

Who Is Actually in the Room? LEAP Africa on Political Leadership and Hidden Gaps

By [Kehinde Ayeni](#), Executive Director, LEAP Africa & [Abdullahi Ibrahim](#), Acting Manager, Programmes & MERL



Image Showing LEAP Africa Staff During The Scenario Convening

The thing that is rarely said plainly about governance in Africa is that the problem is almost never a missing framework. The frameworks exist. The anti-corruption bodies exist, complete with gazetted mandates and annual reports. What tends to be absent is something harder to legislate: the dense network of pressures, norms, organisations, and relationships that makes formal institutions behave the way they are supposed to behave.

The [V-Dem Institute's](#) most recent Democracy Report shows that democratic decline rarely begins with dramatic ruptures; it often unfolds through gradual institutional erosion. In Nigeria, for example, recent concerns around regulatory pressure on media houses and the use of state institutions to scrutinise opposition actors have sparked debate about the independence of key democratic bodies. Similar dynamics have been observed elsewhere, where shifts in how laws are applied, how oversight

institutions function, and how dissent is treated begin to reshape governance long before any formal breakdown is visible. By the time the more obvious symptoms emerge, the institutional safeguards that might have resisted them have already been significantly weakened.

This is one of the governance issues that a consortium of civil society organisations, including [LEAP Africa](#), is actively engaged on at regional scale particularly through our work in [Policy, Advocacy & Government Relations](#).

East Africa's civil society landscape looks different from West Africa's, which looks different again from Central Africa's and the South. Same as the political economy and the relationship between organised advocacy and state response differs The Mo Ibrahim Foundation's [governance index](#) captures some of that variation in numbers. The numbers do not fully capture the reality of governance at work in Kampala versus Kinshasa versus Luanda.

And yet the gaps that appear most consistently across all of these contexts are depressingly familiar. Patronage crowds out merit at the level of political recruitment, which means the incentive structures facing anyone who wants to lead with integrity are stacked against them almost from the start. Young people are invoked constantly in governance conversations and included in them rarely until more recent times. [The African Union's Agenda 2063](#) commits to youth participation in governance at every level. The implementation has been, to put it charitably, uneven. The organisations that understand their communities best, and that have the most credibility to do accountability work, are usually the ones with the least access to funding, networks, and the rooms where decisions get made.

The 2021 Anambra state elections in Nigeria are worth dwelling on because they produced something that does not happen often enough to be taken for granted: a monitoring environment in which rigging was genuinely harder than usual. Youth-led observers, coordinated civil society presence, civic education that had actually reached voters before polling day. Not a perfect election. But a documented one, and [LEAP Africa's report on an election monitored in Nigeria](#) is one of the clearest examples in recent years of what organised civic infrastructure can produce when it is given enough time and resources to actually function.

The lesson from Anambra, and from similar moments elsewhere, is not that civil society needs more passion. It needs more coordination and funding. [The International Civil Society Centre has been documenting for years](#) how systematically funders underinvest in the connective tissue between organisations: the coordination costs, the shared platforms, the time spent building trust across competing agendas. Those costs are invisible on a results framework. They are not invisible to the people trying to do the work.

The [Nigeria Youth Futures Fund](#), a nationwide project implemented by LEAP Africa points toward a model worth scaling. A dedicated, multi-year funding mechanism that gives regional civil society coalitions something they almost never have, which is enough stability to think beyond the next grant cycle. The case for a pan-African equivalent of that structure is strong. LEAP Africa's work is an argument for exactly that.

None of this will happen through another framework, or another continental summit with a well-designed communique. It will happen, if it happens, because the organisations that already understand this terrain get resourced properly and trusted to deliver expected outcomes. This is calling into focus that governance, social justice and related intersections are powerful tools in the construct of national building and development. As we look at Africa at large, the dividends of efficient and effective political leadership and public reforms should be more pronounced.

The next election is already underway in Nigeria and Kenya. The question becomes will partners and investors resource what actually works, or continue funding what merely looks good in a report?

Africa does not lack vision. It lacks the sustained investment in the people and organisations who already know how to turn that vision into accountable governance. The evidence is clear: when civil society is properly resourced, coordinated, and trusted, elections become harder to steal, policies become harder to capture, and leaders become harder to insulate from consequence. It is also, for reasons that say something uncomfortable about how aid and philanthropy work, one that has proved remarkably difficult to meet.