![KDI Kimpact Development Initiative logo]

**Event Report and
Policy Recommendations**

KDI UNGA80 Side Event

Strengthening Democratic Foundations in Africa. ↗

Theme: From Old to Emerging Forms of Cooperation

18/09/2025   10:00AM

⟶

Jay Conference
Midtown East, 515
Madison Avenue,
10th Floor, New
York, USA.

Email:
info@kimpact.org.ng

Citizens, Democracy & Development.

About Kimpact

Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI) is a democracy, development, and civic tech Non-Governmental Organisation working to strengthen democratic development and good governance in Nigeria and across Africa. Established in 2014, KDI deploys innovative programming, development research, data-driven advocacy, and technology-enabled solutions to promote democratic governance through electoral integrity and accountability, institutional reform, and citizen participation. KDI partners with key institutions, both national and international, to drive accountability and inclusive democracy.

Our Mission: To inspire citizen-led democratic development.

No 10 S.B. Abubakar Avenue, NAF Valley Estate,
Behind Mogadishu Cantonment, Asokoro, FCT,
Abuja, Nigeria.

Email
info@kimpact.org.ng

phone
+2348103947690, +2349020118336

KDI | KIMPACT
DEVELOPMENT
INITIATIVE

Executive
summary.

The Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI) convened a side event at the 80th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA80) on **"Strengthening Democratic Foundations in Africa: From Old to Emerging Forms of Cooperation."** The event brought together government officials, policy experts, civil society organisations, and international donors to discuss the state of democracy in Africa and map practical pathways for democratic revitalisation.

In his opening remarks, KDI Executive Director Bukola Idowu underscored Africa's decisive moment: citizens remain deeply committed to democracy, yet dissatisfaction with its delivery is widening. With over 70 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's population under 30, young people embody both the urgency and opportunity for reform. Idowu called for a shift from transactional cooperation to transformational partnerships, where governments, civil society, and international allies co-create democratic ecosystems that deliver accountability, civic freedoms, and inclusion.

Three interlinked panels structured the discussions:

Panel 1: Old and Emerging Forms of Cooperation for Democratic Resilience in Africa

This session explored both the traditional and newer mechanisms through which African states, regional bodies, and civic actors cooperate to protect and strengthen democracy. Discussions highlighted how multilateral institutions, regional frameworks, and grassroots civic initiatives are working, often in difficult, conflict-prone environments, to sustain democratic practices. The panel underscored that while long-standing structures remain important, new forms of collaboration are emerging, offering fresh pathways to bolster resilience against authoritarian tendencies and instability.

Panel 2: Securing Civic Freedoms Amid Security Challenges: Building Forward Together

The second panel examined one of Africa's most pressing dilemmas: how to balance the state's responsibility to ensure security with the need to safeguard civic freedoms.

Speakers reflected on how unchecked government security responses can close civic space, weaken trust, and undermine democratic governance. The discussions emphasised that the protection of civil liberties—freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly- must not be sidelined in the name of stability. Instead, inclusive approaches that bring citizens, governments, and security institutions into dialogue are critical to building forward in a way that preserves both safety and rights.

Panel 3: Civic Engagement and Inclusive Governance as Catalysts for Peace and Development

The final panel focused on the role of civic participation and inclusive governance as drivers of durable peace and sustainable development. Panellists stressed that meaningful inclusion of young people, women, and marginalised groups is not just a matter of rights but also a foundation for stability and prosperity. By expanding opportunities for participation and ensuring governance processes reflect the diversity of society, communities can create stronger bonds of trust and shared responsibility. The conversation underscored that inclusive governance and civic engagement are not peripheral to peacebuilding but central to building societies that are more equitable, resilient, and capable of development.

Across the three panels, seven cross-cutting insights emerged: the centrality of citizen ownership; the need for systemic rather than episodic engagement; prioritisation of gender and intergenerational equity; stronger democratic oversight; enhanced south–south and cross-sectoral collaboration; evidence-driven monitoring of civic space; and sustainable resourcing of democracy work.

From these insights, the event generated concrete proposals tailored to three categories of stakeholders:

- **National and domestic actors** (governments, legislatures, political parties, civil society, and media) must institutionalise civic engagement, strengthen oversight of security institutions, integrate youth and women into governance, and create sustainable domestic resource mobilisation strategies.

- **Regional and continental bodies** (AU, RECs, Pan-African Parliament, African Court) must enforce the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, strengthen peer-learning and solidarity mechanisms, and build intergenerational and gender-equity frameworks.

- **Donors and multilateral partners** must shift from event-based to systemic support, mainstream gender and youth inclusion, strengthen civic space protection mechanisms, close data gaps, and back locally led and south–south approaches.

The side event affirmed that the resilience of African democracies depends on inclusive and citizen-centred systems, strong protections for civic freedoms, and cooperative approaches that bridge domestic, regional, and global actors. The proposals articulated during the panels provide a roadmap for actionable reform, positioning Africa's democratic renewal not as an aspiration but as an urgent and achievable priority.

