The Power of Community: Youth Networks Fostering Resilience, Cohesion, and Local Leadership

by **Modupe Olufemi** *[September, 2026]*



"Young volunteers clearing waste during a community clean-up in Abeokuta" Photo: Tope A. Asokere via Unsplash

Changemakers have long believed that the future of the continent rests on young people who see themselves not as beneficiaries of change but as its architects. Across Nigeria, that belief keeps finding evidence in the real world. Some of the most consequential organising of the last decade has come not from government or formal institutions, but from young people building networks around a shared problem and staying with it long after the initial urgency faded from the headlines. They take many forms: a volunteer security network formed to protect communities under attack, a coalition that rewrote a constitutional clause, a tech community that hands leadership to whichever member is closest to the ground. Different shapes, one underlying pattern: young people organising each other, with real structure and discipline, to solve problems the state has been slow to address. This is what active citizenship looks like when it moves from a value to a practice, and it is quietly building the resilience, cohesion, and local leadership that will carry Nigeria's communities forward.

Protecting Communities Together

One of the clearest examples of youth-led resilience is in community security. In Borno State, a group of young volunteers known locally as the Civilian Joint Task Force organised in 2009 in response to the violence and instability that came with the Boko Haram insurgency. What began as an informal call for volunteers grew, over the following decade, into a large network of men and women working alongside formal security agencies.[1] In 2013, the Borno State government moved to bring greater structure to the group through the Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme, training several hundred volunteers and drawing them further into coordinated operations with the military.[2] Researchers who have studied the group describe it as a vital link in local intelligence-gathering, helping to identify and screen threats within communities.[3] The record is not clean, however. The group has faced credible, documented allegations of abuses, including the recruitment and use of children, and in September 2017 it signed an action plan with the United Nations to end that practice.[4] That history is part of the lesson. The Civilian JTF is a useful case study not because it is a perfect model, but because it shows two things at once: what is possible when young people build a working hierarchy, train together, and coordinate deliberately with formal authorities, and how easily such a network can drift when recognition is not matched by oversight.

Changing the Rules That Hold Young People Back

Community resilience is not only about responding to crises. It is also about young people organising to change the rules that constrain them in the first place. Before 2018, Nigeria's constitution set age minimums that shut most young Nigerians out of elective office entirely, requiring candidates to be 40 to run for president and 30 for the House of Representatives.[5] Starting in May 2016, a youth-focused civil society campaign set out to change that, moving under a single rallying hashtag that let a fast-growing, geographically scattered coalition act as one.[6] By May 2018, 55 youth-led organisations had jointly pressed President Muhammadu Buhari to sign the bill into law, a measure of how wide that coalition had grown. It was deliberately nonpartisan, and it drew backing from the United Nations, which co-launched its global iteration in Geneva in 2016, as well as from the African Union and ECOWAS, which have since promoted it as a model for youth political inclusion across the continent.[7] On 31 May 2018, Buhari signed the Not Too Young to Run Act into law, reducing the minimum age for the presidency from 40 to 35, and for the House of Representatives and state assemblies from 30 to 25.[8]

Building Something for the Next Person Coming Up

That same instinct shows up in a different form in Nigeria's technology sector, in a pattern that looks less like a single organisation and more like a method: a small group of young people notices a gap, builds a community around it, and then hands the running of that community to whichever young member is closest to the ground in a given city. One clear example of this pattern began in 2016, when Ada Nduka Oyom, a young Nigerian woman frustrated by how few women she saw in technology spaces, started organising informal meetups and mentorship sessions for other women trying to break into the field. She Code Africa, the organisation she founded, has since expanded into chapters across more than twenty African countries.[9] What holds the wider community together day to day is a mentorship structure: members further along in their careers coach newer ones and help connect them to paying tech roles once they are ready.[10] Even with a founder still leading the organisation centrally, the actual work of running each chapter, and the leadership that requires, sits with young members in the cities where those chapters operate.

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[1] Bamidele, S. (2020). "Sweat is invisible in the rain": Civilian Joint Task Force and counter-insurgency in Borno State, Nigeria. Security and Defence Quarterly, 31(4), 171–188. Available at: https://securityanddefence.pl/-Sweat-is-invisible-in-the-rain-Civilian-Joint-Task-Force-and-counter-insurgency.130867.0.2.html

[2] Ashafa, A. M. (2019). Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) as a Novelty Model in Counterinsurgency in Nigeria's North East 1. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/80924944/Civilian_Joint_Task_Force_CJTF_as_a_Novelty_Model_in_Counterinsurgency_in_Nigerias_North_East_1

[3] Bamidele, S. (2017). The Civilian Joint Task Force and the Struggle against Insurgency in Borno State, Nigeria. *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review*, 7(2), 85–98, Indiana University Press. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322261158_The_Civilian_Joint_Task_Force_and_the_Struggle_against_Insurgency_in_Borno_State_Nigeria

[4] United Nations Secretary-General. (2018). *Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General* (A/72/865–S/2018/465), section on Nigeria. New York: United Nations.

