

# EMERGING CHALLENGES IN CIVIC TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION IN WEST AFRICA



## Introduction

West Africa is a region on the African continent in Sub-Saharan Africa, made up of 16 distinct countries; Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. These countries have varied political and socio-economic histories, ranging from the impact of years of colonial rule and then from military to democratic government. The history of this region has impacted governance and development systems, including how citizens are engaged with the governance process and how the governments are perceived due to mistrust. Consequently, West Africa has encountered distinctive challenges that hindered the development of civic technology (CivicTech) solutions and limited their potential for technological advancement. Nevertheless, the few civic tech tools available have helped to improve issues around healthcare, governance, transparency and accountability, amongst others, which has been a bane in development in most countries in West Africa.



## Overview of Civic Technology and its Significance

Civic technology (CivicTech) is a system of solving problems using technology and innovative approaches. It involves using technology to strengthen the links between the Government and its citizens with a focus on how new technologies can improve governance and accountability, how we can bridge digital divides, and support service delivery. Civic tech tools have helped to improve the relationship between citizens and government, create a more transparent budgetary process, and enhance service delivery, decision-making, citizen engagement, and participation in electoral processes. Civic technology has significantly strengthened regional connections, civic activism, participation, and learning for leaders, researchers, public office holders, and other stakeholders, forging new pathways with technology to build innovation ecosystems across sectors to solve the region's most pressing problems.

# 1. Global trends in civic tech

While the world faces many political, financial, health, educational, economic, and social difficulties, civic tech growth in Africa has faced numerous challenges, such as lack of access to quality healthcare, education, poor infrastructure, and low quality of life, which in recent times have been, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. During and after the pandemic, there has also been a rise in the use of digital tools for communication and engagement for social change. The global trend of civic tech is broadly around open government and citizens' engagement and actions around how technological tools are used to access critical information about their representatives and engage the government. Citizens use digital tools and platforms such as social media to connect and amplify their voices and convene dialogues on policy issues and critical concerns for economic development for social change. For example, the #EndSARs and #BlackLiveMatters were global social change movements powered by civic technology that empowered citizens to access the government and connect with their communities globally.

Africa, particularly the West African region, has been plagued by corruption, lack of transparency and accountability, and data access, among other issues. For civic technology in Africa to meet global trends, there is a need for a more open and accessible government that understands its citizens' needs and empowers citizens to be more participatory. This bridges the gap between citizens and government using civic technology. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), rights groups, and social innovators are building technology-driven solutions to increase public participation and access to government information to promote citizens' agency for a more inclusive, transparent and accountable leadership for the public good. Some emerging civic technology innovations in West Africa are governance & public service digitisation, citizen engagement & online voting, cybersecurity, big data and analytics, and civic crowdfunding for social causes.

## Objectives

This paper aims to spotlight the emerging challenges of civic tech in West Africa and analyse the impact of these challenges on the current state of civic tech, focusing on how civic tech organisations can provide solutions to the region's most pressing problems. While examining these challenges, this paper offers insights into how civic tech synergizes to overcome these visible threats, to promote innovative solutions that are fit for purpose. It establishes a foundation for developing a strategic framework that promotes cohesion among civic tech innovators and enhances their ability to tackle regional challenges. Consequently, we will explore three dynamic themes to understand these emerging issues and challenges and chart pathways to improved civic tech innovation across the regions, spotlighting the importance of a collaborative approach. The theme is “a region under threat, building civic tech solutions in a hostile environment, and it takes a village.”

# Problem Statement

## 1. A Region Under Threats

Some of the regional threats to civic technology in West Africa are as follows: political and socio-economic instability, insecurity, shrinking funding for civic tech, lack of access to data & government platforms, digital rights and privacy, terrorism financing & laws, lack of freedom of the press; internet shutdown during elections; lack of freedom of association and free speech; lack of transparency in budgetary government processes; compliance and capacity issues, Government bureaucracy as a delay mechanism to stifle transparency innovations.