Introduction

The KDI UNGA80 side event opened by highlighting Africa's democratic fragility: 65% of Africans prefer democracy, yet trust in institutions falls below 40%. Panelists urged rethinking cooperation—making it people-driven, inclusive, and sustainable—while resisting elite capture, donor dependency, and global democratic regression.

Africa's democratic story is neither collapse nor resurgence—it is a mixed feeling of a messy, persistent struggle in motion and resilience. Even amid turbulence, glimmers of democratic vitality persist: citizens volunteering for observation missions, youth mobilising civic campaigns, media investigating abuses, and civil society actors renewing alliances across borders. Afrobarometer's 2025 flagship report underscores that despite frustrations, participation remains alive: across 39 African countries, nearly three-quarters (72%) of citizens voted in their last national election, 47% attended community meetings, while over 42% joined others to raise issues locally, and 41% say they "feel close" to a political party[1]. These are not passive numbers: they are claims on governance by people who still believe their voice matters.

But beneath those hopeful data points, democracy in Africa is straining under intensified pressure.

The sequence of shocks from rising insecurity to institutional erosion, creeping authoritarianism, and the closure of civic spaces is not new. But their confluence poses a heightened threat. Since 2020, the continent has seen multiple coups (especially in West and Central Africa), deepening the sense that democratic gains are reversible[2]. The paradox is stark: while Africans expressed their preference for democracy over alternatives, their trust in political institutions has weakened, especially in systems that underdeliver[3]. The vulnerability lies not in the ideals but in the performance, legitimacy and durability of democratic institutions.

In civic space, the terrain is alarmingly constrained. According to CIVICUS Monitor, 44 out of 49 African countries are rated as "obstructed," "repressed," or "closed," meaning a vast majority of citizens face meaningful barriers to exercising

freedoms of association, assembly, and expression[4]. Only a few island states (Cabo Verde, São Tomé & Príncipe) are rated "open." And within Sub-Saharan Africa, 43 of 50 countries are assessed as obstructed, repressed or closed, with over half categorised as repressed – a trend that has worsened in multiple countries over the past year[5]. Press freedom violations, detention of journalists, internet restrictions, and protest bans have become common tactics[6]. Meanwhile, governments increasingly invoke emergency laws or security rationales to justify suppressing dissent, expanding the gap between declared legal norms and lived realities.

Trust, the lifeblood of democratic legitimacy, is fraying. Afrobarometer's recent data show that in 39 countries over 2021–2023, Africans trust institutions and leaders less than a decade ago. Only religious leaders, the military and traditional institutions still command majority trust; core political institutions (legislatures, political parties and courts) rank lowest[7]. A deeper analysis of institutional trust in sub-Saharan Africa reveals that media exposure has a paradoxical role: in many cases, heightened exposure to public discourse and information is associated with lower confidence in institutions, especially when performance falls short[8]. Corruption remains a central corrosive force: Afrobarometer's working papers show that perceived or experienced corruption consistently undermines trust in institutions, regardless of public service quality[9]. In other words, even if institutions deliver some social goods, the perception of impunity or rent-seeking erodes legitimacy.

Eroding trust, shrinking civic space, and fragile institutions are interconnected. When states prior-itise security over accountability, civic freedoms shrink, citizens grow alienated, and institutions weaken. At the regional level, weak enforcement of democratic norms by continental bodies worsens the problem, as commitments often remain rhetorical rather than practical.

It is within this landscape that the KDI UNGA80 Side Event, under the theme **"Strengthening Democratic Foundations in Africa: From Old to Emerging Forms of Cooperation",** sought to intervene. The event aimed not to rehearse crises but to surface pathways through which democracy can regain coherence, credibility, and momentum. Its three-panel conversations were deliberately structured to address the interlocking dimensions of democratic resilience: cooperation, civic freedoms, and inclusive governance.

The event's objectives, in concise terms, were to:

- Generate actionable policy proposals and guardrails for democratic resilience across national and regional actors.

- Strengthen partnerships across civic, regional, donor and governmental actors to operationalise those proposals.

- Translate evidence and discussion into pilot programmes, advocacy roadmaps, and short-term commitments that can be monitored and followed.

In convening this event, KDI sought to shift the narrative from diagnosis to deliverables. Through moderate design and diverse panels, we tried to knit together regional ambition with citizen demand, legal reform with grounded participation, and strategic cooperation with accountable action.

Excerpt from the Welcome Remarks at the Side Event on Strengthening Democratic Foundations in Africa.

