

## **Bridging the Digital Governance Gap: How Nigeria's Youth Uses Social Media to Participate in Governance Dialogues**



### **Introduction**

A digital revolution is reshaping civic life in Nigeria. With over 107 million people now online in 2025,<sup>1</sup> compared to 82.94 million users in 2015,<sup>2</sup> the internet has become a vital arena for expression, mobilisation, and protest. These platforms have evolved into critical spaces for young Nigerians to spotlight injustice, critique government action, and demand accountability. From the fiery surge of the #EndSars protests to the reflective candor of the recent #30DaysRantChallenge, the internet has allowed a generation to speak, trend, and organise. But here is the challenge: despite this flurry of civic engagement online, a noticeable disconnect remains- access to

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.statista.com/statistics/505883/number-of-internet-users-in-african-countries/>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/nigeria/>

policy making and influencing remains limited for them. Young Nigerians may dominate X trends, but few have a seat where real decisions are made. Government structures have not fully adapted to the new realities of the digital revolution. And while governments monitor, track the pulse of conversations online, sometimes responding with pushbacks, surveillance, or token gestures, there is little effort to involve these voices in policymaking, structurally.

Compounding this challenge is the issue of access. Despite the impressive internet penetration, access to these platforms is still uneven,<sup>3</sup> with urban areas, men and the more privileged having better access. In many rural communities, the idea of tweeting at a legislator or organising X (formerly Twitter) spaces is far removed from reality.

This analysis examines the evolution of youth-led digital activism, unpacks the government's responses, and proposes actionable strategies for bridging the disconnect between how young people use the internet for civic engagement and how the outcomes of these engagements can be structurally reflected in governance and policy making. It also addresses how unevenly distributed connectivity, concentrated in urban centres and marked by significant gender disparities, threatens to leave millions behind in democratic conversations.

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2023.pdf>

## **The Rise of Digital Civic Engagement**

In recent years, social media has emerged as a veritable platform for youth participation in politics in Nigeria and beyond. Platforms like X, Instagram, Facebook, and, more recently, TikTok have transcended entertainment and connectivity and have been transformed into digital channels where young people start and influence conversations, mobilize action, and demand accountability from leaders. These platforms have provided robust opportunities for engagement, especially where conventional access to authority figures seems herculean and ineffective.

The remarkable 2020 #EndSARS movement serves as the defining case study of this transformation. Originating as an online protest against police brutality on X, it evolved into one of the most significant youth-led civic movements in Nigeria's contemporary history. Led by the 'Sorosoke' (Speak Louder) generation and utilizing hashtags and live reporting, young Nigerians established a leaderless, organic movement that mobilized collective action. The movement generated 48 million mentions<sup>4</sup> and 28 million tweets,<sup>5</sup> mobilized millions of people across the country, garnered international attention and protests in cities like New York and London. It compelled significant government action, notably the disbandment of SARS and establishment of state-level judicial panels of inquiry into

police abuses.<sup>6</sup> The movement also elevated public consciousness around state accountability, fueling civic engagement and nationwide debate on policing, justice, and democratic rights.

Beyond protests, young people leverage social media to shape policy conversations and scrutinize government actions. Initiatives such as FollowTheMoney and BudgIT involve numerous young Nigerians in budget monitoring and public finance advocacy, utilizing social media platforms like X and WhatsApp to distribute simplified data and mobilize citizens for social accountability. Digital advocacy is gaining acceptance and ascendancy with proponents frequently promoting governance-related hashtags, such as #OpenNASS and #NotTooYoungToRun, enhancing exposure and momentum for legislative reforms and youth political inclusion.

This digital activism has empowered youth to circumvent conventional gatekeepers and communicate directly with leaders, establishing a novel form of participatory politics. However, the challenge remains on how to harness this online engagement into sustainable, long-term democratic advancement.