There are several case studies of civic tech initiatives spread across the region and addressing threats in distinct thematic areas with expertise in West Africa. Over 60 civic tech initiatives deliver solutions in education, healthcare, governance accountability, etc. Some of these organisations are Co-creation Hub (CcHUB), BudgIT, Creative Space Startups, Centre for Social Development, Connected Development, Enough is Enough (EiE), Paradigm Initiative, IGBANET, Kimpact Initiative, ZongoVation Hub amongst others.

### ■ The Nexus of Civic Tech and Regional Threats

The nexus between civic technology and the threats in the West African region is diverse and multifaceted. However, it is essential to mention some of these critical challenges and possible opportunities that exist amongst these threats.

#### A. Challenges

- **Illiteracy:** A high level of illiteracy in Africa can impede the utilisation of civic tech platforms in Africa.
- **Infrastructure:** Inadequate technology infrastructure, including power supply and network connectivity, poses challenges for effectively deploying civic technology tools across the continent.
- **Funding:** Many civic tech initiatives face funding challenges, making sustaining and scaling projects difficult over the long term. This can hinder innovation and the ability to address pressing civic issues effectively.
- **Politics:** To silence dissenting voices by some African administrations they may introduce policies that can stifle civic technology.

#### B. Opportunities

- **Increased Connectivity:** The ongoing improvements in internet connectivity and mobile technology present opportunities to reach a broader audience and facilitate greater civic engagement.
- **Youth Demographic:** Africa has a significant demographic advantage with a youthful population. Engaging the youth through civic technology can contribute to a more active and informed citizenry.
- **Collaboration and Networking:** Civic tech platforms can facilitate collaboration among various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and citizens, fostering a more collaborative approach to addressing societal challenges.

The role of civic tech in addressing these threats is invaluable. There is an urgent need to build capacity and the skills gap that currently exists, increase collaboration and partnership, and invest in different value chains to ensure the region is not just a consumer of technology for the public good but an innovator of a solution that speaks to the needs of the different countries in the region.

## Building Civic Solutions in a Hostile Environment

Hostile environments are defined in this section, as well as the factors contributing to their hostility. Understanding the characteristics of such an environment is crucial in devising effective strategies for building civic solutions. By examining the various challenges a hostile environment poses, we can gain insight into the obstacles that must be overcome. These challenges include a lack of trust and cooperation among stakeholders, restrictive policies and regulations, and threats and intimidation from those seeking to implement civic solutions. Recognising and addressing these challenges makes it possible to forge a path towards successful civic solutions.

In such a hostile environment, trust and cooperation are lacking, restrictive policies and regulations hinder progress, and threats and intimidation are prevalent. Despite these obstacles, civic solutions play a vital role in addressing and overcoming the issues faced. Communities can work together to find innovative solutions by building trust and collaboration. Advocacy for policy change helps create an enabling environment for civic initiatives to flourish. Strengthening security measures is crucial to protect those working towards positive change. Successful civic solutions serve as examples that inspire and motivate others to act.

Some challenges resulting from the hostile environment are

### ■ Restrictive Policies and Regulations

Another significant challenge is the presence of restrictive policies and regulations that hinder the development and implementation of civic solutions. Governments or authorities may impose stringent laws that limit the freedom of expression, assembly, or organisation, making it challenging for civic initiatives to operate effectively. These oppressive policies create legal barriers and bureaucratic red tape, impeding the progress of civic solutions and stifling innovation.

### ■ Threats and Intimidation

Building civic solutions often involves navigating threats and intimidation from various actors who seek to maintain the status quo. Individuals or groups opposed to change may employ tactics of violence, harassment, or intimidation to deter those advocating for civic solutions. Such hostile behaviour creates a climate of fear, making it difficult for individuals to participate in civic activities openly and undermining the potential for collective action.

Other important factors that limit and hinder civic innovations are lack of inclusion, intolerance, and the inability of stakeholders and government to adequately engage the youth, who are the vibrant minds of the nation. Overall, these challenges in building civic solutions highlight the complex dynamics and obstacles that must be addressed. Overcoming the lack of trust and cooperation, navigating restrictive policies and regulations, and countering threats and intimidation are crucial steps towards creating meaningful change in such contexts.

