POLICY BRIEF

Building Trust And Promoting People-Centered Security In Nigeria:
Policy Recommendations From The High-Level Roundtable On
Security Agencies And Civic Engagement

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HIGH-LEVEL ROUNDTABLE ON SECURITY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN BUILDING TRUST AND PROMOTING PEOPLE-CENTERED SECURITY IN NIGERIA

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria continues to face an evolving and multifaceted security crisis marked by insurgency, banditry, communal conflicts, kidnappings, cybercrime, and secessionist agitations. These security challenges have significantly strained state institutions, particularly security agencies tasked with maintaining law and order. However, amid growing insecurity, a critical concern has emerged—the widening trust deficit between security institutions and the citizens they are mandated to protect.

This erosion of trust is fuelled by a complex web of factors: perceptions of excessive use of force, cases of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions without trial, and the suppression of peaceful protests. High-profile incidents such as the #EndSARS protests brought national and international attention to the urgent need for reform within Nigeria's security sector, especially in terms of how security personnel interact with civilians, particularly young people.

The trust deficit also has deep historical roots. Nigeria's long period of military rule established a command-and-control approach to governance and law enforcement that continues to influence the mindset and operations of security institutions. The legacy of authoritarianism has made many citizens view security agents with suspicion and fear rather than as allies in safety and protection.

In 2021, the Goodluck Jonathan Foundation convened a high-level roundtable to interrogate the escalating crisis in Nigeria's northwest region, particularly the rise of banditry and its implications for national security. One of the key debates at the time was whether the activities of bandits qualified as acts of terrorism. The roundtable helped build consensus among security stakeholders and contributed to the eventual gazetting of banditry as an act of terrorism by the Federal Government. That moment illustrated the power of dialogue in shaping policy direction.

Yet, the persistent lack of coordinated policy response to security challenges and the growing disconnection between security actors and civil society pointed to the need for a broader, more inclusive engagement. It became evident that to shift the security paradigm, both state and non-state actors must be involved in co-creating solutions and redefining security governance.

Additionally, the country's current security architecture is largely state-centric, focusing more on protecting institutions than addressing the safety and well-being of ordinary citizens. This approach has limited the potential for community-driven, locally grounded security initiatives and has excluded key non-state actors, including civil society organizations, youth groups, and traditional leaders.

Recognizing these pressing challenges, the Goodluck Jonathan Foundation convened a High-Level Roundtable on Security Agencies and Civic Engagement at Transcorp Hilton, Abuja. The roundtable aimed to foster open dialogue between security agencies, policymakers, civil society actors, and youth leaders. It provides a platform to unpack the roots of the trust deficit, identify structural weaknesses within the security ecosystem, and co-develop solutions for building a more inclusive, people-centred security governance framework in Nigeria.

In his opening remarks at the roundtable, H.E. Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, Chairman of the Foundation, emphasized that "security agencies remain the most visible arm of the state and as such become the face through which citizens experience government—whether positively or negatively." He reminded participants that rebuilding trust requires moving "from fear to understanding and from conflict to cooperation" and that inclusive dialogue is key to developing long-lasting solutions.

The insights and resolutions generated during this convening form the basis of this policy brief, which sets out key policy challenges, practical recommendations, and implementation considerations to guide government actors, security institutions, civil society, and development partners in advancing meaningful and sustainable security sector reform.

CITIZEN-SECURITY AGENCY RELATIONS

1

Colonial Legacy of Repression

Security institutions in Nigeria originated from colonial structures designed primarily to suppress dissent and protect imperial interests rather than provide safety for the populace. Events like the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 underscore how security was used to violently repress civic expression. This legacy instilled a tradition of viewing public protest as a threat to state power.

2

Post-Independence Authoritarianism

Successive governments after independence, particularly under military rule, sustained repressive practices. Legal instruments such as the Official Secrets Act (1962) and the Public Order Act were used to curtail freedom of expression, media rights, and public assembly. The 1995 execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa exemplifies the brutality with which civic dissent was often met.

3

Institutionalized Distrust

These authoritarian experiences fostered deep-rooted distrust between citizens and security institutions. Security agencies became associated with surveillance, harassment, and impunity rather than protection. This created a long-standing barrier to citizen engagement with security structures.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN CITIZEN - SECURITY AGENCY RELATIONS

1. Trust Deficit and Abuses of Power

The erosion of public trust is compounded by contemporary issues such as extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, and the violent suppression of peaceful protests. High-profile incidents like the #EndSARS protests in 2020 brought these issues to international attention. Citizens often fear rather than respect security agencies.

2. State-Centric Security Architecture

Nigeria's security model remains highly centralized, prioritizing the protection of government institutions and elite interests over community well-being. This top-down approach limits community participation and ignores local security needs.

3. Political Interference and Weaponization of Youths

Security agencies are frequently manipulated by political actors to suppress dissent and influence electoral outcomes. In many cases, young people are mobilized as political thugs, further undermining trust in both the political and security systems.