UNGA80, September 18, 2025

by Bukola Idowu,
Executive Director,
Kimpact Development Initiative

Excellencies, distinguished members of the diplomatic community, development partners, civil society leaders, and friends here in New York and across the globe—good morning. It is a profound honour to welcome you to this side event on *"Strengthening Democratic Foundations in Africa: From Old to Emerging Forms of Cooperation."*

Africa is at a decisive moment. In recent years, over 15 African countries have held elections, engaging millions of citizens. Surveys show that two-thirds of Africans still believe democracy is the best form of government, yet satisfaction with its functioning remains low. Citizens believe in democracy, but they demand results. This tension is most visible among Africa's young people, who make up 70% of sub-Saharan Africa's population. While many are active in protests, civic tech, and grassroots organising, too many remain excluded from decision-making spaces.

At Kimpact Development Initiative, democracy is more than ballots. It is accountability, transparency, and freedom of participation. Through initiatives like the Ballot Integrity Project and our civic space monitoring efforts, we work to ensure that every vote counts and that citizens can speak, organise, and participate freely. For us, democracy is the young woman in Abuja insisting her vote must matter, the civil society leader in Monrovia demanding transparency, and the journalist in Lusaka risking everything to tell the truth.

The theme of this gathering reminds us that democracy in Africa cannot be strengthened by Africans alone. The future of cooperation must be built differently:

- From donor-driven approaches to locally led partnerships.

- From event-based interventions to continuous civic education and institutional resilience.

- From lone efforts to multi-stakeholder coali-

tions.

This is the cooperation we need—not transactional, but transformational. My call today is simple:

- To donors and partners: Walk with us in strengthening ecosystems, not just events.

- To the diplomatic community: Stand boldly for civic freedoms whenever they are under attack.

- To civil society leaders: Keep innovating and

holding all accountable.

- To Africa's youth: Do not wait for permission—your time is now.

At Kimpact, we pledge to keep watering the tree of democracy, rooted in trust, integrity, civic freedoms, and the energy of young people. When democracy thrives in Africa, it strengthens peace and prosperity for the world.

Let us build that future together—resilient, inclusive, and unshakably democratic.

"

Democracy is not abstract; it is the young woman in Abuja insisting her vote must matter, the civil society leader in Monrovia demanding transparency, and the journalist in Lusaka risking everything to tell the truth. "

Bukola Idowu

Executive Director,
Kimpact Development Initiative

Special Address

by Dr. Obiageli "Oby" Ezekwesili,
Founder of #FixPolitics

Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili at the side event delivered a powerful reflection on the current state of democracy in Africa. She described democracy on the continent as being "in crisis" and increasingly resembling "an orphan." Its legitimacy, she argued, is under question not because the system itself is inherently flawed, but because it has not been fully or properly practised.

Central to her address was the assertion that the responsibility for fixing democracy ultimately rests with the citizens. She underscored the critical role of political literacy in enabling Africans to safeguard and strengthen governance. Too often, citizens cast their votes and then withdraw from the process, leaving elected leaders to act unchecked. Democracy cannot thrive without active citizen participation at every stage of governance, she noted. When leaders abuse the very power entrusted to them, citizens become disillusioned and disengaged, creating a cycle of weak accountability.

Drawing from global trends, Dr. Ezekwesili observed that the crisis is not unique to Africa. Even long-established democracies such as the United States are showing visible decline. On the democracy index, most African countries are classified as "flawed" or "hybrid" democracies. She cited Mauritius, which ranks highest on the continent with a score of 8/10, in contrast to Nigeria's 4/10. More troubling, she highlighted that only 37% of surveyed citizens believe democracy works in their country. "This poor rating reflects waning trust in the system," she warned.

For her, the fundamental question is not whether democracy can work in Africa, but whether it is being genuinely practised. What has prevailed on the continent is an "abridged version of democracy," one that has fallen short of delivering growth, prosperity, and inclusive governance. Despite these shortcomings, she emphasised that most Africans still prefer democracy to authoritarian alternatives—a signal that the system's appeal en-

dures, even amid disappointment.

Dr. Ezekwesili stressed that to restore democracy's legitimacy, the continent must embrace its principles and practices in full, centring citizens at the heart of governance. "Democracy in Africa will not survive on words; it will survive on the active, informed, and relentless engagement of its citizens," she declared. Her call was clear: fixing democracy requires moving beyond the ballot box to sustained citizen action, political accountability, and reforms that give real meaning to participation.

"The real issue is not whether democracy can work in Africa, but whether it is being genuinely practised. Restoring legitimacy requires transparency, accountability, and genuine commitment to democratic values."

Dr. Obiageli "Oby" Ezekwesili

Founder of #FixPolitics.

