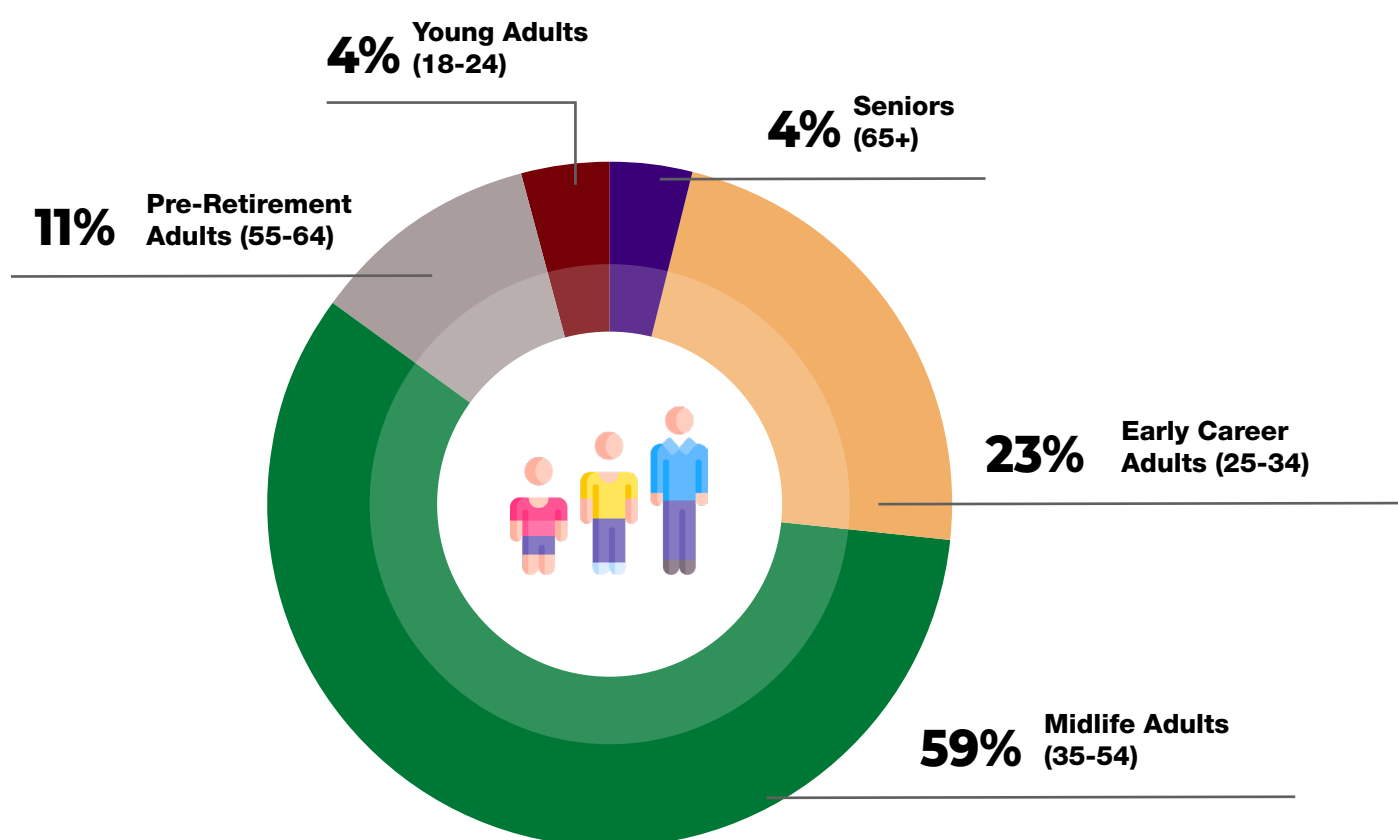
Primary data collection involved a quantitative survey on the drivers and consequences of polarisation, strategies for mitigation, and areas of common ground. Although there were challenges with getting civil society leaders to participate in the data gathering process, data were obtained from one hundred and thirty-four (134) CSO leaders across different types of organisations, geographical regions, and issue areas. This small data set made it difficult to generalise to the entire population and therefore modified the original intent of the study, making it more exploratory in nature.

Approximately fifty nine percent (59%) of participants were male while forty one percent (41%) of participants were female. Midlife adults, represented fifty nine percent (59%), early career adults represented twenty three percent (23%), pre-retirement adults represented eleven percent (11%), while young adults and seniors represented four percent (4%) each (see Table #1)

Two Stakeholder meetings were also conducted with CSO Leaders and young persons in Lagos and Abuja. From the discussions, participants seem to be in agreement that there exists a generational disconnect as a significant driver of polarisation.

**Table 1: Demographic information (Age) for Civil Society Leader-Participants**

| Age Category          | Age Range | Percentage of Participants |
|-----------------------|-----------|----------------------------|
| Young Adults          | 18-24     | 4%                         |
| Early Career Adults   | 25-34     | 23%                        |
| Midlife Adults        | 35-54     | 59%                        |
| Pre-Retirement Adults | 55-64     | 11%                        |
| Seniors               | 65+       | 4%                         |





Further, data were collected from a cross-section of nine hundred and eight (908) CSO beneficiaries across geographical regions and beneficiary groups, to assess beneficiaries' perceptions and experiences related to polarisation among CSOs and its impact on the services and support they receive. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with

representatives of donor agencies and foundations that support CSOs in Nigeria to explore their perceptions of polarisation among CSOs, their impact on funding decisions, partnerships, and strategies for promoting collaboration and mitigating polarisation.

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**134**  
CSO leaders

# State of the Sector: An Analysis of Polarisation Among Nigerian CSOs

# 6

**While divisions exist, the majority of responses suggest these challenges are moderate or low, providing an optimistic outlook for the sector's ability to foster collaboration and overcome divisions where they exist.**

The state of Nigerian CSOs is characterised by a mix of challenges and opportunities for collaboration. An analysis of our polling exercise and consultations within the CSO sector, present a granular understanding of the sector's divisions while highlighting areas of cohesion and potential for unity. While divisions exist, the majority of responses suggest these challenges are moderate or low, providing an optimistic outlook for the sector's ability to foster collaboration and overcome divisions where they exist.

## 6.1 Methodology and Framework: Our Polling Exercise

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Further, data were collected from a cross-section of nine hundred and eight (908) CSO beneficiaries across geographical regions and beneficiary groups, to assess beneficiaries' perceptions and experiences related to polarisation among CSOs and its impact on the services and support they receive. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of donor agencies and foundations that support CSOs in Nigeria to explore their perceptions of polarisation among CSOs, their impact on funding decisions, partnerships, and strategies for promoting collaboration and mitigating polarisation.



