



Citizen Toolkit For Accountability

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Introduction

In every democratic society, the ultimate sovereignty indeed lies with the people. Governments are held accountable for their actions and decisions, as they are expected to serve the public interest from the moment they take office. This accountability is fundamental to ensure that power is not abused and that the government remains responsive to the needs and concerns of its citizens.

In Nigeria, this principle of accountability is particularly important, given the country's governance structure. The Nigerian Federation comprises 774 local government areas, which serve as the foundation of its governance structure. These local governments are designed to be the most responsive to the needs of the people, providing essential services and addressing local concerns. However, the persistent lack of transparency and accountability at this level of governance has taken a significant toll on the well-being of ordinary Nigerians.

Without accountability, democracy is impossible. The absence of accountability can lead to corruption, abuse of power and arbitrary decision-making. In contrast, democratic governments have several advantages in dealing with corruption, including elected representatives direct relationship with citizens, constitutional provisions and laws related to elections and governance.

Accountability refers to the answerability of public officials to the citizens through the government.

Citizen participation is crucial for responsible governance. Elections provide opportunities for citizens to choose their leaders and actively participate in decision-making. This fosters a sense of responsibility among elected officials and promotes informed participation among citizens.

Improving government accountability enhances public service delivery, fosters trust and promotes social cohesion. By strengthening accountability, governments can address citizens' needs, reduce corruption and use public resources more effectively.

Ultimately, the Local Accountability Watch toolkit aims to support young people, civil society organizations and local government authorities in their commitment to promote accountability. By facilitating collaboration and action to ensure citizens remain engaged and hold their elected representatives accountable. Through active participation in the government process, citizens can shape government policies, ensure the responsible use of local resources and foster a culture of transparency and accountability that benefits entire community.

Know Your Right

As citizens, it is essential to understand your rights and responsibilities to participate effectively in the democratic process and hold government accountable for their promise. This section will outline the key rights and responsibilities of citizens in Nigeria.

Rights:

- To participate in decisions affecting your communities.
- To engage in the governance process.
- To demand responsible leadership.
- To hold elected representatives accountable for their promises.

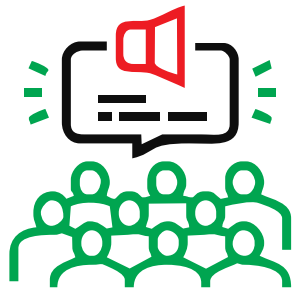
Responsibilities:

- To participate in all aspects of governance decision-making including politically, electoral processes, constitution-building, peace-building and community development projects.
- To seek greater control over representation bodies in community by taking ownership.
- To demand increased government accountability.

Exercising citizens' rights and fulfilling their responsibilities enables them to bring about meaningful change and ensure voices are heard. This drives positive changes in society, empowers citizens and their communities, and ensures that their rights are respected and protected.

Citizen Tools for Participatory Governance and Accountability Demand

The Nigerian constitution contains provisions that empower citizens to hold their government accountable. We can refer to them as citizen tools for participatory governance and accountability demand as follows:



Public Hearings



Community Town Hall Meetings



Freedom of Information Act (2011)



Right to Petition



**The Judiciary
(Chapter VII of the Constitution)**



Electoral Participation



**Economic and Financial
Crimes Commission (EFCC).**

Know the role of Government Authorities

Government authorities play vital role in ensuring accountability and transparency in governance. They are responsible for creating an environment that fosters citizen participation, promotes transparency and ensures that delivery of essential public services.

Responsibilities:

Provide public services: Ensure delivery of essential services such as education, healthcare and infrastructure.

Promote transparency and accountability: Foster a culture of openness and accountability in government decision-making and actions.

Protect human rights: Safeguard citizens' rights and freedoms as enshrined in the constitution.

Encourage citizen participation: Create opportunities for citizens to engage in the democratic process and participate in decision-making.

Obligations:

Comply with laws and regulations: Adhere to constitutional provisions, laws and regulations governing governance.

Manage public resources effectively: Ensure judicious use of public funds, assets and resources.

Provide access to information: Make government accessible to citizens to facilitate informed decision-making.



Accountability through Transparency: How Public Hearings can Strengthen Democracy

The public hearings provide a platform for citizens to contribute to law-making processes and hold leaders accountable. It is conducted by legislative bodies as an open and mutually respectful dialogue gathering of citizens, key stakeholders and government officials to discuss and make proposals for a proposed law in the Legislature. It also provides an opportunity to obtain public input on crucial legislative policy or proposed legislation that affects a wide range of citizens, such as constitution review or the annual budget. It allows a group of citizens to communicate their interest to legislators.

Ways Citizens Can Participate in a Public Hearing

Know when and where the public hearing is scheduled by searching for the information through television, radio and media platform.

Be informed of the Bill to be discussed and get a copy of it at the National Assembly or State House of Assembly.