[5] Heinrich Böll Stiftung. (2022, October 19). *Still too young to run?* https://ng.boell.org/en/2022/10/19/still-too-young-run

[6] YIAGA Africa. (n.d.). *Not Too Young To Run: The campaign*. https://www.nottooyoungtorun.org/. See also Usigbe, L. (2018, August 2). *Youth: Getting ready for public office*. Africa Renewal. https://africarenewal.un.org/en/magazine/youth-getting-ready-public-office

[7] Usigbe, L. (2018, August 2). *Youth: Getting ready for public office*. Africa Renewal. https://africarenewal.un.org/en/magazine/youth-getting-ready-public-office

[8] Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018, June). *Nigeria brings in fresher faces to its Parliament*. https://www.ipu.org/news/news-in-brief/2018-06/nigeria-brings-in-fresher-faces-its-parliament

[9] BusinessDay NG. (n.d.). *Ada Nduka Oyom - Founder, She Code Africa*. https://businessday.ng/interview/women-in-business/article/ada-nduka-oyom-founder-she-code-africa/

[10] Sehloho, M. (2023, July 28). *Hot startup of the month: Nigeria's She Code Africa*. Connecting Africa. https://www.connectingafrica.com/women-in-tech/hot-startup-of-the-month-nigeria-s-she-code-africa

What Makes This Possible Now

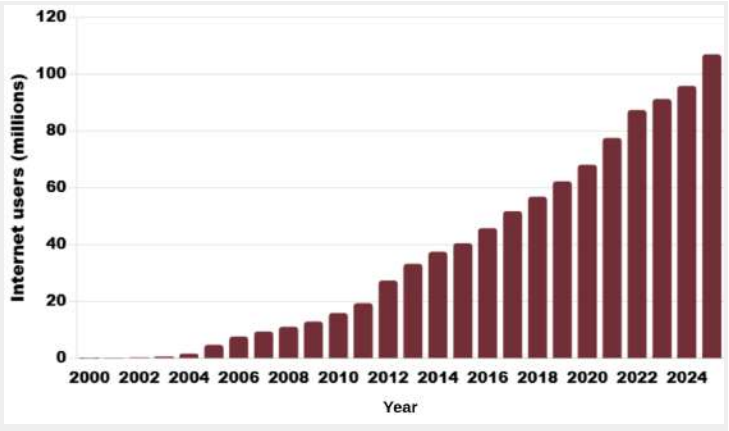


Figure 1. Nigeria: internet users (millions), 2000–2025[11]

None of the organising described above happens in a vacuum, and it is worth asking plainly what has changed to make it easier for young people to build these kinds of networks than it would have been a generation ago. Three conditions stand out. The first is sheer demographic weight: by Worldometer's estimates, more than 60 percent of Nigeria's population is under the age of 30, and the median age sits at just over 18.[12] Exact figures vary by source, but all of them place Nigeria among the youngest countries in the world, which means that on almost any given issue, the pool of young people available to organise around it is enormous by default. The second is connectivity. By the end of 2025, about 45% of Nigerians were using the internet, and, as Figure 1 shows, the number of internet users has climbed from almost none in 2000 to more than 100 million. Social media use grew by nearly 35% in a single year, according to DataReportal. That figure counts active user identities rather than unique individuals, and DataReportal's methodology shifts from year to year, so it is best read as a signal of direction rather than a precise measure.[13] In practical terms, this connectivity means a coalition or a mentorship community no longer needs an office, a newsletter, or a radio slot to reach thousands of people in a matter of hours rather than months. The third, less visible, condition is the growth of digital financial tools. Formal financial inclusion among Nigerian adults rose from 56% in 2020 to 64% in 2023, a shift driven largely by non-bank, fintech-style channels, whose share of that growth more than doubled over the same period.[14] For a young network with no office and no legal structure, that matters in an unglamorous but essential way: dues can be collected, donations gathered, and shares of a settlement paid out, all without either side needing a bank branch. None of these three conditions organises anything by itself. A cheap connection and a mobile wallet do not build a coalition on their own; young people still have to do that work. But they lower the cost of trying, which goes a long way toward explaining why so many of these networks have been started by ordinary young people with no institutional backing, rather than by organisations with money and staff behind them from day one.

What This Adds Up To

The most successful youth-led initiatives share a pattern: they form around a problem young people have already identified and are actively organising to solve, well before any institution steps in. The role policymakers, funders, and civic institutions should take away from this piece is not to originate the response but to notice it early and back it, through funding, legal recognition, and the kind of structural support that lets those creative solutions scale. Where that much-needed backing never comes, the same energy and minds that build such networks can just as easily curdle into something unregulated and unaccountable. Where it does come, it turns a volunteer effort into lasting public infrastructure that benefits the wider community. The clearest signal of where Nigeria's youth leadership is headed is not found in any single sector; it is found in how consistently these networks keep forming around solving specific problems, and in whether the institutions around them choose to enable that rise or get left behind by it.

[11] International Telecommunication Union (ITU). (2026). *Individuals using the Internet (% of population), Nigeria* [Data set]. World Bank, World Development Indicators. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=NG

[12] Worldometer. (2026). *Nigeria demographics 2026 (population, age, sex, trends)*. https://www.worldometers.info/demographics/nigeria-demographics/

[13] Kemp, S. (2025, November 8). *Digital 2026: Nigeria*. Data Reportal. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-nigeria

[14] Enhancing Financial Innovation & Access (EFInA). (2024). *Access to Financial Services in Nigeria (A2F) 2023 Survey: Key findings*. Lagos: EFInA. Available at efina.org.ng