**Among those who noted divisions, twenty six percent (26%) stated competition for funding or resources as the most significant driver.**

## 6.2 Drivers of Polarisation: Analysis of Root Causes

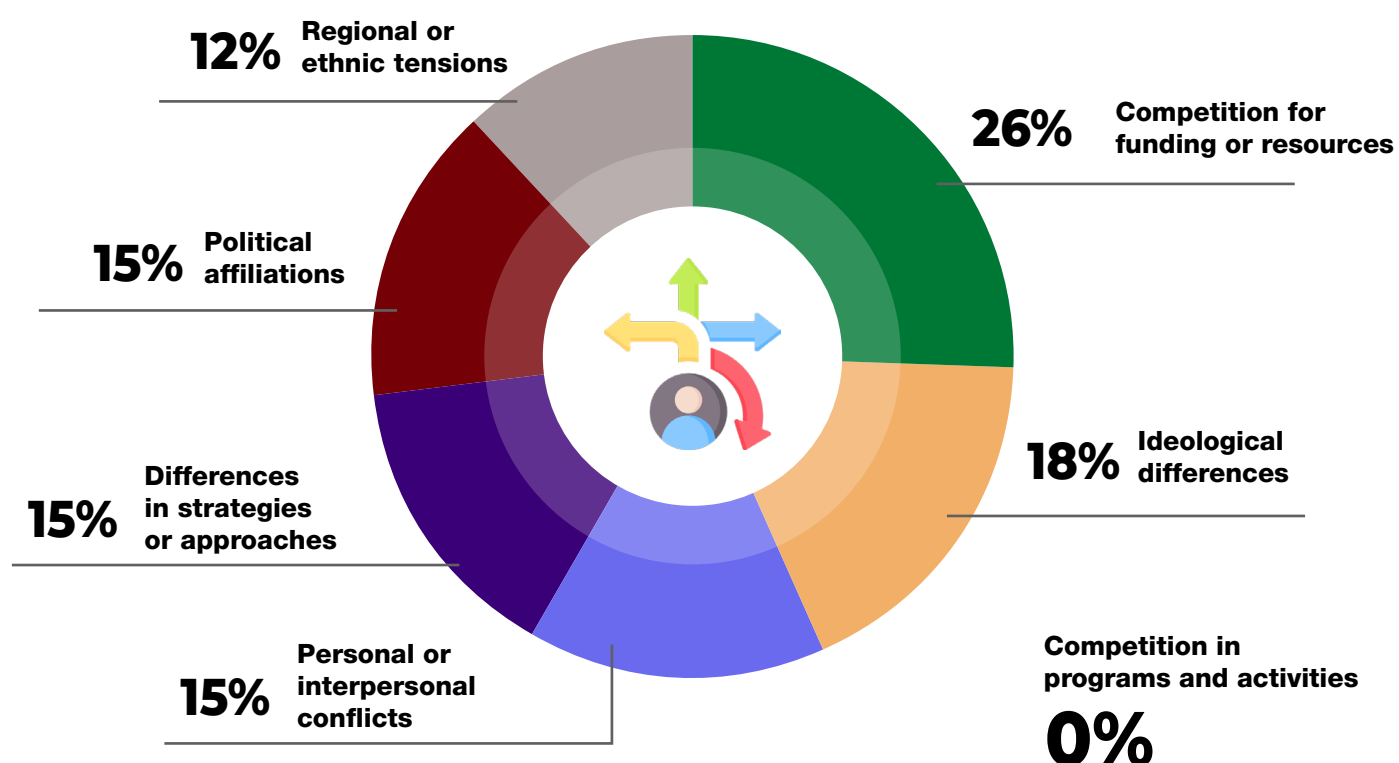
Participants' perceptions of polarisation within the sector varied. Eighty two percent (82%) of participants reported observing differences within their sub sectors while eighteen percent (18%) did not perceive such differences. Among those who noted divisions, twenty six percent (26%) stated competition for funding or

resources as the most significant driver. Ideological differences, personal or interpersonal conflicts, differences in strategies or approaches, and political affiliations were each cited by fifteen percent (15%) of participants as notable contributors to polarisation (see Table #2)



**Table 2: Observed Differences**

| S/N | Difference                              | Percentage |
|-----|---|------------|
| (a) | Competition for funding or resources    | 26%        |
| (b) | Ideological differences                 | 18%        |
| (c) | Personal or interpersonal conflicts     | 15%        |
| (d) | Differences in strategies or approaches | 15%        |
| (e) | Political affiliations                  | 15%        |
| (f) | Regional or ethnic tensions             | 12%        |
| (g) | Competition in programs and activities  | 0%         |



These findings underscore the diverse nature of challenges affecting cohesion and collaboration within Nigeria's civil society sector.

## 6.3 Extent of Polarisation: A View into the Scope and Breadth of the Problem

The polling result identified several key drivers of polarisation within the civil society sector in Nigeria. Among the participants, forty three percent (43%) highlighted competition for funding and resources as a significant contributor to tensions among CSOs in Nigeria. Forty percent (40%) identified generational differences or leadership transitions as factors with a noticeable (though not overwhelming) impact on polarisation. Unequal power dynamics and representation within the CSO sector were cited by thirty eight percent (38%) as major influencers of polarisation.

Additionally, thirty three percent (33%) pointed to external pressures from the government, donors, or other stakeholders as exacerbating divisions among CSOs. While twenty eight percent (28%) attributed polarisation to differences in organisational values, missions, and approaches as well as geographical or regional disparities. Personal or interpersonal conflicts among leaders or staff of CSOs were noted by twenty six percent (26%) as fueling polarisation. Similarly, twenty six percent (26%) of participants identified historical, cultural, or ethnic factors as significant contributors to CSO polarisation.

These findings reflect a multifaceted landscape of challenges requiring targeted strategies to mitigate division and foster collaboration.

### Impact of Polarisation

Polarisation within Nigeria's civil society sector has several far-reaching consequences:

- It creates challenges to achieving goals and implementing projects, since disunity hampers strategic execution.
- It leads to duplication of efforts due to insufficient collaboration, leading to inefficiencies.
- Resource allocation conflicts divert focus from core missions.
- Lack of collaboration fueled by polarisation leads to inconsistent messaging on key issues, which confuses stakeholders, weakens advocacy efforts, and reduces the impact of campaigns.
- It reduces influence and advocacy power, limiting the sector's ability to drive change.
- Without optimal collaboration and complementarity of actions, there is limited reach and impact of programs and initiatives.
- There is increased operational costs, due to duplication of efforts.
- There are missed opportunities for collaborative innovation, hindering progress.



**Among the participants, forty three percent (43%) highlighted competition for funding and resources as a significant contributor to tensions among CSOs in Nigeria.**

- Polarisation can trigger strained relationships with donors, reducing funding opportunities.
- It creates negative public perception, which diminishes trust in CSOs.

Participants highlighted key

consequences of polarisation, with thirty six percent (36%) citing lack of cooperation and coordination as the most significant issue. Thirty one percent (31%) emphasised the impact of low trust among CSOs and diminished credibility and legitimacy among stakeholders. Twenty eight percent (28%) noted that duplication of efforts was a substantial challenge.

## 6.4 Areas of Common Ground: A Bright Side

Despite identified levels of polarisation, eighty four percent (84%) of participants affirmed the existence of shared values and principles that can foster unity. These include commitments to social justice, human rights, community development, and democratic governance. These provide a unique foothold for improved relationships and the ability of the sector to counter divisions.

Some of the identified key opportunities for collaboration include:

- **Dialogue and partnership building, supported by thirty six percent (36%) of participants, to encourage constructive communication.**

- **Regular multi stakeholder forums and workshops, as well as building collective capacity, backed by thirty four percent (34%).**
- **Collaborative research and advocacy projects, cited by thirty one percent (31%) to harness collective experience and amplify impact.**

These findings highlight significant opportunities for CSOs to build on commonalities and address polarisation effectively.