4. Weak Institutional Oversight and Accountability

Oversight mechanisms such as the Police Service Commission and the National Human Rights Commission lack independence, capacity, and funding to hold violators accountable. Despite reforms like the Police Act 2020, enforcement remains weak.

5. Limited Capacity of Mid-Level Officers

Many frontline officers lack training in human rights, community engagement, and de-escalation techniques. This often results in excessive use of force and the escalation of routine encounters into violent incidents.

6. Poor Strategic Communication and Misinformation

Security institutions are yet to adopt a comprehensive digital communication strategy. This has allowed misinformation and rumors to flourish, especially during crises, further deteriorating trust between the state and citizens.

7. Inadequate Data and Identity Management Systems

Nigeria suffers from poor data integration across security and civil institutions. Weak identity systems make it difficult to track criminal activities or conduct accurate background checks. Inter-agency information sharing remains minimal.

8. Poor Funding and Welfare for Security Agencies and Personnel

Chronic underfunding of security institutions affects training, logistics, equipment, and operational efficiency. Many officers operate in poor conditions, lack insurance coverage, and face delayed salaries or pensions. This not only demoralizes personnel but also increases the risk of corruption, abuse of power, and excessive use of force as an alternative means of livelihood or survival.

9. Intergenerational Gap in Security Governance

There is a significant disconnect between the leadership of security agencies and Nigeria's youthful population, which makes up over 60% of the country's demographics. This gap affects policy responsiveness, communication, and mutual understanding. Youths often feel alienated from decision-making processes and perceive the security sector as rigid and unresponsive to their realities and aspirations. This disconnection fuels frustration and weakens youth participation in civic-security collaboration.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

GOVERNMENT AND POLICY MAKERS

Legal and Institutional Reform

- Repeal or amend repressive laws that limit civic space and reinforce authoritarian legacies.
- Fully implement and fund the Police Act 2020 and establish timelines and metrics for monitoring compliance.
- Strengthen the independence and resourcing of oversight institutions such as the Police Service Commission (PSC) and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

Political and Electoral Reforms

- Enforce political party accountability by criminalizing the recruitment and weaponization of youths for electoral violence.
- Establish robust screening procedures for political candidates, including ethical background checks.
- Ensure security sector neutrality by preventing political interference in security operations and deployments.
- Build national consensus on long-term security reforms through multi-stakeholder political dialogues.

Resource Allocation and Security Sector Financing

- Prioritize funding for the security sector in national and state budgets.
- Allocate dedicated funds for welfare, insurance, and pension schemes for personnel.
- Institutionalize funding mechanisms for community-based security initiatives.
- Establish a private sector-managed security support fund to complement government efforts in improving logistics, infrastructure, and welfare for security personnel.

Victim Support and Community Healing

- Activate the Victim Support Fund as provided for under Section 91 of the Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act of 2022 to support individuals and communities affected by terrorism and violent conflict.
- Ensure the Fund is transparently managed, inclusive in reach, and responsive to the needs of survivors to aid recovery and rebuild trust in state institutions.

GOVERNMENT AND POLICY MAKERS

Local Governance and Security Reform

- Expand the scope of the ongoing constitutional review on local government autonomy to include clear provisions for the involvement of local governments and traditional institutions in community-based security planning and implementation.
- Establish legal and policy frameworks empowering local governments to collaborate with state actors and traditional leaders to foster peace and stability at the grassroots level.
- Allocate security responsibilities and funding to local authorities to support early warning systems, community peacebuilding initiatives, and conflict resolution mechanisms.
- Integrate security considerations into local governance structures, ensuring a stronger role for traditional leaders and grassroots organizations in co-designing and implementing local security initiatives.

Cybercrime and Digital Rights Legislation

- Review the Cybercrime Act (2015) to align with international human rights standards and prevent misuse against journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens.
- Introduce judicial oversight and clearer definitions of cyber offenses to prevent arbitrary arrests and prosecutions.
- Promote digital literacy and public awareness campaigns about citizen rights online, including lawful protest and free expression.
- Create a multi-stakeholder oversight body to monitor implementation and complaints related to the Act.

Citizen Perception and Satisfaction Monitoring

- Institutionalize periodic citizen perception and satisfaction surveys to assess public trust in security agencies and the quality of service delivery.
- Use survey data to inform policy reviews, training needs, and operational reforms.
- Publicize findings to promote transparency and accountability while allowing citizens to see progress and raise concerns.

Data and Identity Management Systems

- Scale up the national digital identity program and integrate it across security, civil, and electoral systems.
- Ensure data protection and privacy frameworks are enforced in line with global standards.

A

Training and Capacity Building

Design continuous professional development curricula focused on Human rights and community engagement, de-escalation and non-violent conflict resolution and mental health and stress management

B

Institutional Culture and Leadership

- Foster leadership accountability and promote internal transparency.
- Encourage open-door policies at command levels to enhance communication with rank-and-file officers and the public.