## **Government Response: Engagement or Control?**

The Nigerian government's interaction with youth opinions online presents a complex

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.nendo.co.ke/post/endsars-analyzing-48-million-tweets-in-10-days-using-brandwatch>

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/End\\_SARS](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/End_SARS)

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<sup>6</sup><https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2021/12/13/endsars-a-evaluation-of-successes-and-failures-one-year-later/>

mix of engagement, control, and at times, outright confrontation. On one hand, there has been a noticeable effort by various government agencies and officials to use digital platforms for public outreach. Social media has become a tool for sharing information, promoting youth-oriented initiatives like the N-Power programme, and occasionally soliciting feedback on policy matters. Some online town halls and digital consultations reflect a recognition of the importance of youth voices in governance.

However, these positive gestures are frequently undermined by more troubling patterns. The government has consistently reacted defensively or punitively to online criticism, especially from organized youth movements. The aftermath of the #EndSARS protests exemplify this pattern. Despite initial promises of police reform in response to online outcry, the government's actual response included systematic crackdowns on protest leaders, with Amnesty International documenting arrests and beatings of those who lead peaceful demonstrations during the #EndSars protest,<sup>7</sup> restrictions on social media usage—including the temporary suspension of Twitter in June 2021,<sup>8</sup> and targeted harassment of activists.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/10/nigeria-two-years-on-more-than-40-endsars-protesters-still-languishing-in-jail/>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/13/nigeria-lifts-twitter-ban-seven-months-after-site-deleted-presidents-post>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/07/nigerias-twitter-ban-follows-pattern-repression>

Legislative efforts like the proposed Social Media Bill and Hate Speech Bill<sup>10</sup> have raised serious concerns about freedom of expression and the potential criminalization of online speech critical of the government. Even when the government appears to engage, critics often accuse it of tokenism – engaging with a narrow segment of youth or creating the appearance of dialogue without implementing meaningful change. This pattern has fostered growing distrust among Nigerian youth, who recognize online activism as crucial for civic participation while simultaneously understanding the very real risks of state retaliation.

### **The Persistent Divide: Access and Gender Disparities**

The digital divide in Nigeria, reinforced by both gender and geographic inequalities, creates significant barriers to equitable youth participation in digital governance. The gender gap in internet usage stands at 17.05 percent, with 37.20 percent of men using the internet compared to only 20.05 percent of women.<sup>11</sup> This disparity reflects deeper structural inequalities that limit young women's participation in digital governance.

Cultural norms, socio-economic factors, and safety concerns often discourage or restrict girls' use of technology, particularly in conservative or low-income households. Parents frequently prioritize boys when allocating resources for phones, internet

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<sup>10</sup><https://www.movedemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Hate-Speech-Bill.pdf>

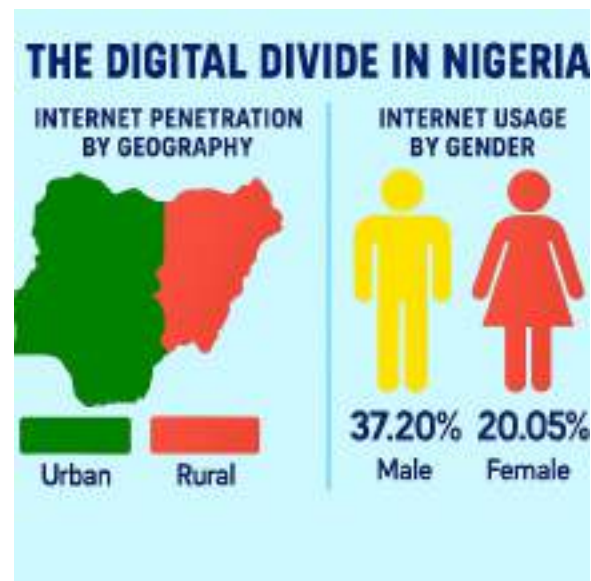
<sup>11</sup>[https://banyanglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Nigeria-GDD-Brief\\_Final-508-May-2023.pdf](https://banyanglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Nigeria-GDD-Brief_Final-508-May-2023.pdf)

data, or digital education.<sup>12</sup> The underrepresentation of women in STEM fields and tech-related training programs perpetuates this cycle of exclusion, further marginalizing young women in the digital space.