**Additionally, thirty three percent (33%) pointed to external pressures from the government, donors, or other stakeholders as exacerbating divisions among CSOs.**



**33%**  
respondents



## 6.5 Stakeholders' Consultation:

Two stakeholder meetings were held with leaders in civil society as well as young people in Abuja and Lagos to delve deeper into the issue of polarisation. Discussions from the meeting revealed that polarisation within civil society in Nigeria may currently be moderate but has the potential to escalate significantly without timely intervention.

A key outcome was the identification of a generational disconnect as a significant driver of polarisation. Seasoned civil society leaders often operate from positions of privilege and influence that emerging leaders are yet to attain. This disconnect creates blind spots for seasoned leaders, fosters divisions and leads to suboptimal experiences for emerging

leaders. This intergenerational gap was flagged as a potential major driver of future polarisation.

Additionally, other contributors to polarisation identified during the meeting include:

- **Hiring and gender biases and exclusivity;**
- **Trust deficits among CSOs;**
- **Lack of cohesion between development and humanitarian sectors;**
- **An “elite” group of decision-makers and gatekeeping practices; and**
- **Political affiliations influencing organisational alliances.**

**84%**  
participants



**Eighty four percent (84%) of participants affirmed the existence of shared values and principles that can foster unity. These include commitments to social justice, human rights, community development, and democratic governance.**



# Drivers of Division: The ‘Push’ Factors



While CSOs share the overarching goal of fostering national progress, various internal and external factors create divisions, hinder collaboration, weaken collective impact, and reduce the sector’s ability to drive sustainable change.

While advocating for human rights, social justice, social protection, good governance, and providing services that contribute to sustainable development, CSOs are not immune to divisions that undermine their collective impact. According to our findings, several key factors that contribute to polarisation include:

These divisions are driven by a complex interplay of internal and external factors. Understanding these drivers is essential for

designing interventions that can bridge the divides and enhance the sector’s effectiveness. While CSOs share the overarching goal of fostering national progress, various internal and external factors create divisions, hinder collaboration, weaken collective impact, and reduce the sector’s ability to drive sustainable change. These multiple interconnected drivers must be addressed to foster a more unified and effective civil society.

Table 3: Drivers of Polarisation (Synopsis)

| Internal Drivers                               | External Drivers                                | Mixed Drivers                     |
|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| Political and Ideological Differences          | Pressure from Governments, Donors, Stakeholders | Rivalry for Funding and Resources |
| Rivalry for Funding and Resources              | Historical, Cultural, and Ethnic Elements       | Imbalances in Power Dynamics      |
| Divergent Organisational Values and Priorities | Geographical or Regional Disparities            | Generational Gaps                 |
| Personal or Interpersonal Conflicts            |   |                                   |
| Imbalances in Power Dynamics                   |   |                                   |
| Generational Gaps                              |   |                                   |

The above classification helps in designing targeted interventions. Internal drivers require strategies like conflict resolution, capacity building, and leadership development, while external drivers necessitate advocacy, policy engagement, and improved donor/CSO relations.

The drivers of division within Nigeria's civil society sector are multifaceted, encompassing political, economic,

cultural, religious, and interpersonal factors. Addressing these divisions requires a holistic approach that fosters collaboration, promotes inclusivity, and strengthens the sector's capacity to navigate a complex and often polarised environment. By understanding and mitigating these drivers, CSOs can enhance their collective impact and contribute more effectively to Nigeria's sustained national development.

## 7.1 Internal Drivers

Internal drivers are factors that originate from within CSOs or result from their interactions with one another.

The typical organisational mindset has a 'competition versus a collaboration' inclination, and the latter leads to competition for visibility, dwindling resources, and recognition by donors, resulting in fragmented efforts in the sector.

### Political and Ideological Differences

These reflect the organisational alignment, beliefs, and advocacy strategies within the sector. They significantly shape how CSOs operate, who they collaborate with, and the strategies they employ. CSOs often align with specific political ideologies or policy positions, which can lead to friction with others who hold opposing views.

Some CSOs prioritise governance reforms and anti-corruption efforts, while others may focus on socio-economic development, human rights, or environmental advocacy. In polarised political environments, CSOs may be perceived as partisan actors, leading to mistrust, and reducing their ability to form broad-based coalitions.

The influence of Social Identity Theory is evident here, as organisations gravitate toward groups that reinforce their beliefs, creating echo chambers and limiting opportunities for cross-ideological dialogue and cooperation.

### Rivalry Among Organisations in Securing Funding

These arise from competition between and among CSOs for financial sustainability. This competition for limited and shrinking funding and resources is a significant source of tension among CSOs. Donor-driven agendas often dictate the focus and scope of projects, forcing organisations to compete rather than collaborate.

Larger, well-established CSOs typically have greater access to funding, networks, and visibility, creating an imbalance that marginalises smaller or grassroots organisations. This competition fosters a myopic focus on individual organisations, where securing resources for survival sometimes takes precedence over collective action for social good.

This resource-based rivalry aligns with Resource Dependency Theory, which

**Larger, well-established CSOs typically have greater access to funding, networks, and visibility, creating an imbalance that marginalises smaller or grassroots organisations.**



explains how organisations' behaviors are shaped by their need to secure external resources, often at the expense of collaboration.

### **Divergent Organisational Values and Priorities**

CSOs often operate with different missions, values, and priorities, which can lead to fragmentation within the sector. While some organisations may focus on immediate service delivery, others may prioritise long term advocacy, human rights protection, social justice, regulatory reform, or systemic change.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework<sup>3</sup> highlights how coalitions form around shared policy beliefs, but when values diverge too significantly, collaboration becomes challenging and competition for influence emerges.

### **Personal or Interpersonal Conflicts Between Individuals**

Individual relationships within and among organisations can drive division. Leadership conflicts, personality clashes, or historical grievances between key figures can escalate into organisational rivalries.

Personal conflicts can lead to the breakdown of partnerships, reduced trust, and a reluctance to engage in joint initiatives. In some cases, charismatic or influential leaders may prioritise personal agendas over organisational or sector-wide goals, further exacerbating divisions.

Addressing these conflicts requires robust internal governance structures and mechanisms for conflict resolution and adaptive feedback to prevent personal issues from undermining organisational effectiveness.

### **Imbalances in Power Dynamics**

Power imbalances within the civil society sector, often based on organisational size, access to resources, or political influence, create hierarchies that can lead to division. Larger CSOs with greater funding and visibility often dominate decision-making processes, marginalising smaller organisations or grassroots movements. These imbalances could lead to feelings of exclusion, disenfranchisement, and disempowerment among less influential groups, reducing their willingness to engage in collaborative efforts.

Addressing power imbalances requires intentional efforts to create inclusive multi-stakeholder platforms where all voices, particularly those from marginalised or underrepresented groups, are heard and valued.

### **Generational Gaps in Attitudes and Beliefs**

Generational differences within the civil society sector also contribute to division. Older, more established leaders may prioritise traditional advocacy methods and hierarchical organisational structures, while younger activists often favor innovative, technology-driven approaches and flat organisational models. These generational gaps can lead to misunderstandings, resistance to change, and challenges in leadership succession.