C

Strategic Communication and Public Engagement

- Create dedicated public communication units with expertise in social media, crisis communication, and rumor management.
- Proactively share information on agency mandates, operations, and public safety tips.
- Establish joint civil-security media briefings during high-risk operations.

D

Youth Inclusion and Intergenerational Dialogue

- Establish youth advisory units within police and military structures.
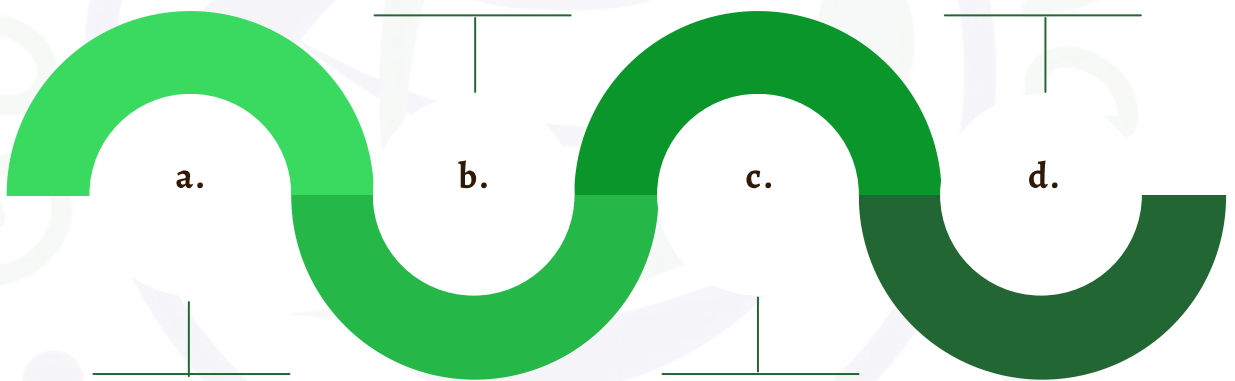- Promote intergenerational programs between senior officers and young civic leaders to promote empathy and exchange.

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOS) AND MEDIA

Watchdog and Accountability Role

- Monitor the implementation of laws like the Police Act and publicize gaps or abuses.
- Establish platforms for real-time reporting of violations and abuse linked to national response mechanisms.

Countering Misinformation

- Build coalitions of fact-checkers to address false narratives about civic protests and security operations.
- Train security agencies and media on joint information dissemination protocols.

a.   b.   c.   d.

Civic Education and Community Engagement

- Scale up campaigns on citizens' rights, civic responsibilities, and channels for security complaints.
- Train community influencers, journalists, and youth leaders to serve as civic-security liaison officers.

Bridging the Generational Gap

- Facilitate digital storytelling campaigns highlighting youth experiences and perspectives on security.
- Co-host forums with youth and security stakeholders to share lived experiences and co-create solutions.

FOR DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS AND INTERNATIONAL DONORS

Learning And Knowledge Exchange

- Support government and CSOs in implementing reforms through grants, technical expertise, and monitoring tools.
- Invest in community policing pilots, digital identity integration, and local peacebuilding infrastructure.

Technical and Financial Support

- Facilitate peer learning among security actors in West Africa and other reforming states.
- Sponsor academic and field research to inform context-specific reform models.

Youth and Gender Programming

- Fund youth-led civic engagement initiatives that promote peace and security.
- Promote the inclusion of women and marginalized groups in security dialogues and policy design.

CONCLUSION

The Goodluck Jonathan Foundation remains deeply committed to promoting citizen-focused approaches to security governance in Nigeria. We understand that meaningful change goes beyond policy recommendations; it requires action, collaboration, and clear, measurable impact.

As part of our ongoing efforts, the Foundation will continue working closely with key stakeholders, government agencies, security institutions, civil society, development partners, and traditional leaders to foster dialogue, offer technical support, and encourage the implementation of sound policies.

Through sustained advocacy, strong partnerships, and strategic follow-up, we aim to turn these recommendations into tangible progress that strengthens trust, accountability, and inclusiveness in Nigeria's security system. We firmly believe that lasting peace and stability can only be achieved through collective commitment to inclusive and transparent reforms.

WHO WE ARE

The Goodluck Jonathan Foundation is an independent, non-governmental organisation established to advance peace and prosperity on the African continent.

Over the past years since its establishment, GJF has successfully implemented projects in Nigeria and several African countries targeting democratic accountability, strengthening governance and building leadership to ensure a transparent and peaceful transition of power.

The Foundation has actively explored opportunities and contributed to promoting the security of the state and its people with respect for the rule of law, fundamental human right, and democratic principles. We are dedicated to promoting peace and reconciliation, advancing democratic governance, advocating for inclusive governance and economic development, promoting citizen's rights, and continental and national integration.

OUR VISION

Peaceful, just, and progressive nations of Africa

OUR MISSION

It is our firm belief that sustained peace and political stability are essential for an environment where people can enjoy social, political, and economic prosperity. We, therefore, work to forge a continent where we understand our differences and work towards a perfect union founded on transparency, equity, and justice.