Panel summaries, thematic findings and *policy recommendations*

Panel 1 —
Old & Emerging Forms of Cooperation for Democratic Resilience in Africa

Panelists:

- Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh, Senior Associate for Africa, NDI

- Bonolo Makgale, Program Manager, Democracy & Civic Engagement Unit, Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria

Moderator: Dr. Mathew Ayibakuro, Governance Adviser, FCDO

The first panel of the KDI UNGA80 side event framed the overarching theme of the day by interrogating how African democracies can become more resilient in the face of fragility, repression, and disillusionment. The session began with stark data points on Africa's democratic trajectory by the moderator. Surveys indicate that while 65% of Africans prefer democracy, trust in key institutions has dropped below 40%. Confidence in parliaments, electoral commissions, and local government councils hovers in the 30–40% range, revealing an urgent trust deficit. Globally, the democratic landscape indicates that the average citizen's level of democracy has regressed to the 1980s, with 72% of the world's population now living under autocratic regimes.

Against this backdrop, the panel moved beyond diagnostics to critically examine both the models of cooperation and the assumptions underlying them. It asked how cooperation could be reframed to become people-driven, inclusive, and sustainable, while resisting elite capture and donor dependency.

Amidst declining trust and global democratic regression, the focus is on building resilient, people-driven African democracies through inclusive cooperation.

> **Trust in democratic institutions has dropped below 40%—without trust, democracy cannot function.**

Dr. Mathew Ayibakuro

Dr. Mathew Ayibakuro,
Governance Adviser, FCDO.

Key Discussion Points

1. Structural limitations of current cooperation frameworks: Dr. Fomunyoh emphasised that African democracies often stall not because elections are absent, but because elections do not translate into legitimacy. Existing cooperation models, he argued, remain too elite-driven and externally anchored. Procedural democracy is often prioritised, while people's sense of ownership and legitimacy is neglected.

2. Continental and civil society engagement: Ms. Makgale drew attention to the African Union's frameworks, such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance. She noted that while these frameworks hold promise, they risk remaining symbolic unless they are domesticated and operationalised at the citizen level. She underscored that civil society must be empowered to translate these frameworks into accountability tools that speak to ordinary citizens.

3. Technology, social media, and democratic resilience: Dr. Ayibakuro highlighted the dual role of technology: on the one hand, enabling participation, pluralism, and mobilisation; on the other hand, opening the door to misinformation, hate speech, and restrictions on civic freedoms. This tension reflects both the promise and the peril of new forms of cooperation.

4. Global democracy trends and Africa's positioning: Panellists situated Africa within broader democratic currents. With fewer democracies globally than autocracies for the first time in two decades, African democracies face both external and internal pressures. Yet they also stand at the forefront of mobilisation and innovation, particularly through youth activism, civic technology, and south-south collaboration.

Consensus Policy Recommendations and Stakeholder Action Points

The panel converged on several actionable recommendations:

1. **Reinforce citizen ownership of democratic processes**

    o   Invest in revitalising political parties as vehicles of citizen representation.

    o   Empower CSOs to act as bridge-builders between citizens, political institutions, and regional bodies.

    o   Create spaces for grassroots participation that go beyond formal elections.

" **We need to start thinking of democracy as something citizens can experience and can supply their needs, rather than just a fundamental construct.** "

Bonolo Makgale

Program Manager, Democracy and Civic Engagement Unit, Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria.

---

2. **Strengthen south-south collaboration**

   o   Expand partnerships among African and other developing countries to share resources, knowledge, and innovations for democratic resilience.

   o   Encourage peer learning and solidarity in confronting democratic backsliding.

3. **Expand women's participation in governance**

   o   Institutionalise mentorship and leadership pathways for women.

   o   Recognise women's inclusion not as symbolic but as foundational to legitimacy and resilience.

"In less then 25 years, African and its diaspora will constitute 25% of the world population. The next 25 years will be African, and then, one-third of the youth population of the world, more than 33% of the youth population of the world will be African. "

Dr Chris Fomunyoh

Senior Associate for Africa, National Democratic Institute (NDI)

---

4. **Enhance citizen action for democratic resilience**

   o   Develop new civic tools that allow citizens to engage meaningfully with democracy.

   o   Move away from elite-driven models to participatory frameworks that reflect lived realities.

   o   Reimagine dialogue and policy spaces so they are citizen-facing rather than insulated.

5. **Simplify the language of democracy**

   o   Use data storytelling to demystify democracy.

   o   Craft communication that resonates with ordinary people, not just policy elites.

6. **Develop innovative and sustainable financing models**

   o   Reduce overdependence on foreign donor support.

   o   Create domestic resource mobilisation strategies to fund democracy work and civic space defence.

---

7. **Embrace a culture of inquiry**

    o   Ask difficult questions about how democracy has worked in Africa.

    o   Use these reflections to inform frameworks that are adaptive and future-oriented.

Conclusion:

The first panel set the tone for the day by moving the conversation away from narrow electoral procedures and toward broader democratic resilience. It underscored that Africa's democratic future cannot rest on external templates or donor prescriptions. Instead, resilience must be rooted in citizen agency, south-south solidarity, inclusive governance, and innovative cooperation. Stakeholders were urged to localise democracy, simplify its language, and build creative funding and participation models that align with citizens' aspirations.