Bridging generational gaps requires creating spaces for intergenerational dialogue, mentorship, and the integration of diverse perspectives to foster innovation and continuity.

**Older, more established leaders may prioritise traditional advocacy methods and hierarchical organisational structures, while younger activists often favor innovative, technology-driven approaches and flat organisational models.**

3. The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) is a framework of the policy process developed by Paul A. Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith to deal with "wicked" problems—those involving substantial goal conflicts, important technical disputes, and multiple actors from several levels of government. See Sabatier, P.A., and Weible, C.M. (2007). The Advocacy Coalition Framework: Innovations and Clarifications. In *Theories of the Policy Process* (Second Edition) by Paul Sabatier. Routledge Limited.

## 7.2 External Drivers

These refer to factors that are imposed or influenced by forces outside of the civil society sector. These include the following:

### Pressure Exerted by External Entities (Government, Donors, or other Stakeholders)

CSOs in Nigeria operate within the regulatory framework from the Government, both at Federal and State levels. They often operate under additional significant pressure from donors and other stakeholders who may impose restrictive conditions or exert influence over their activities.

There are eight major regulators at the national level<sup>4</sup> with a myriad of regulations CSOs are to comply with. In addition, legislators constantly attempt to introduce more legislation that further constricts the civic space for CSOs. These stringent regulations and additional reporting requirements place a strain on meager CSO resources. On the other hand, donors may impose specific project priorities or performance metrics, forcing organisations to align their programs with external agendas rather than local needs. The localisation<sup>5</sup> agenda is one proposed way to counteract this.

This external pressure can create divisions as organisations struggle to balance stakeholder demands with their core missions, community needs and working with other organisations.

### Historical, Cultural, and Ethnic Elements that Shape Perspectives

Nigeria's rich cultural diversity is both

a strength and a challenge for civil society. Historical and ethnic factors shape the perspectives and priorities of CSOs, often leading to regional or ethnic-based divisions.

Organisations may be perceived as representing specific ethnic, cultural, or religious groups, leading to distrust or exclusion by others. Historical grievances, particularly those rooted in Nigeria's colonial past or regional conflicts, further complicate efforts to build cohesive networks across diverse groups. Building trust and fostering inclusivity requires acknowledging these historical and cultural contexts and promoting dialogue that bridge the divides.

### Disparities Arising from Geographical or Regional Differences

Nigeria's vast geographical diversity creates disparities in access to resources, infrastructure, and opportunities, leading to regional imbalances within the civil society sector.

CSOs in major cities like Abuja or Lagos often have better access to funding, networks, and government engagement compared to those in rural or underserved regions. These disparities limit the ability of rural organisations to participate in national dialogues or access critical resources, perpetuating regional inequalities.

Promoting equitable resource distribution and creating mechanisms for regional representation can help mitigate these disparities and foster a more inclusive civil society.

**CSOs in major cities like Abuja or Lagos often have better access to funding, networks, and government engagement compared to those in rural or underserved regions.**

4. Some of these regulators include: the Corporate Affairs Commission; the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission; the Federal Inland Revenue Service; the Federal Ministry of Budget and National Planning; and State-Level Ministries of Women Affairs, Youth Development, and Social Welfare, among others.

5. In the context of this brief, 'localisation' refers to the act or process of decoupling (from the purview of international agencies or donor organisations) funding and decision-making powers and granting same to local communities in which international aid and development is done. Hence, localisation would provide more autonomy and decision-making to local actors. See Tomlinson, C., and Zakaria, S. (October, 2024). Unpacking localisation in international development: what can we do? Oxford Policy Management. Available at: <https://www.opmi.co.uk/insights/unpacking-localisation-international-development-what-can-we-do/>

## 7.3 Mixed Drivers

Some drivers may have both internal and external aspects since they are influenced by external forces yet manifest internally within organisations.

### **Rivalry for Funding and Resources**

The rivalry for funding is driven externally by donor priorities and funding mechanisms and internally manifests in competition and resource hoarding among CSOs.

### **Imbalances in Power Dynamics**

Imbalances in power dynamics are often influenced externally by donor preferences and international partners. It is also internally reflected in

organisational hierarchies and exclusionary practices.

### **Generational Gaps**

Generational gaps are externally shaped by broader societal trends and technological advancements while internally seen in leadership transitions and operational methods.

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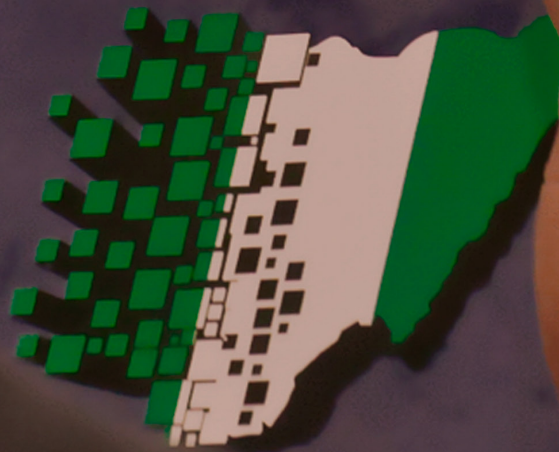
**Some CSOs prioritise governance reforms and anti-corruption efforts, while others may focus on socio-economic development, human rights, or environmental advocacy. In polarised political environments, CSOs may be perceived as partisan actors, leading to mistrust, and reducing their ability to form broad-based coalitions.**



*Foreword by Professor Yemi Osinbajo*

# *It is* **imPOSSIBLE**

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# Implications of Divisions on Nigeria's Civil Society Sector

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**Divisions among CSOs in Nigeria have far reaching consequences that undermine the sector's capacity to fulfill their roles as advocates for social justice, human rights, catalysts for development, and watchdogs for governance.**

Divisions among CSOs in Nigeria have far reaching consequences that undermine the sector's capacity to fulfill their roles as advocates for social justice, human rights, catalysts for development, and watchdogs for governance. These fractures, driven by competition, ideological differences, external pressures, and interpersonal conflicts, among others, hinder their ability

to advocate effectively, build strategic partnerships, and maintain public trust – three critical pillars for achieving sustainable impact. The ripple effects of these divisions manifest in both the short and long term, affecting not only the organisations themselves but also the communities they are designed to serve.

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**Rivalries and a lack of communication among CSOs may lead to duplication of efforts and lack of synergy in programs and service delivery.**

## 8.1 Short-term Implications

In the short term, divisions among CSOs manifest as operational inefficiencies, fractured alliances, erosion of trust and credibility, reduced capacity to collectively respond to urgent societal needs, and a diminished collective voice.

### Operational Inefficiencies

Competition for resources often results in suboptimal resource allocation, with CSOs prioritizing fundraising over programmatic impact. Smaller, grassroots organisations may struggle to sustain operations, while larger organisations dominate the sector, creating an imbalance in service delivery, potentially excluding certain segments of the population. Administrative bottlenecks and interpersonal conflicts within and among organisations may lead to delays in project implementation and reduced service quality.