In rural areas, access issues compound the problem. Infrastructure deficits including unreliable electricity, poor mobile network coverage, and lack of affordable internet disproportionately affect youth in remote communities. Many rural schools lack computers, and digital learning resources are scarce. Even when internet access is technically available, the cost of devices and data remains prohibitively high for many families. As a result, rural youth are often disconnected from digital opportunities that their urban counterparts can more easily access, such as online education, e-commerce, or digital entrepreneurship.

The intersection of gender and geography means that rural girls often face the steepest obstacles, such as limited mobility, social norms that discourage technology use, and a lack of targeted interventions. Addressing these issues requires intentional policies that invest in rural infrastructure, promote gender-inclusive digital literacy programmes, and ensure that efforts to expand connectivity actively target those most at risk of exclusion. Without such comprehensive measures, the promise of digital inclusion for Nigerian youth will remain unfulfilled, and meaningful youth engagement with government through

digital platforms will continue to be severely constrained.



Dual-panel infographic showing Nigeria's internet penetration by geography (left) and gender-based internet usage (right).

### Innovative Solutions in Africa

Across Africa, innovative digital platforms are transforming governance and civic engagement. Kenya's Huduma Centres,<sup>13</sup> combine digital and physical access points to streamline public service delivery, while civil society initiatives like the Mzalendo<sup>14</sup> Promise Tracker enables citizens to monitor parliamentary commitments. Code for Africa<sup>15</sup> works with government agencies across the continent, including Nigeria, to develop open data portals and train young people in data journalism, creating bridges between government information and citizen engagement. Civic Tech Innovation Network<sup>16</sup> catalyzes collaboration between civic tech organizations across Africa,

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.hudumakenya.go.ke/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://tracker.mzalendo.com/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://codeforafrica.org/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://civictech.africa/about/>

including several Nigerian initiatives focused on digital governance and accountability. These examples demonstrate the transformative potential of integrating civic tech tools in strengthening transparency and participation.

In Nigeria, the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre's (PLAC) BillsTrack, Legislative Tracker, and Repository platforms<sup>17</sup> are promising additions to the civic-tech landscape. BudgIT's<sup>18</sup> user-friendly tools are empowering citizens to engage in fiscal transparency through simplified budget tracking and dynamic social media campaigns

However, these initiatives remain scattered and lack the systematic integration needed to transform governance comprehensively. The challenge lies not in the absence of innovation but in scaling and institutionalizing these efforts to reach all segments of Nigerian youth.

### **Bridging the Gap**

For Nigeria to fully harness its digital transformation for inclusive governance, a comprehensive approach is needed that addresses both the technological infrastructure and the social barriers limiting youth participation.

First, Nigeria must build on its existing Digital Literacy Skills Framework<sup>19</sup> by developing a targeted “Youth Digital

Governance Module” that strengthens young citizens’ ability to navigate and influence the digital civic space. This enhanced module should be integrated into school curricula and community centers across all 36 states and the FCT, with a focus on governance-specific competencies such as understanding government processes, digital civic tools, and youth-inclusive policy making.

A core component of this intervention must be Critical Media Literacy, co-created with youth, educators, civic tech actors, and media literacy experts to ensure relevance and cultural resonance. This will equip young Nigerians to detect, deconstruct, and defend against digital disinformation--an urgent necessity given recent trends.

During the 2023 general elections, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) West Africa<sup>20</sup> reported a surge in political disinformation targeting young voters across social platforms. Their report highlighted how political parties clandestinely employed social media influencers to disseminate falsehoods about opponents, aiming to manipulate public opinion and undermine electoral integrity. A BBC Africa Eye investigation<sup>21</sup> further revealed that political actors paid influencers up to ₦20 million (approximately \$45,000) or offered government contracts and appointments to spread disinformation online. These professional propagandists

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<sup>17</sup><https://placng.org/Legist/plac-production-launch-of-legislative-digital-platforms/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://budgit.org/>

<sup>19</sup><https://nitda.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Digital-Literacy-Framework.pdf>

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<sup>20</sup><https://guardian.ng/news/how-presidential-candidates-pay-influencers-to-peddle-fake-news-on-social-media-by-cdd-report/>

<sup>21</sup><https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/2/15/nigeria-election-triggers-deluge-of-fake-news-on-social-media>



were instrumental in shaping online narratives, exploiting digital blind spots among youth to sow confusion and deepen societal divisions.