Picture Democracy in Africa as a great tree. Its roots are trust, its trunk is integrity, its branches are civic freedoms, and its leaves are the energy of young people. For this tree to grow strong, it must be watered by cooperation – old and new, local and global.

Bukola Idowu

Executive Director,
Kimpact Development Initiative

Panel 2 —
Securing Civic Freedoms Amid Security Challenges: Building Forward Together

Panelists:

- Senator Abba Morro, Minority Leader, NASS

- Peter Bofin, Southeast Africa Senior Analyst, ACLED

- Bukky Shonibare, Founder and Executive Director, Invictus Africa

Moderator: Oluwafemi John Adebayo, Head of Research, KDI

The second panel addressed one of the most pressing issues confronting African democracies: the shrinking of civic space. The moderator set the stage by highlighting alarming data from the CIVICUS Monitor showing that over 80% of African countries are classified as "closed," "repressed," or "obstructed." Between 2015 and 2023 alone, Nigeria recorded nearly 600 documented incidents of state suppression against protests, journalists, and civil society organisations. Similar patterns are evident across Sudan, Ethiopia, Cameroon, and Burkina Faso.

The opening remarks stressed that security and freedom are not mutually exclusive. Sustainable peace cannot be achieved through repression. Instead, democratic freedoms and security are complementary and mutually reinforcing. The discussion explored how governments can ensure security responses do not become tools of repression, how civil society can act as a counterweight and collaborator, and how international and regional mechanisms can safeguard civic space in fragile contexts.
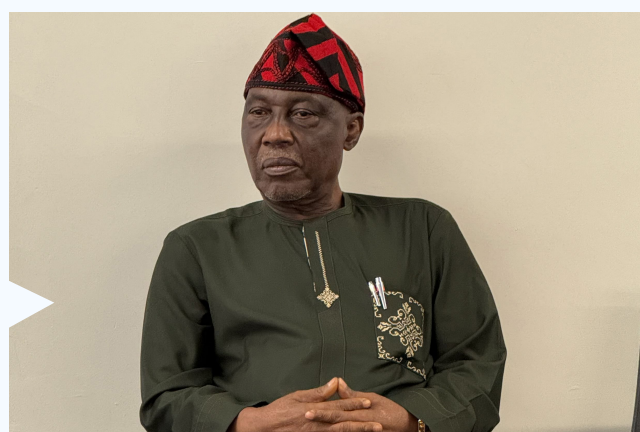
Key Discussion Points

1. Constitutional and legislative safeguards

Panellists from experience underscored the risks of unchecked executive power during security operations and pointed to Section 45 of Nigeria's Constitution, often used as justification for restricting rights, as an example of how legal provisions can be exploited. Emphasis was placed on the need for stronger parliamentary oversight and constitutional guardrails to ensure that security responses are not weaponised against civic freedoms.

> **If we must save ourselves from the totalitarian system we find ourselves in, we must rise to the occasion of how we push our narrative for what is on the ground.**

Sen. Abba Morro

Minority Leader, NASS

2. Data and evidence in defending civic freedoms

Peter Bofin highlighted ACLED's findings that civic space is most constrained where governments use counterterrorism, emergency powers, or public order laws as pretexts for repression. He stressed that data on patterns of state suppression is crucial not only for documentation but also for advocacy. However, he acknowledged significant gaps in real-time data collection, particularly in rural or conflict-affected areas, which weakens the capacity of civil society to respond early.

3. Gendered impacts of shrinking civic space

Bukky Shonibare emphasised that women activists and grassroots groups are often the first targets in crackdowns. She stressed that security frameworks must be gender-sensitive to prevent the disproportionate harm faced by women. She called for governments and civil society to adopt a gender lens in planning responses, ensuring that both security actors and rights defenders understand and address the vulnerabilities of women and marginalised groups.

> **When there is repression, certain people are disproportionately affected because of their unique and interesting identities, and there we are talking about women, young and persons with disabilities.**

Buffy Shonibare

Executive Director, Invictus Africa

4. Building trust and reframing relationships

All panellists converged on the need to shift the perception of civil society as adversaries of the state. Instead, both sides must embrace a partnership mindset. Civil society must build active citizenry, while governments must commit to respecting existing frameworks and implementing them. The balance between collaboration and confrontation was described as context-specific—civil society must be flexible in choosing when to partner and when to challenge.

Consensus Policy Recommendations and Stakeholder Action Points

The panel extracted reflections into clear policy proposals and action steps:

1. **Domesticate and enforce civic freedom frameworks.**

   o   Governments must translate continental and national legal frameworks protecting civic freedoms into binding domestic law.

   o   Institutions must prioritise implementation, not just adoption, of these frameworks.

2. **Strengthen parliamentary oversight of security institutions.**

   o   Legislatures should create and enforce constitutional safeguards limiting the discretionary powers of security agencies.

   o   Clear checks and balances are needed to prevent abuse of emergency laws and public order provisions.