### Erosion of Trust and Credibility

Trust in CSOs as reliable agents of social change is essential. However, public perception of civil society is eroded when organisations are seen as divided, competitive, or self-serving. Conflicts between organisations may erode trust among CSOs, donors, regulators, beneficiaries, and citizens. Public perception of civil society as a unified, reliable force for social good tends to be diminished, reducing broad support and engagement. Further, donors may use the lack of cohesion to push their own agendas rather than contribute to the achievement of the national agenda. The erosion of trust and credibility may also lead to reduced funding. Donors and stakeholders may lose confidence in the sector's capacity to successfully

manage resources and achieve meaningful outcomes.

### Reduced Collaboration and Fragmentation of Efforts

CSOs working in silos fail to collaborate on common issues, leading to duplication of efforts and fragmented service delivery. Furthermore, opportunities for coalition building and joint advocacy campaigns are missed, weakening the collective voice of civil society. Fragmentation among CSOs limit their ability to effectively address complex, multidimensional issues such as poverty, corruption, or human rights violations, which require coordinated, cross-sectional approaches.

Rivalries and a lack of communication among CSOs may lead to duplication of efforts and lack of synergy in programs and service delivery. Instead of pooling resources and expertise, organisations often replicate similar initiatives, leading to inefficient use of limited resources. The dearth of synergy weakens the sector's ability to address complex, multifaceted issues that require collaborative solutions.

### Fractured Coalitions and Weak Advocacy

Polarisation among CSOs prevents them from forming strong coalitions that can advocate for policy reforms or social change. Organisations working in silos or at cross-purposes lack the critical mass needed to effectively influence government policies or donor priorities. Advocacy campaigns become fragmented with multiple voices competing for attention rather than presenting a unified front, reducing their overall impact.

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## 8.2 Long Term Implications

In the long-term, divisions within the civil society sector undermine its sustainability, resilience, and ability to influence policy and social change.

### **Weakening of Civil Society's Collective Voice**

The lack of a unified front among CSOs reduces the sector's ability to advocate for policy reforms or hold government accountable. Policymakers and regulators may exploit divisions to undermine civil society's influence, weakening democratic processes and civic engagement. CSOs lose their role as watchdogs and a critical counterbalance to government power, limiting their ability to protect human rights and promote social justice.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework highlights the importance of coalitions in driving policy change. When divisions exist, the ability to form effective coalitions is compromised, weakening the sector's influence on policy making. Policymakers, regulators, and other external actors may exploit these divisions, further marginalising civil society and reducing its ability to protect human rights and promote social justice.

### **Diminished Impact on Beneficiaries**

Fragmentation and resource competition among CSOs reduce the reach and quality of services provided to beneficiaries, particularly in underserved or marginalised communities. Beneficiaries may experience inconsistent or duplicated services,

leading to confusion and reduced trust in CSOs. In addition, vulnerable populations, such as women, children, and displaced persons may suffer from gaps in service delivery, exacerbating existing inequalities and social injustice.

### **Stagnation of Innovation and Knowledge Sharing**

Divisions among CSOs hinder knowledge sharing and the exchange of best practices, limiting opportunities for innovation and capacity building. Technology driven organisations and individuals may be excluded from traditional networks and coalitions, slowing the sector's adaptation to emerging challenges and technologies. The inability to leverage diverse perspectives and expertise, results in outdated strategies and reduced effectiveness in addressing complex social issues.

### **Sustainability Challenges and Sectoral Decline**

Resource dependency and competition for donor funding among CSOs create an unsustainable cycle where organisations prioritise short-term survival over long-term impact. Smaller CSOs may be forced to shut down due to a lack of resources, reducing diversity and inclusivity within the sector. The overall capacity of civil society to respond to crises, advocate for systemic change, and promote social cohesion is diminished, leading to a decline in the sector's relevance and influence.

**Policymakers, regulators, and other external actors may exploit these divisions, further marginalising civil society and reducing its ability to protect human rights and promote social justice.**

## 8.3 Impact on Beneficiaries

Those who bear the brunt of the divisions within civil society are the beneficiaries – the communities and individuals CSOs are meant to serve. CSOs play a critical role in bridging the gap between diffuse and fragmented citizens groups and government and wider donor environment. CSOs articulate and table before state actors, the yearnings, concerns and demands of citizens. While political parties are meant to play this role, the configuration of Nigeria's political elite has the elite prioritise their sustainability and survival. This means that CSOs must constantly ensure they are properly positioned to translate the needs of beneficiaries to the ears of decision makers. These needs can range from the quality and quantity of government service provision, the quality of government to citizen engagement, the quality of information on government activity as it affects citizens, among other things. Where CSOs do not protect their cohesion and structural integrity, the following can occur:

**Reduced Access to Services:** Fragmentation and resource competition among CSOs, can adversely affect the availability and accessibility of essential services, particularly in rural and marginalised areas. Beneficiaries may be excluded from critical interventions due to geographical, cultural, or organisational biases.

**Inconsistent Service Delivery:**

Duplication of efforts and lack of coordination among CSOs potentially result in inconsistent service delivery, leaving beneficiaries without comprehensive or sustainable solutions. Gaps in service delivery may exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, such as food insecurity, lack of education, gender-based violence, or inadequate healthcare.

**Erosion of Trust and Social Capital:**

Trust is an essential component of civil society's ability to build relationships and work effectively in communities. Beneficiaries may lose trust in CSOs due to perceived inefficiencies, conflicts, or politicisation of services. Reduced trust can lead to decreased community participation in civil society initiatives, weakening social capital and collective voice.

**Weakened Advocacy for Beneficiaries' Rights:**

The lack of a unified voice weakens advocacy efforts aimed at protecting the rights and interests of beneficiaries. Advocacy campaigns may be less effective in influencing policies or securing resources that benefit marginalised communities. As a result, beneficiaries may feel abandoned or underrepresented, leading to decreased community participation and engagement with civil society initiatives.

Divisions within Nigeria's civil society sector have profound implications for its short-term operational efficiency and long-term sustainability.

## 8.4 Implications for CSO effectiveness

Divisions within the sector directly undermine the effectiveness and credibility of CSOs, reducing their ability to achieve their missions and make a meaningful impact. There is

limited influence on policy and governance processes, reducing the ability to advocate for systemic change. Policymakers may exploit the divisions to dismiss civil society



demands or co-opt specific organisations for political gain.

Internal conflicts and competition for resources weaken organisational resilience, making CSOs more vulnerable to external shocks, such as funding cuts or regulatory changes. Organisations may struggle to find and retain skilled staff, build strategic partnerships, or invest in capacity development, further reducing their effectiveness.

Divisions can compromise internal accountability and transparency, leading to governance challenges, financial mismanagement, or mission drift. Donors and stakeholders may lose confidence in the sector's ability to manage resources effectively and deliver on its commitments.

Divisions within Nigeria's civil society sector have profound implications for its short-term

operational efficiency and long-term sustainability. These divisions weaken collaboration, reduce the sector's impact on beneficiaries, facilitates negative public perception, and compromises its ability to influence policy and drive social change.

Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to foster unity, build trust, and promote inclusive, collaborative approaches that leverage the collective strengths of civil society. Only through cohesive action can the sector achieve its full potential as a catalyst for social change and development in Nigeria.