Overcoming these challenges requires innovative strategies that can navigate and challenge these policies, including legal advocacy, international pressure, and effective communication to counter the negative narratives propagated by the authorities. By championing an enabling environment and advocating for the protection of civic spaces, individuals and organisations can work towards building effective and sustainable civic solutions in the face of restrictive policies and regulations.



It is thus crucial to employ effective strategies to overcome the challenges faced in building civic solutions. Three key strategies have proven successful in this endeavour.

Firstly, building trust and collaboration is paramount. Trust can be developed by fostering transparent communication and actively listening to all stakeholders' concerns. This can be achieved through open dialogue, engaging communities, and working towards common goals. Collaboration allows diverse perspectives and expertise to come together, leading to innovative and sustainable solutions.

Secondly, advocacy for policy change is essential. Restrictive policies and regulations are a major hindrance to progress. The barriers can be dismantled by engaging with policymakers and advocating for inclusive and equitable policies. It is vital to highlight the benefits of civic solutions and their positive impact in addressing societal challenges.

Lastly, strengthening security measures is also crucial to protect those building civic solutions. Threats and intimidation can deter progress, but by implementing security protocols, training programs, and programs that promote inclusion and tolerance and creating safe spaces, individuals and communities can be safeguarded. This allows them to work without fear and focus on creating impactful solutions.

The challenges posed by a hostile environment can be overcome by employing these strategies of trust-building, policy advocacy, and strengthening security measures. Through these proactive approaches, civic solutions can thrive and contribute to positive change in society.

It is essential to take immediate action to overcome the challenges of building civic solutions in a hostile environment. There is a need to foster trust and collaboration among all stakeholders, including community members, organisations, and governments. Open and transparent communication channels must be established to encourage dialogue and cooperation.

Advocacy for policy change is another crucial step in making progress. In this hostile environment, it is necessary to challenge and reform restrictive policies and regulations that hinder the development of civic solutions. Engaging with policymakers, raising awareness, and presenting evidence-based arguments can help drive positive change.

Additionally, strengthening security measures is essential to ensure the safety and protection of individuals and organisations working on civic solutions. This includes implementing robust security protocols, investing in training and resources, and establishing emergency response plans.

Lastly, drawing inspiration from successful civic solutions implemented elsewhere is important. Learning from community-led initiatives, international collaborations, and technology-based solutions can provide valuable insights and practical approaches that can be adapted to the local context. By taking these actions, we can empower ourselves and our communities to build effective civic solutions in the face of hostility. It is time for everyone to come together, overcome challenges, and create a brighter future for all.

## It Takes A Village

### ■ **The Issue of Digital Inequality And Inclusivity**

The metaphor “it takes a village” underscores the need for collaboration and community involvement as essential elements for effectively navigating and surmounting the distinct challenges present in the civic tech landscape of West Africa. A digital divide in West Africa presents a substantial challenge for developers in civic technology. To address this disparity, collaborative endeavours must prioritise the advancement of digital literacy, allocate resources towards infrastructure development, and develop tailored solutions that consider the wide array of language and cultural backgrounds within the region.

### ■ **The Presence of Regulatory Ambiguities**

Regulatory frameworks that are ambiguous or restrictive have the potential to impede or hinder innovation. Innovators must get together to push for well-defined and supportive policies that effectively promote advancing and implementing civic technology solutions. Establishing a collaborative relationship with policymakers is of utmost importance to create a favourable atmosphere for developing and expanding civic technology.

### ■ **Resources and Funding**

Civic technology efforts sometimes encounter challenges related to financial limitations. One potential solution to this difficulty is adopting a collective approach incorporating resource-sharing and joint funding applications. The implementation of regional funds or the use of international alliances has the potential to offer a viable and enduring resolution to the constraints posed by limited resources.