Identify the priority challenges and draft your recommendations in line with the issues. You can also include challenge you believe should be addressed which has not been included.

Prepare a letter of memorandum detailing your views and recommendations.

You can submit copies before the public hearings.

Attend the public hearing and present your view.



Making Voices Heard: Effective Town Hall Meeting for Government Accountability

A community town hall meeting is an informal public meeting around share subjects of interest. For many years, town hall meetings have been a vital tool for informing citizens about emerging issues, gauge where a community stands on certain subjects and serve as a place to identify and implement solutions to challenges. These meeting also facilitate direct engagement between citizens, local leaders, government representatives, the ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), media and other key stakeholders to discuss about community needs, deficiencies and possible future obstacles. This also serves as an opportunity for citizens of the community to raise questions or grievances they might have concerning their needs. Key outcomes from the community town hall meetings included commitments from government representatives to ensure community concerns are well addressed.

How to Plan a Town Hall Meeting

Define the purpose and objectives: Have a clear purpose on what you want ro achieve and the objective could be on a particular concerns or needs.

Understand the community needs: Make research to identify community values, interest and priority needs. This information will help you know what to focus on the discussion and gives you presentation credibility.

Form a planning committee: Gather a team of committed individuals from your organization, partners and community to help and organize the town hall meeting.

How to Plan a Town Hall Meeting

Follow-up with attendees to gather feedback and assess the effectiveness of the town hall meeting, which would help you understand whether you achieved your town hall purpose and how you can put the solutions that was developed into practice in the community.

Develop an action plan by establishing a working group or committee to implement the ideas and solutions discussed during the meeting. Some possible ideas can be policy recommendations, information dissemination or media outreach.

All these steps can help you develop a broader advocacy strategy by leveraging the Town Hall meeting outcomes of the attendees and stakeholders.



Empowering Citizens: A Guide to Petition for Change

The right to petition is a crucial aspect of citizen engagement and demanding accountability from government agencies or the National Assembly. It gives citizens a chance to express their grievances or advocate for policy changes, creating meaningful impact and producing real results.

To start a petition, you need to identify your goal and desired audience. Every petition has a different goal, audience and scope of change. Knowing what you want to change and who you need to reach will help massively as you develop the petition. Also, check government agencies or institutions requirements for petition format and signature numbers needed.

Choosing a Platform

Choose the proper platform to get the right audience to sign your petition. You can use a digital platform to reach global audiences or physical copies for local communities. So all you need to do is choose the proper platform, you can use templates for physical copies or digital platforms for global reach.

How to Create a Digital Petition Using Online Platforms

There are popular websites for digital petitions include Change.org, Care2 and GoPetition. These platforms easily and freely allow you to create and share your petitions digitally but have limited options when it comes to the designing petition.

Basic Steps of Creating a Petition

Have clearly purpose and goal: What are you petitioning for what you hope to achieve at the end.

Writing the petition statement: Provide a comprehensive context, explain the issue, state what you are asking and the desired outcome.

Identify the target audiences: Choose the decision-maker that has the power to address the issue and also determine who you want to sign the petition.

Customize the petition: Add attractive messaging images or videos to make it more engaging.

Gathering signatures: Encourage people to sign the petition and share it, either in-person or online.

Submit the petition: Present the petition to the decision-maker or relevant authority.



Open Government: A Guide to Freedom of Information Request (FOI) Act

This act enables citizens to access information from government agencies, promoting transparency and accountability. The FOI Act was initiated to make public records and information more freely available, and provide for public access to public records and information. In Nigeria for example, the FOI Act requires that the information or data requested must be provided to the requester within 7 working days. Section 2(2) of the Act states that “A public institution shall ensure proper organization and maintenance of all information in its custody in a manner to facilitate public access to information” and section (4) adds that “All information relating to the receipt or expenditure of public or other funds of the institutions should be widely disseminated and made readily available...”

The Freedom of Information Act was signed into law on 28th May, 2011 by the former President Goodluck Jonathan as a legislation that guarantees public access to records and information held in the public domain. The 32-section document also seeks to protect public officers from being punished or prosecuted for disclosing certain kinds of official information without authorisation.

In countries where such like the Freedom of Information exist, it should be leveraged as a tool to hold government accountable through demand for project and budget information from MDAs. From the above statement, it is evident that the FOI Act nullifies the provision of laws like the Official Secrets Act and the Criminal Code that legislate against unauthorised disclosure of public information. In fact, as a Law of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act surpass that of any existing law regarding the concealment and disclosure of public information in Nigeria.



5 Steps on How to Use the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act

Identify the information needed: Before filling the Freedom of Information Act request, it is advisable to make research to be very clear on what information you are seeking such as which agencies or public institutions hold the documents you need and any available government data related to what your interest is already in the public domain. The National Assembly and the courts are not covered by the FOI Act, meaning you cannot send an FOI request to a court or the National Assembly. You can only send your FOI request to all the executive branch ministries, departments and agencies.