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# Lessons from Other Jurisdictions

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**Conversely, in nations like India and the United States, deep-seated ideological divides rooted in religion, race, and political affiliation are mirrored within the civil society sector.**

While Nigerian CSOs share commonalities with global counterparts, their challenges are deeply rooted in the country's unique socio-political context. The comparative analysis of polarisation within CSOs across various nations underscore several critical lessons and insights:

## **Context Matters**

The socio-political context of a country profoundly influences the extent and nature of polarisation within its civil society. In relatively stable environments like Ghana and Canada, CSOs benefit from a culture of consensus-building and government collaboration. These circumstances enable CSOs to maintain cohesion even when disagreements arise over key issues, such as environmental policies or electoral reforms. Conversely, in nations like India and the United States, deep-seated ideological divides rooted in religion, race, and political affiliation are mirrored within the civil society

sector. In these environments, polarisation often hampers collaborative efforts, complicating unified advocacy on critical national issues. Additionally, Senegal's ability to foster unity despite political shifts highlights the potentials of institutional frameworks that encourage broad-based participation.

## **Adaptation and Resilience**

Despite facing significant challenges, CSOs worldwide have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience. One of the most effective strategies has been the formation of coalitions around shared goals. In Kenya, for example, CSOs played a pivotal role in the successful campaign for the 2010 Constitution, which introduced essential governance reforms. Similarly, Senegal's Y'en a Marre movement harnessed the power of youth-led activism to push for democratic accountability and peaceful political transitions.

Developments in Kenya's 2022 general elections further illustrate how civil society mobilised to ensure electoral transparency and accountability, despite persistent ethnic and political divides. These examples highlight that even in polarised environments, civil society can mobilise collective action, when focusing on common interests and pressing societal issues.

### **Resource Competition and Donor Influence**

A pervasive challenge across many countries is competition for limited resources, which often exacerbates divisions within the CSO sector. In both Nigeria and Ghana, for instance, the scramble for donor funding has created a competitive landscape, leading to fragmentation as organisations prioritise donor-driven agendas over collective

action. Moreover, the influence of international donors can sometimes skew organisational priorities, making them less aligned with local needs and more focused on meeting external benchmarks. This dynamic has been further complicated by the global economic downturn and shifting donor priorities post-COVID-19, which have intensified resource scarcity. However, innovative CSOs in countries like Canada and Ghana have begun leveraging local philanthropy and private sector partnerships to mitigate these challenges.

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## Recommendations

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### Friction should be managed within a framework of shared values and goals focused on improving the lot of citizens.

Understanding the drivers and implications of polarisation is critical for revitalising Nigeria's CSO sector. Addressing these challenges will require deliberate efforts to promote inclusivity, foster inter-organisational trust, and encourage collaborative advocacy. By overcoming these internal divisions, Nigerian CSOs can better fulfill their role as agents of democratic governance and social progress. CSOs cannot and should not be homogenous. The differing opinions and ideologies are inherent characters of a democratic environment. However, divergent opinions should not be a catalyst for polarisation. Political ideology, religion, ethnicity, struggle for scarce resources and individual

differences are points of friction but such friction should be managed within a framework of shared values and goals focused on improving the lot of citizens. Divisions in the sector are not yet toxic but absent urgent actions to build a more cohesive working relationship and shared values, the sector risks being consumed by the divisive factors already crippling effective governance in the country. To effectively forestall further deterioration and address current challenges, the following are recommended:



## For Civil Society Organisations

### **1. Building Consensus around Shared Values:**

Building consensus should be central to the work that CSOs do. While this may not be possible in every circumstance, there is need to jointly develop and adopt a set of principles that guide the work of civil society organisations. This can be achieved through facilitated convenings on building shared values and effective working relationships within CSOs. There should be consequences for organisations that fail to uphold these values and principles. The CSO space is often seen as 'free for all', where people enter and exit at will. It is important therefore, to reflect deeply on the nature and structure of the civic space and how that fuels divisions. While the CSO space does not necessarily have to be homogeneous, there needs to be certain principles and values which organisations must respect. Differences need to be managed so they do not undermine the collective belief in the civic space. It is important for civil society to engage in self-reflection around shared values and principles.

### **2. Address Potentially Dangerous Dynamics:**

As important as it is to recognise positive trends in relationships within the sector, the current cases of divisions and tension should not be underplayed either. While the sector should not be demonised, it is necessary to address the dynamics that could become dangerous when widespread. Issues around gatekeeping, deprecation of the 'other' and deep individual differences (which affect collaboration) need to be addressed through good faith forums and mediated engagement led by CSO leaders. CSOs can also create spaces for open and respectful dialogue where members can discuss differing opinions and find common

ground on important issues. Such forums could be an annual retreat for CSOs.

### **3. Investment in Training and Diversity Management Skills:**

CSOs must invest individually and collectively in training programs to equip their members with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively address polarisation and promote social cohesion. This may include conflict resolution training, intercultural communication skills, leadership development programs and diversity awareness to equip members with the skills to navigate differences effectively. CSOs should also encourage diversity in recruitment, leadership, and decision-making processes within their organisations to ensure that different perspectives are represented.

### **4. Emphasizing Collaboration and Complementarity:**

It takes a village to make a change and collaboration amongst CSOs to make an impact. At an individual level, there is a huge limitation to what CSOs can do. Collaboration and complementarity are at the heart of an effective CSO ecosystem. Prioritizing collaboration as a fundamental tool of CSOs in Nigeria, around shared values and goals will provide a huge opportunity for CSOs to know each other, understand each other's work and find productive relationships that help address the challenges facing the country. There are several platforms already existing which provide good examples of how CSOs can work together and the benefit of such constructive collaboration. Teamwork will also help in joint program development and access to resources.

**There is need to jointly develop and adopt a set of principles that guide the work of civil society organisations.**

## **5. Understand Personal Differences and Biases:**

Even though institutions are at the center of all the conversations, yet it is human beings, with varying value systems, who head those institutions. This changes the entire outlook, as whether organisations collaborate or not, is dependent on the decisions that individuals make. It is important to understand that some differences we see are not institutional but rather individual differences, which reflect one's belief system, ethnicity, religion, etc. Different people have different motivations for joining the sector, informed by their ideologies, values, beliefs, education, experiences, religion, ethnicity, etc. Understanding this helps organisations deal with the perceived issue of polarisation or fragmentation. It is important to listen and understand differing motivations and interests and patiently find common grounds.

## **6. Strengthen Intergenerational Relationship:**

The consultations with CSOs leaders show a divergence of perspectives of the state of CSOs in Nigeria especially along generational divides. There is also a lack of understanding of what the older generation of activists did and how it complements the work of CSOs currently. The relationship between the old and young within the sector needs to be strengthened in a way that allows for effective collaboration built on shared knowledge and complementarity. There are a lot of lessons from the past which are crucial for the present challenges. Proper appreciation of the huge assets that history holds will aid a more productive relationship between the past and present. CSO leaders must see each other as partners despite the generational gap. It is important therefore to design and implement initiatives that help pass down history

and promote learning and honest conversations across generations within the sector. Seasoned CSO leaders, while acting as guides and facilitating transition to emerging leaders must be willing to evolve, while emerging leaders learn the crucial lessons from history in order not to repeat the mistakes.