### ■ **Data Privacy and Security**

The growing dependence on data-driven technologies has raised significant issues regarding privacy and security. Establishing regional standards for data protection through collaborative efforts, coupled with the sharing of knowledge on best practices, has the potential to foster a more secure environment for innovators and users.

### ■ **Community Engagement and Ownership**

Community engagement and ownership refers to the active involvement and sense of responsibility that individuals and groups within a community have toward the development and well-being of their community. It encompasses the participation of community members. The efficacy of civic technology solutions is then maximised when they are in congruence with the needs and ideals of the communities they aim to serve. It is recommended that innovators employ participatory design techniques, which entail engaging local populations in the collaborative process of creating solutions. This approach ensures that the solutions are culturally and contextually appropriate and are readily accepted by the general population.



## Recommendations For Future Directions For Civic Tech in West Africa

- **Increase access to government digital platforms**

To promote agency and more inclusivity, it is important for the government to support civic tech innovation and adopt mechanisms for open government accountability to build citizens' trust. Engaging with government bodies is crucial for the success of Civic Tech initiatives. This could involve establishing formal partnerships where governments provide support in the form of funding, infrastructure, and regulatory backing. The Track initiative by BudgIT is an excellent example of a civic tech tool that brings together a community of active citizens who want to track government service delivery for transparency and accountability. The government should create an enabling environment and policies supporting civic technology growth in West Africa to scale development across all sectors.



- **Empowering Local Communities for Partnerships**

Empowering local communities will involve more investment in human capital across the different civic tech value chains that can solve regional problems. This could involve understanding the peculiar issues by involving local communities and co-creating solutions that work for each country. This will also involve partnerships with relevant stakeholders to ensure that the citizens use the solutions created as a solution to the identified problem. For example, the GoVote initiative was co-created with young people in Nigeria to understand why they are not interested in participating in elections and what can be done to raise their interest and make the voting process more accessible. Digital platforms for electoral processes should be made transparent and accessible to all.

- **Training Programs for Individuals and Organisations**

Continuous capacity-building initiatives are critical for fostering expertise in the Civic Tech ecosystem. For example, partnerships between researchers and civic tech hubs can strengthen specialisation areas and create a skilled workforce capable of implementing impactful civic tech solutions. Additionally, mentorship programs supported by industry leaders will provide valuable guidance and support to emerging Civic Tech, contributing to a sustainable talent pipeline.

### **Capacity Building Initiatives**

There is an urgent need for capacity-building initiatives to increase civic education and enhance individuals' and communities' skills, knowledge, and abilities. Citizen and civic tech organisations should not wait for governments before they can innovate. They should broaden their scope and continue to push for dialogue with the government to adopt innovation through advocacy and collaboration. This advocacy and collaboration for policy change would also help to tackle regulatory obstacles and foster the growth of civic technology in West Africa.

## **Conclusion**

Corruption, as well as a lack of access to government platforms, are direct threats to civic technological advancement in West Africa. As a result, we have to ensure that there is open and transparent public service delivery, as well as citizen participation in processes that encourage agency and diversity. The government must foster an environment that fosters innovation and makes government platforms available. Furthermore, civic tech solutions developed in the region should be adapted to meet problems specific to the region through a co-design approach.

## Contributors

- Co-Creation Hub (CcHUB) - RAP West Africa
- African Youths Initiative on Crime Prevention - AYICRIP
- Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative
- BudgIT Nigeria
- Centre For Inclusive Social Development
- Creative Spaces Startups
- Citizens Gavel Foundation For Social Justice
- Glowing Minds Initiatives

## Appendix

Previous studies on civic tech in Africa

- <https://civictech.africa/civic-tech-research/>
- <https://civictech.africa/databases/civic-tech-evidence-map/>
- <https://www.peoplepowered.org/news-content/civic-tech-in-africa>
- <https://civictech.africa/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Exploring-Civic-Tech.pdf>
- <https://www.startus-insights.com/innovators-guide/civic-tech-trends/>
- <https://civictech.africa/about-ctin/regional-ambassadors-programme-rap/>