3. **Adopt gender-sensitive security and civic space strategies.**

- o Governments and CSOs must mainstream gender in both security planning and civic space protection.

- o Women's rights groups must be protected as frontline defenders of democratic freedoms.

4. **Foster active citizen participation.**

- o Citizens must be encouraged to take ownership of democracy by pushing narratives that reinforce accountability and good governance.

- o Civic education should be strengthened to enable citizens to recognise and resist undue restrictions on their freedoms.

5. **Reframe state–civil society relations.**

- o Both governments and CSOs must move beyond an "us versus them" dynamic.

- o Build trust through hybrid approaches—collaboration where possible, confrontation where necessary—anchored in mutual responsibility.

6. **Close data and monitoring gaps.**

- o Enhance collaboration between researchers, CSOs, and governments to produce actionable, real-time data on restrictions to civic space.

- o Use evidence proactively to inform rights-based preventive strategies, rather than reactive repression.

Conclusion:

The panel stressed that civic liberty and security are interdependent pillars of democracy. Suppressing freedoms in the name of security weakens nations; the real challenge lies in implementation, not frameworks. Panellists urged trust-building, citizen participation, gender sensitivity, and collaboration, emphasising that protecting rights is the foundation of peace and democratic legitimacy.

If we fail to protect civic space under the pressure of conflict, we risk hollowing out the very democracy we seek to defend.

Oluwafemi John Adebayo

Head of Research and Strategy,
Kimpact Development Initiative

Panel 3—
Civic Engagement and Inclusive Governance as Catalysts for Peace & Development

Panelists:

- Ashley Law, Civic Engagement Specialist and Founder, Dynamic Prism Solutions

- Bodunrin Joseph Adebo, International Development Specialist

- Dr. Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi, Board Chair, KDI

Moderator: Adaobi Egboka, Africa Program Director, Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice

The third panel examined the central role of inclusive governance and active citizen participation in building peaceful and democratic societies. Speakers emphasised that civic engagement should not be episodic or symbolic but institutionalised as a long-term process that empowers citizens to shape decisions. The discussion, framed around structural and political conditions, highlighted both opportunities and persistent challenges in Africa. Drawing on experiences from youth activism, civic engagement in restrictive spaces, and coalition-building for rights reforms, panellists affirmed that meaningful participation is not only a democratic aspiration but also a prerequisite for peace, cohesion, and sustainable development.

1. Sustaining youth participation beyond election cycles

Ashley Law underscored the limits of campaign-driven youth engagement, where young people are mobilised temporarily but excluded from sustained decision-making. She argued that inclusive governance requires long-term investments in civic education, mentorship, and leadership development programs that embed youth participation in institutions rather than short-lived initiatives. She highlighted examples where deliberate inclusion of marginalised youth voices in local governance helped de-escalate tensions and foster resilience.

> **There is a strong positive connection between a strong workforce, youth employment and a strong democracy.**

Ashley Law

Civic Engagement Specialist and Founder, Dynamic Prism Solutions

2. Navigating closed and restrictive civic spaces

Bodunrin Joseph Adebo reflected on experiences in environments where civic participation is risky. He emphasised that even in restrictive contexts, it is possible to design structured and safe spaces for citizens to engage and hold leaders accountable. Political economy analysis, he noted, is essential to tailor engagement strategies to realities on the ground, allowing citizens to push for reform while mitigating risks. He called for moving from tokenistic consultation to substantive participation, where government structures respond meaningfully to citizen input.

> **Inclusion is about seeing someone who looks like you in the important rooms, where the budgets are being made.**

Bodunrin Adebo

Development Specialist / Executive Director,
T2 Global Consulting

3. Confronting structural resistance to inclusion

Dr. Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi framed inclusive governance as both a rights-based struggle and a technical reform agenda. She stressed that structural forces such as patriarchy, entrenched elite interests, and weak institutions remain formidable barriers. Drawing from her experience leading gender equality and constitutional reform campaigns, she argued that real progress requires sustained coalition-building, intergenerational dialogue, and strategic confrontation of power structures. She urged younger activists to combine resilience with strategic engagement to navigate resistance from political elites and cultural institutions.

> **We must carry young people along, and we should see each other as allies working towards development.**

Dr. Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi

Board Chair, KDI

4. Inclusive governance as a driver of peace and development

Across the interventions, panelists emphasised that inclusive governance is more than a moral imperative; it is a legal obligation and a peacebuilding necessity. Informed, engaged, and empowered citizens create the foundation for stability, as exclusion and marginalisation often fuel conflict. Youth and women were highlighted as cross-sectoral stakeholders whose voices are indispensable for crafting policies that deliver both legitimacy and development outcomes.

Consensus Policy Recommendations and Stakeholder Action Points

1. **Institutionalise long-term civic engagement.**

    o Move beyond one-off campaigns to build enduring systems of participation.

    o Invest in civic education from early learning stages to nurture informed citizens capable of effective engagement.