## **7. Working Closely with Communities:**

CSOs must strengthen their connections with local communities and grassroots organisations to address the root causes of polarisation and build trust among diverse groups. For example, to bridge the abyss of polarisation and promote a more inclusive and resilient democracy, educators, religious leaders, and community organisers are crucial in facilitating dialogue, understanding, and empathy across social divides (Laghari, 2024). By working closely with communities, CSOs can therefore develop tailored solutions that address specific needs and challenges.

## **8. Interrogate Hiring Patterns:**

Lack of diversity in organisations and insular hiring practices deny CSOs the opportunity to learn and understand their operating environment better. Ignorance of the 'other' drives biases and division. It is important that CSOs develop diversity and inclusion practices that are rooted in the cultural and social dynamics of the Nigerian environment and intentionally work towards ensuring a more inclusive hiring pattern and organisational culture. To solve the problem of lack of diversity in hiring patterns, it is important for organisations to look beyond their immediate environment and their familiar circle. Issues like ethnicity, marital status, and religion, among others, should not be primary considerations for recruitment.

**CSOs must focus more on collaborative relationships and ensure an inclusive environment devoid of unhealthy gatekeeping.**

Working together to develop a model diversity and inclusion policy (that can be adapted by organisations), is a crucial step.

**9. Jettison Gatekeeping:** One of the major factors that contribute to divisions within the sector is gatekeeping. People outside the inner circle with good ideas or interventions are sometimes excluded because some believe they lack the legitimacy to speak on certain issues or carry out certain interventions. These practices cut across issues of gender, disability, religion, grassroots advocacy, policy advocacy, amongst others. This turf claim and exclusionary practice limit the effectiveness of the sector and creates divisions and tension within the sector. It is also important to understand the context in which gatekeeping occurs and find constructive ways to engage better. CSOs must focus more on collaborative relationships and ensure an inclusive environment devoid of unhealthy gatekeeping.

**10. Encourage Healthy Disagreements:** Disagreements should be encouraged within the sector if people can disagree without demonizing the other. Healthy debates are the bedrock of a thriving civic space. Efforts must be made to help groups manage differences. Investing in people management training and leadership programs is crucial in building an environment of healthy dissent.

Concerning relationships within the CSO space, it is clear that development and humanitarian actors have different time frames: one works for long term solutions and one for short term fixes. This can create different motivations and internal pressures that may lead to challenges.

The text below itemises potential solutions in this regard.

**11. Address Lack of Cohesion Between Development and Humanitarian Sectors:** Establish cross-sectional platforms and joint forums to align priorities and share best practices. Promote integrated approaches, joint capacity-building programs, data sharing, and strengthened coordination mechanisms.

**12. Address Trust Deficits Among CSOs:** Build transparent communication channels and host open forums to share goals, challenges, and best practices. Implement trust building activities, such as retreats and conflict resolution sessions, and establish peer review systems to enhance accountability and credibility.

**13. Diversify Funding Sources:** Explore local philanthropy, corporate partnerships, income generating activities, and social entrepreneurship, and reduce donor dependency. Encourage resource sharing and emphasise collective impact to shift the narrative from competition to collaboration.

**14. Mitigate Influence of Political Affiliations:** Establish ethical guidelines that emphasises non-partisanship and neutrality in all organisational activities. The Harmonised Code of Conduct for CSO Self-regulation may be revised to include these principles. Enhance transparency by disclosing funding sources and affiliations, promote value-building partnerships, and diversify board leadership to reduce partisanship influence on decision making in organisations.

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## For Donors

### **1. Avoid duplication of efforts:**

Funders should be careful in the way they provide support to CSOs to avoid unnecessary and contradictory duplication of efforts which often leads to unhealthy competition among CSOs. The focus of funding on similar themes should be about complementarity and scaling up. To this end, it is recommended that funders find an effective mechanism for information sharing among themselves and evolve an intentional strategy for ecosystem building that allows for constructive and complementary support to CSOs.

### **2. Support capacity building for effective resource mobilisation:**

Struggle for scarce resources is one of the major sources of tension amongst civil society groups. Funders should support capacity building for CSOs on fundraising. They should be better supported to leverage their skills to attract funding from a more diverse funding pool. Transparency in current funding processes and decisions is also important to help dispel perception of gatekeeping and favoritism which adds to tension and divisions.

### **3. Facilitate partnerships and joint grant application:**

As a matter of policy, encourage multiple organisations to cooperate during proposal application process and create programs that necessitate collaboration towards a common

goal. Be deliberate in encouraging joint effort and complementarity in portfolio design and write collaborations into grant approval contracts. This will go a long way in creating incentive for partnerships and reducing competition.

### **4. Support relationship-building and conflict management within CSOs:**

Promote platforms for CSOs to share ideas and reduce tensions caused by duplication, policy disagreement and competition. Utilise convening power of funders to sustain a practice of open conversation and conflict management within the sector. Support retreats and convening of CSOs that allow for dialogue, joint ideation, and conflict management.

### **5. Understand the sector dynamics:**

Donors should invest time in understanding the CSO space and identifying key players, unspoken tensions and undercurrents that undermine collaboration. It is necessary to strategically engage stakeholders and facilitate dialogues to build common ground and mutual understanding. This way, donors can better support partnerships and avoid polarizing practices. Encourage open communication and dialogue with potential partners to foster trust and cooperation.

Transparency in current funding processes and decisions is also important to help dispel perception of gatekeeping and favoritism which adds to tension and divisions.



## For Government

### **1. Promote Social Cohesion:**

Government has the primary function of improving social cohesion and addressing polarisation within the larger Nigerian society. It is a responsibility that is urgent given the current situation in the country. Through honest dialogue, equity in government appointments and projects, inclusive policy decisions and emphasis on civic and social education, the government can improve togetherness across Nigeria.

### **2. Seek productive relationship with CSOs:**

CSOs are partners in progress with the government. Disagreement with the government is all part of a wholesome democratic experience. Government should see CSOs as collaborators and work actively to find common areas of partnership. Governments across various levels should leverage on the expertise of CSOs for the best interest of the country. In this space of constructive partnership, the

government should avoid undermining CSOs credibility through acts of subversion and demonisation. These acts often include weaponisation of divisions and identities which strain relationships within and outside of the CSO space.

### **3. Support effective and enabling statutory framework:**

The operations of CSOs in Nigeria should be protected and enhanced. Government policies around this should be framed to support the work of credible CSOs and expose groups who are only mercantile or created to discredit the space. The practice of the government trying to create discord amongst CSOs or creating bogus non-governmental organisations to sell unpopular government actions is a disservice to development and damages the operating environment of CSOs.

**Government should see CSOs as collaborators and work actively to find common areas of partnership.**

## For Beneficiaries and Citizens

### **1. Build Trust and Engage Actively:**

Citizens should engage in open dialogue and collaborate with CSOs to foster trust and ensure community needs are represented.

### **2. Support Collaborative Initiatives:**

Encourage and participate in initiatives that unite diverse CSOs around shared goals to reduce fragmentation and strengthen cohesion.

### **3. Demand Transparency and Accountability:**

Participate in feedback mechanisms and demand clear communication from CSOs to ensure initiatives align with community priorities.