Prepare FOI request letter: Write a formal request, specifying the information you seek and providing appropriate details to enable the agency to locate it.

Submit FOI request: Send your request to the designated government agencies that the subject to the FOI request, following the prescribed format and procedure. Some agencies have online submission forms while many accept requests sent by fax or email.

Wait for a response before tracking the request: After submitting the FOI request, you have to wait because under the law, agencies are to issue a final determination within 7 working days, although many FOI Act agency offices have weighty backlogs of pending requests. However, you will receive a response, letter of acknowledgement or cite a backlog of requests as to what could delay processing your request or the information can be released in full or in part.

Appeal if rejected: If your request is rejected, refuse to confirm or deny the existence of the information for procedural reason, you can appeal by crafting letter and sending it to the agency, a higher authority or seeking judicial review.

Best FOI Act Practices

Always be specific, brief and direct in your request.

Provide sufficient details to enable the agency to locate the information, documents or records.

Use the agency's FOI template or format, if available.

Keep a record of your request and correspondence.

Use the FOI Act responsibly, always ask for permission if you are going to replicate a document that's been sent to you.

Holding The Power Accountable: Harnessing the Judiciary for Good Governance

In Nigeria, the judiciary provides mechanism for citizens to challenge government decisions or actions that considered unconstitutional or unjust. The courts play a crucial role in safeguarding human rights in Nigeria, it is the most important constitutional structure designed to ensure the observance of and compliance with the human rights norms codified in the various international human right instruments and constitution.

This session aims to empower citizens, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to effectively utilize the judiciary to promote transparency, accountability, social justice and good governance.

Key Institutions

Nigerian Bar Association Human Rights Institute (NBA-HRI)

The NBI-HRI is a non-governmental organization established by the Nigerian Bar Association to promote and protect the rule of law, the independence of the legal profession and advance human rights enforcement in Nigeria. The institute has a human rights desk in all 120 branches of the Nigerian Bar Association across the country.

The NBI-HRI has always been at the vanguard in the promoting of human rights, the rule of law, access to justice and good governance.

Legal Aid Council of Nigeria

The Legal Aid Council of Nigeria is a government agency that works nationwide and, provides free legal service to indigent persons, promote access to justice and enhance the administration of justice in Nigeria. Its vision is to build a Nigeria where is equal access to justice for all, regardless of means, and where all rights are respected, protected and defended.

Promoting Accountability in Public Office: The Role of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)

The Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) was established to combat economic and financial crimes, reinforcing accountability in public offices. The EFCC's mandate includes investigating and prosecuting financial malpractices, such as corruption, embezzlement and money laundering.

Basic Functions

Investigating financial crimes and prosecuting offenders.

Recovering stolen assets and funds.

Collaborating with other agencies to promote transparency and accountability.

EFCC Reporting Process: A Guide for Citizens

To report any case to the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), follow these steps:

Gather Evidence: Collect relevant information, documents or record related to the case.

Submit a Petition: Write a detailed petition outlining the case including evidence information and supporting documents.

Visit the EFCC website/office: Go to the official EFCC website or visit the nearest EFCC office to submit your information.

By working together, citizens and EFCC can promote transparency, accountability and good governance in Nigeria.

Strengthening Democracy: Citizens' Charters in the Electoral Process

In Nigeria, citizens exercise signature power through electoral participation by voting leaders and shaping governance. By leveraging a Citizen Charter strategy, citizens can transparency, accountability and responsive governance. A Citizens Charter is a written commitment between stakeholders (government and citizens) for transparent and accountable governance. It provides framework for different levels, ensuring citizens can participate for better results.

The Citizens Charter aims to:

Ensure regular interactive dialogue between citizen-voters and government/political actors and government/political actors to fulfill commitments to the development agenda.

Encourage active citizenship, promoting a balanced relationship between politicians, citizens and civil society actors, and amplifying the voice of the underserved in policy and planning.

In the election process, Citizens Charters empower citizens to:

Set clear expectations for leaders performance and service delivery.

Hold leaders accountable for their commitments and actions.

Make informed choices based on leaders track records.

By leveraging Citizens' Charters, citizens can shape governance, ensure accountability and promote performance-oriented leadership, fostering a culture of openness and good governance.



Conclusion

Democracy requires active citizen participation in all democratic aspects especially in local governments' level. Promoting transparency and accountability in governance is crucial to ensure that power is exercised responsibly and in the best interests of citizens.

By working collectively with local government agencies, we can promote transparency, accountability and good governance, ultimately strengthening democracy at the local level. The tools and strategies outlined in this toolkit provide a comprehensive framework for citizens to engage with government and hold leaders accountable.

Active citizen participation is essential for responsible governance, through collective action, we can build more transparent, accountable and responsive governance that serves the needs of all citizens. By working together, we can foster a culture of openness, transparency and accountability that benefits the entire society.



Local Accountability Watch: Citizen Toolkit For Accountability

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