2. **Strengthen context-sensitive interventions.**

    o Conduct rigorous political economy analyses before designing programs to ensure strategies are responsive to local realities.

    o Tailor civic engagement initiatives to address the specific political, social, and economic dynamics in each context.

3. **Build solidarity through networks and coalitions.**

    o Encourage cross-sectoral and thematic collaborations among civil society, government, and citizens to strengthen collective advocacy for inclusive governance.

    o Foster coalitions that connect women, youth, and marginalised groups to amplify their influence in decision-making.

4. **Promote mentorship and intergenerational dialogue.**

    o Establish mentorship programs to transfer knowledge and leadership skills to young people.

    o Create structured platforms for intergenerational dialogue, enabling collaboration between youth and older generations in shaping inclusive democratic futures.

5. **Adopt bottom-up and gender-sensitive approaches.**

    o Design programs that grow from the community level upward, ensuring co-creation and shared ownership.

    o Integrate youth and women's issues across all sectors and provide resources that allow them to

thrive as equal partners in governance.

6. **Prioritise substantive inclusion over procedural reforms.**

   o   Focus civic engagement strategies on achieving quality democratic outcomes, not just procedural participation.

   o   Develop interventions that ensure citizens' inputs lead to tangible government action and policy adjustments.

7. **Create responsive platforms for government–citizen dialogue.**

   o   Establish institutional mechanisms where government officials can actively listen and respond to citizens' needs.

   o   Ensure that these platforms are safe, inclusive, and sustained, not symbolic or ad hoc.

Conclusion:

The panel reaffirmed that inclusive governance and civic engagement are indispensable to peace and development. While structural and political resistance remain a challenge, institutional reforms, intergenerational dialogue, and sustained citizen empowerment offer viable pathways forward. The panel called for governments, civil society, and citizens themselves to commit to building systems of participation that are inclusive, gender-sensitive, and context-specific, ensuring that democracy delivers for all.

Democracy in Africa will not be saved from above; it will be rebuilt by the voices and visions of everyday citizens – whether it's the young organiser in a rural town, the woman leading a peace dialogue in a conflict zone, or the activist coding civic tech in a city basement.

Adaobi Egboka

Africa Program Director, Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice

A. National / Domestic Stakeholders

Actors: Governments, legislatures, political parties, civil society organisations, media, youth and women's groups

Policy Proposals	Practical Actions
Institutionalise long-term civic engagement.	Embed civic education in school curricula from early learning stages; create continuous civic education programs run by CSOs and local government structures.
Strengthen democratic accountability.	Political parties are to be revitalised as genuine vehicles of citizen representation rather than elite clubs.
Ensure inclusive governance.	Adopt bottom-up approaches that involve grassroots communities in governance; integrate youth and women's issues across all policy sectors.
Enhance state–citizen trust.	Establish institutionalised platforms where the government regularly consults and responds to citizen priorities; protect civic freedoms through domesticated legal frameworks.
Promote intergenerational dialogue.	Develop structured mentorship programs pairing senior leaders with emerging youth leaders; institutionalise youth quotas in decision-making structures.
Close monitoring and data gaps.	National statistical agencies and CSOs are to collaborate in generating real-time data on civic space restrictions and democratic performance, ensuring transparency.
Create sustainable resourcing models.	Develop national endowments, taxes, or public–private partnerships to finance civic engagement and civic space defence.
Promote locally led, sustainable democracy work.	Support domestic resource mobilisation and community-driven financing models; reduce overdependence on external donor cycles.

B. Regional & Continental Bodies

Actors: African Union (AU), Regional Economic Communities (ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, etc.), Pan-African Parliament, African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights

Policy Proposals	Practical Actions
Strengthen continental frameworks on civic space and democracy.	Ensure AU's African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) is enforced at the member state level with compliance monitoring.
Foster south–south collaboration and peer learning.	Create regional peer-learning platforms to exchange innovations and best practices for inclusive governance and civic engagement.
Enhance regional oversight of security and civic freedoms.	Mandate regional parliaments and human rights bodies to monitor misuse of emergency laws or restrictions on civic freedoms in member states.
Institutionalise intergenerational and gender equity approaches.	Create regional mentorship exchanges where experienced leaders build the capacity of younger activists and political actors; support gender parity frameworks across African sub-regions.
Build solidarity coalitions across borders	Strengthen cross-border CSO coalitions that amplify grassroots voices regionally and advocate collectively at AU and UN platforms.

C. Donors & Multilateral Partners

Actors: Bilateral donors, UN agencies, World Bank, AfDB, EU, INGOs, multilateral development partners

Policy Proposals	Practical Actions
Shift from event-based to systemic support.	Fund long-term civic engagement and institutional strengthening programs rather than ad-hoc election-period projects.
Mainstream gender and youth inclusion in programming.	Require funded programs to demonstrate measurable women's and youth participation; invest in youth-led and women-led organisations directly.
Support civic space defence and protection.	Provide flexible funding for CSOs working in restrictive environments; fund legal aid, digital security, and rapid response mechanisms for civic defenders.