### **4. Combat Misinformation and Disinformation:**

Verify information before sharing and participate in awareness campaigns to counter divisive narratives.

### **5. Advocate for Equity and Inclusion:**

Ensure marginalised voices are heard and represented in CSO activities, advocating for more inclusive policies and actions.

### **6. Enhance Grassroots Advocacy:**

Co-create solutions with CSOs to address the root causes of polarisation, promoting sustainable progress and national development.

# Conclusion



**Where CSOs are unable to cohere around a broad set of values and principles and remain vulnerable to internal and external pressures, it will be difficult for them to discharge their agendas.**

The CSO sector needs to be repositioned now, perhaps more than ever as its contribution to civic and political development is key to social progress. As a critical non-state actor, CSOs provide an articulation of interests, desires and needs. Where CSOs are unable to cohere around a broad set of values and principles and remain vulnerable to internal and external pressures, it will be difficult for them to discharge their agendas. Furthermore, it will be challenging to effectively and efficiently protect the interests of their key beneficiaries-the citizens.

This report has identified numerous factors responsible for the inability of CSOs to operate unhindered and unrestrained. While there are expected challenges inherent in the way CSOs are composed of individuals with different viewpoints, other difficulties that exist that can

erode the needed solidarity. Fortunately, these challenges can be surmounted with a mixture of intentional and strategic approaches that range from better hiring practices, increase in collaborative ventures and transformational thinking. There are also roles for other governance stakeholders (donor organisations and the government) to play that can ensure CSOs remain agile and vibrant.

In terms of evidence from polling, this report has noted, among other things, that competition for resources and ideological differences are the main drivers of conflict within the CSO sector in Nigeria, with personal, strategic, and regional issues also playing significant roles. Also, a number of respondents identify a moderate level of ideological and political differences within the CSO sector in

Nigeria. In addition, fragmentation and isolated operations are seen as a moderate to high issue within the CSO sector in Nigeria. This suggests that there is some degree of collaboration but many organisations still operate independently, creating potential inefficiencies and missed opportunities for better collaboration. The report has gathered empirical data on the state of the CSO sector in Nigeria and the results show that polarisation has not hit critical levels but if not addressed may drift in that direction. The recommendations above, if applied with deliberate emphasis, can forestall this from happening.

The report, while attaining a level of rigour, does leave questions requiring further examination. For instance, the number, gender and geographical spread of respondents can be expanded and enhanced. Also, the drivers of polarisation (both internal and external) can be further unpacked, to determine their salience among an enhanced group of respondents.

Also, insights from stakeholders outside the CSO sector would be beneficial to provide a different set of perspectives on the challenge of polarisation.

Finally, methodologically, respondent participation can be taken beyond quantitative surveys to Focus Group Discussions and key informant interviews that can provide a more nuanced insight into the views and concerns of respondents.

The CSO sector is indispensable in a modern liberal democracy. Being properly positioned between the government and the citizens, CSOs possess the drive and motivation to ensure that development and governance is in the interests of the citizens. While there are difficulties that arise as a result of this paradigm, CSOs need to have their internal relationships strengthened. CSOs need to acknowledge and accept that their bond and internal integrity are required for adequately playing their role in society.

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**CSOs need to acknowledge and accept that their bond and internal integrity are required for adequately playing their role in society.**

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# Annex

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## Annex 1: Research Report Synopsis

The Research Report on Polarisation within Nigerian CSOs provides an in-depth analysis of the drivers, manifestations, and impacts of polarisation in the civil society sector. Key findings include:

### Drivers of Polarisation:

- **Ethnicity:** Identified by 62% of respondents as the most significant factor contributing to polarisation, with hiring practices often reflecting ethnic biases.
- **Political Affiliations:** Ranked by 60% of respondents as a divisive factor, particularly during election cycles.
- **Religion:** Contributed to polarisation according to 57% of respondents, with tensions between secular and faith-based organisations highlighted as a recurring issue.

### Manifestations:

- **Workforce Diversity:** Many organisations align their staffing patterns with the ethnicity or religion of their leadership, reducing inclusivity.
- **Fragmented Advocacy:** Contradictory positions on issues such as electoral reforms undermine collective credibility.
- **Regional Disparities:** Urban-based CSOs often dominate national advocacy conversations, leaving grassroots organisations marginalised.

### Recommendations:

- Promote inclusive hiring and diversity policies.
- Establish collaborative funding mechanisms to reduce rivalry.
- Facilitate regular dialogue forums to bridge ideological and regional divides.

## Annex 2: Synopsis of Consultation Meetings

### Abuja Consultation Insights:

- Discussions underscored generational divides, with younger activists feeling alienated from traditional leadership structures.
- Gender biases were flagged, with participants urging greater inclusivity in leadership and programming decisions.

### Lagos Consultation Highlights:

- Participants emphasised the lack of trust as a primary barrier to collaboration.
- The need for standardised criteria for assessing election credibility was identified as crucial to fostering cohesion.
- Proposed solutions included mentorship programs for smaller CSOs and shared platforms for advocacy coordination.

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#### Overall Themes:

- The consultations revealed a clear appetite for capacity-building initiatives and the development of shared tools for resource mobilisation.

## Annex 3: Policy Development Process

#### Initial Research and Desktop Review:

Conducted to map existing data and establish a foundational understanding of CSO polarisation in Nigeria.

#### Polling and Data Collection:

Nationwide surveys captured the perceptions of CSO stakeholders, revealing key divisions and areas of collaboration.

#### Development of the Policy Brief:

Synthesised findings into actionable recommendations, aligning with international best practices.

#### Consultation Meetings:

Facilitated regional dialogues to validate findings and foster consensus-building.

#### Final Recommendations and Dissemination:

The finalised policy document serves as a blueprint for addressing polarisation, with emphasis on inclusivity and collaboration.

## Annex 4: Tools and Templates for Collaboration

The project developed several tools to support CSOs in mitigating polarisation:

- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Templates:** Designed to ensure equitable representation across ethnic, religious, and generational lines.
- **Collaborative Advocacy Frameworks:** Guidelines for forming coalitions and reducing duplication of efforts.
- **Resource Mobilisation Plans:** Strategies for pooled funding and collective grant applications.

## Annex 5: Comparative Analysis of Polarisation in Civil Societies

The Nigerian CSO experience was compared with trends in other regions, providing valuable lessons:

- **India:** Religious and caste-based divisions parallel Nigeria's ethnic challenges, but collaborative platforms for shared advocacy goals offer a model for adaptation.
- **United States:** Partisan divides highlight the importance of maintaining neutrality in CSO operations.
- **Senegal and Ghana:** Successes in electoral advocacy underscore the value of regional collaborations.

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## Annex 6: Stakeholder Contributions

- **Ford Foundation:** Provided critical funding and conceptual frameworks for addressing polarisation.
- **Local CSOs:** Offered grassroots perspectives that shaped practical recommendations.
- **Academic Partners:** Delivered theoretical insights, ensuring the policy document's alignment with global scholarship.

## Annex 6: Glossary

**CSOs punch within their weight** – This phrase refers to the ability of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to operate at their full potential, effectively using their available resources, support, and influence to achieve their goals.