While NITDA's framework rightly recognizes that digital literacy is context-specific and performance is shaped by factors such as task complexity, familiarity, and available support, it currently lacks a structured focus on governance-related digital competencies--an omission that leaves young Nigerians vulnerable in a volatile information ecosystem.

Second, the establishment of youth digital governance hubs in each geopolitical zone would provide infrastructure, mentorship, and direct channels to government decision-makers. These hubs must specifically address gender inclusion through targeted outreach and programming for young women, ensuring that digital spaces become more equitable and representative.

Third, Nigeria's Open Government Partnership<sup>22</sup> implementation mechanisms need reform to include meaningful youth representation on steering committees and working groups, with clear mandates for digital governance innovation. The current 2023-2025 Action Plan,<sup>23</sup> while introducing promising commitments in fiscal transparency and beneficial ownership, carries over many commitments from previous cycles with minimal improvement.

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<sup>22</sup><https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/nigeria/>

<sup>23</sup><https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/nigeria-action-plan-review-2023-2025/>

Fourth, a gender-responsive e-governance strategy must address connectivity barriers for women and girls, particularly in rural and northern regions. This should include subsidized data packages and women-only digital safe spaces that provide security and encourage participation.

Finally, the institutionalization of regular digital town halls between government officials and youth representatives, with structured follow-up mechanisms to track implementation of agreed actions, would create sustainable channels for ongoing dialogue and accountability.

## **The Urgency of Action**

Young people constitute approximately 63% of Nigeria's population under the age of 25,<sup>24</sup> yet they remain largely sidelined from decision-making processes. While platforms for civic engagement exist, they remain underutilized due to limited access to e-governance tools, unreliable internet infrastructure, and weak policy frameworks supporting youth inclusion in governance.

The digital space has become a double-edged sword. The spread of misinformation continues to erode public trust and weaken electoral credibility. While youth-led fact-checking initiatives like Dubawa<sup>25</sup> have emerged to combat these trends, they require greater institutional support and integration into broader governance ecosystems.

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<sup>24</sup><https://nigeria.unfpa.org/en/publications/united-nations-population-fund-country-programme-document-nigeria>

<sup>25</sup> <https://dubawa.org/>

Nigeria stands at a crossroads. The country can either harness the energy and innovation of its digital-native youth to strengthen democracy, or it can continue to marginalize these voices through inadequate infrastructure, restrictive policies, and exclusionary practices. The choice will determine not only the future of Nigerian democracy but also the country's ability to address the complex challenges of the 21st century.

## **Conclusion**

The path forward requires both the government and society to recognize that digital inclusion is not just about technology, it's about democracy itself. It demands investment in infrastructure, reform of governance structures, and a fundamental shift in how power relates to the digital generation. Only through such comprehensive action can Nigeria bridge the digital governance gap and realize the full democratic potential of its connected youth.

The “Soro Soke” generation has found its voice and demonstrated its power. The question now is whether Nigeria's institutions will genuinely listen and, more importantly, whether they will act decisively on what they hear. The future of Nigerian democracy may well depend on the answer to this fundamental question.

**Call to Action:** Governments at all levels must immediately prioritize youth digital inclusion through infrastructure investment, policy reform, and the creation of meaningful participation mechanisms. Civil Society Organizations should strengthen

collaboration to scale successful civic technology initiatives. Most importantly, young Nigerians must continue to organize, advocate, and demand the systemic changes necessary to transform their digital engagement into lasting democratic progress.