Close data and monitoring gaps.	Invest in independent, African-led data collection on democratic performance and civic space; strengthen CSO–government–academic collaboration on evidence-based advocacy.
Strengthen state–civil society trust.	Encourage donor-supported convenings where governments and CSOs engage constructively; fund hybrid approaches that combine collaboration with rights-based accountability.
Expand south–south and cross-continental learning.	Support exchanges and technical partnerships between African CSOs and other Global South actors for adaptive strategies in democratic resilience.

Together, the three panels converge on a single proposition: **democratic resilience in Africa depends on building inclusive, citizen-driven systems of participation, protecting civic space, and fostering cooperative partnerships at national, regional, and global levels.** Governments must lead by reforming institutions, regional bodies must enforce accountability, and donors must support long-term, locally led initiatives that sustain the democratic ecosystem.

References

1. African insights 2025: Citizen engagement, citizen power," Afrobarometer, https://www.afrobarometer.org/feature/african-insights-2025/

2. Support for democracy in Africa falls amid military coups and corruption," The Guardian (2024), https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/17/support-for-democracy-in-africa-falls-amid-military-coups-and-corruption

3. Across Africa, public trust in key institutions and leaders is weakening," Afrobarometer, https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad891-across-africa-public-trust-in-key-institutions-and-leaders-is-weakening/

4. Africa," CIVICUS Monitor, https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings/africa/

5. Africa (South of the Sahara)," CIVICUS Monitor, https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2024/africa/

6. The Civic Space Crisis in Africa and How Civil Society Responds," CIVICUS, https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/op-eds/6475-the-civic-space-crisis-in-africa-and-how-civil-society-responds

7. Across Africa, public trust in key institutions and leaders is weakening," Afrobarometer (PDF), https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/AD891-PAP20-Africans-trust-in-key-institutions-and-leaders-is-weakening-Afrobarometer-31oct24.pdf

8. Determinants of institutional trust in sub-Saharan Africa: Does media exposure matter?" Afrobarometer, https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/WP210-determinants-of-institutional-trust-does-media-exposure-matter-Afrobarometer-13april25.pdf

9. Corruption and institutional trust in Africa," Afrobarometer, https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/wp81-corruption-and-institutional-trust-africa-implications-democratic-development/

Annex

TIME	SESSION	DESCRIPTION Host: Femi Olanipekun
09:00 – 10:00	Arrival & Registration	Guest check-in and networking over coffee
10:00 – 10:10	Welcome & Opening Remarks	Bukola Idowu, Team Lead KDI
10:10 – 10:20	Good will message	Dr. Obiageli "Oby" Ezekwesili, Founder of #FixPolitics.
10:20 – 11:20	Panel 1: Old and Emerging Forms of Cooperation for Democratic Resilience in Africa Panelists: 1. Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh, Senior Associate for Africa, NDI. 2. Bonolo Makgale, Program Manager, Democracy and Civic Engagement Unit, Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria 3. Abba Morro, Minority Leader, NASS Moderator: Dr. Mathew Ayibakuro, Governance Adviser, FCDO	Examines traditional and new multilateral, regional, and civic mechanisms sustaining democracy in conflict-prone contexts.

11:20 – 12:20	**Panel 2: Securing Civic Freedoms Amid Security Challenges: Building Forward Together** Panelists: 1. Sen. Abdulaziz Musa Yar'Adua, Chair, Committee on Army and Vice Chair, Committee on Electoral Reforms. 2. Peter Bofin, Senior Analyst, ACLED 3. Bukky Shonibare, Executive Director, Invictus Africa Moderator: Oluwafemi John Adebayo, Head of Research, KDI	Explores the balance between state security measures and protection of civic space and rights in Africa.
12:20 – 12:45	Tea Break & Networking	Informal engagement and refreshments
12:45 – 1:45	**Panel 3: Civic Engagement and Inclusive Governance as Catalysts for Peace and Development** Panelists: 1. Ashley Law, Civic Engagement Specialist, Founder, Dynamic Prism Solutions 2. Bodunrin Adebo, Development Specialist/ Executive Director, T2 Global Consulting 3. Dr Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi, Board Chair KDI Moderator: Adaobi Egboka, Africa Program Director, Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice	Focus on how civic participation and inclusive governance (youth, women, marginalized groups) can drive durable peace.

1:45 – 1:55	Presentation of Outcomes and Policy Proposals	Obaje Michael Ukeh, Country Director IFES, Kenya
1:55 – 2:00	Closing Remarks & Commitments	Dr Abiola Akiyode- Afolabi, Board Chair KDI

Citizens, Democracy & Development.