

Pandemic watchdog: how vigilant Nigerian civil society organisations tracked graft, discrimination and human rights abuses

Nigerian CSOs deserve plaudits for their efforts to monitor COVID spending, police abuses and the treatment of people with disabilities during the pandemic, says **Oluwole Ojewale (Institute for Security Studies)**. They are in a good position to build on their work and prepare for the next crisis.

Nigeria's lockdowns were [strict](#), with stay-at-home orders and curfews, and President Muhammadu Buhari and some state governments put the police force in charge of enforcing them. Evidence has since emerged of numerous human rights abuses. [Security forces enforcing the lockdown in parts of the country killed 18 people, while COVID-19 killed 12](#) in April 2020. Other African countries saw similarly [violent policing](#). Were Nigerians more at risk from security and law enforcement agents enforcing the lockdown than the virus itself?

Fortunately, civil society organisations (CSOs) rose to the challenge. The [CLEEN Foundation](#), which has many years of experience in police reform, gathered [evidence](#) to support its advocacy through the COVID-19 Public Safety Support Virtual Centre (COVID19-PSSC). It provided real-time public safety and security information to Nigerians, creating the COVID-19 Nigeria Security Support Group (CNSSG) of state coordinators and observers in the 774 local government areas across the 36 states and Abuja. Members used an electronic platform to report both compliance with government directives and rights violations by security personnel.

According to one source within CLEEN, it has documented 1,075 incidents of human rights abuses during lockdown — ranging from [extrajudicial killing](#), torture, [extortion](#), unlawful arrest and Intimidation perpetrated by law enforcement and security agents. These spirited advocacy efforts prompted the Nigerian police force to develop and implement the first [operational guidelines](#) on pandemic policing.



A protest against police brutality in Nigeria in Ohio, US, October 2020. Photo: [Becker1999](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

It was not the only example of a CSO stepping up in the face of the pandemic, despite the fact that Nigeria's already ailing economy suffered unprecedented disruption. The [World Bank forecast in January 2021](#) that the crisis means an additional 10.9 million Nigerians will slide into [poverty](#) by 2022. While it caught all sectors [unprepared](#), the sheer resilience and innovation that some CSOs have displayed remained inspirational. They have engaged in unprecedented co-operation with regional partners, used technology to reach out, and consistently advocated for ordinary people and raised awareness about abuses by the state.

Emergency COVID spending [rallied](#) frontline CSOs to push for reforms through open data. When Nigeria recorded its first COVID case in February 2020, the [private sector](#), [IMF](#), [World Bank](#), and the [European Union](#) pledged billions of dollars to help the country cope with the outbreak. The Coalition Against COVID-19 (CACOVID)- a private sector taskforce in partnership with the federal government, the [Nigeria Centre for Disease Control \(NCDC\)](#) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) had also raised [30 billion naira](#) (£5.3m) by the end of June 2020.

Nigeria has a long history of public sector graft and the CSOs feared [COVID public spending](#) would be no exception. [BudgIT](#), a CSO that uses technology to explain the budget and public spending to citizens, tracked and [documented](#) 636 donors— including individuals, groups, businesses, philanthropists and multinationals — who donated money and emergency relief materials to national and regional governments, in an effort to check and scrutinise the public sector data on COVID donations and expenditure. [Dataphyte](#), a media research and data analytics organisation, published a series of groundbreaking [investigative reports](#) to make Nigerians aware of the opacity that characterised public sector spending on COVID in Nigeria.

The [Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre](#), the Nigerian chapter of Transparency International, launched spirited advocacy efforts, calling on local and national governments to ensure that funds meant to cushion the effect of COVID were used for their intended purpose and distributed equitably to vulnerable Nigerians. The [Centre for Citizens with Disabilities \(CCD\)](#) also amplified the voices of [25 million people with disabilities](#). Through data-driven advocacy and engagement, CCD found systemic factors that affected access to COVID vaccines among people with disabilities, including a lack of policy guidelines prioritising their various needs at vaccination centres, discrimination, poor attitudes, and unprofessional practices among health workers at public health institutions in Lagos and Abuja. Practical recommendations from this research will be implemented by government, including the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control.

The [World Bank](#) has noticed this activity, and hopes it shows the political will to continue to improve platforms and resources that help ensure transparency and accountability in public expenditure. Nigerian CSOs have the opportunity to redesign the future of their work, building on the lessons learnt during the crisis and preparing for the next.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE.