Report of AGFCS Validation Meeting on Draft Reports of the Security Playbook Research

At a one-day validation meeting organised by SPACES FOR CHANGE on Thursday, September 23, 2021, at its Lagos State office, twenty-five (25) stakeholders comprising of **researchers**, **members of the Action Group on Free Civic Space (AGFCS)**, **media practitioners**, **civic space experts**, **research consultants**, **representatives from non-profit organisations** and the **International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGO)** converged to validate the preliminary drafts and findings of an ongoing collective-action research of the AGFCS titled *The Security Playbook*. The validation meeting hosted with support from the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) afforded stakeholders the opportunity to evaluate, critique, and contribute to the draft-report findings and submissions of twelve AGFCS member-organisations whose collaborative studies interrogates the rising misuse of digital technologies, counter-terrorism and, national security laws to restrict the civic space in Nigeria.

While delivering her opening remarks at the event, the Executive Director of SPACES FOR CHANGE, Ms. Victoria Ibezim – Ohaeri welcomed all participants at the meeting and especially thanked the AGFCS members and researching partners for leveraging resources to embark on the collective research that proceeds chiefly to review five major civic space trends in the country. First, the misuse by state actors, of counter-financing of terrorism architecture and measures designed to address incidents of a lethal nature such as terrorism financing, to shrink the civic space, and antagonise activists and civic space actors. Second, the rising misapplication of terrorism warfare and anti-terrorism narratives to quell legitimate dissent and, restrict digital spaces used by citizens to express opinions and interrogate the quality of governance – as seen with the illegal ban of Twitter in Nigeria by the federal government on accounts of national security and integrity. Third, the role of private sector actors such as telecommunication companies and businesses either in collusion with state actors or independently in undermining the civic space. Fourth, the impact of these undue shocks on the civic space on minority groups in the country such as women, children, persons living with disabilities, and LGBTQIs (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgenders, Queers, Intersex persons). Lastly, the impact of global security measures on the civic space and how transnational dimensions of the war on terrorism provide the impetus and pretexts for attacks on the civic space.

Eleven member-organisations of the AGFCS who partook in the research presented key findings from their studies even as they availed the audience, information around the research methodologies - which incorporated both desk studies, focus group discussions, and field visits, all of which provided first-hand insights and road information on the research particulars. Key findings from various presentations underlined the increasing tendency of both state and federal authorities in Nigeria to securitise legitimate social groups, frame genuine citizen agitations and dissent bothering on national questions such as ethnically-based secessionists demands for self-determination, inter-ethic and communal clashes centered on resource acquisition, and citizens interrogation of the quality of governance as existential

threats that threaten to upset the unity and integrity of the country. These trends are evident in the Nigerian government's arbitrary proscription of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a secessionist group demanding for self-determination of the southeastern peoples of Nigeria, as a terrorist group despite lack of sufficient evidence to uphold the label and, a court order that ruled against the designation of the group as terroristic. The consequence of the ban imposed on the group has been a brutal and unfair crackdown on leaders, members, associates, and sympathisers of the group. In a similar context, is the renewed drive by the Nigerian government to control the digital space by repressing popular criticisms and expressions through the use of sophisticated technological tools to trace and persecute target actors. In an extreme case, state actors outrightly banned a digital platform that has become safe haven for conscious citizens in Nigeria to freely express political views and dissent, away from the harsh realities of protesting offline such as police brutality on protestors and new measures of social distancing birthed by the coronavirus pandemic. According to findings from a research report, the Nigerian government between 2011 and 2021 has through gaps in national data privacy laws, increased budgetary and resource allocation on surveillance tools furthered a rogue crackdown and unlawful-targeted monitoring of activists, journalists, protestors, and opposition voices in politics.

Reacting to the findings from the presentations, participants queried researchers to provide information as regards the influence of the state's crackdown on separatist sympathisers on forced migration of residents in affected areas to other locations in the country. A particular participant and media practitioner illuminated the room with information related to the National Broadcasting Commission's express directive to media houses in the country to quit discussing issues related to the agitations of separatist groups in the country or run the risk of fines and revocation of broadcast licenses failure to adhere to the gag order. Another participant, a representative of the INGO forum in Nigeria informed the room of how unfounded narratives and perceptions of humanitarian groups in northeast Nigeria as susceptible to terrorism continue to discredit the activities of the group and fuel over-reaching regulatory actions by state actors and oversight bodies in the country who inadvertently stifle the operational capacities of humanitarian agencies in war-torn zones of Nigeria's northeast region.

A presentation from Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri educated participants and members of the AGFCS on the rudiments of good research. In most cases, a research study is a rigorous process that sets out to investigate an unknown phenomenon, provide new data and knowledge that solves a specific problem, or feeds the curiosity of readers and reviewers. Thus, a good research study must offer to its readers, information on the methodology of the research – which translates to the various systems and methods employed by the researcher to gather data and information embedded in the study. Also, a research study must strive to present data clearly, analytically, and coherently such that readers and audience can grasp and assimilate the core of the study easily. Building a table of content for a research study also provides a definite roadmap with which researchers can narrow upon to structure information gathered from the research on a narrow focus strictly concentrated on the subject matter.

Finally, a research study needs to provide acknowledgments also known as declarative information that informs the reading audience of persons or institutions who supported the research or provided a basis for the research study.

In a call-in session, James Savage of the Fund for Global Human Rights commended researchers, participants, and contributors at the strategy meeting. He expressed great expectations as regards the ultimate outcome of the collective research and its potential to provide useful information and relevant guidance for civic actors to protect and defend the civic space. Ultimately, the collective action research when finalised will identify entry points and opportunities for reform of the security architecture in Nigeria to defend and expand the civic space. The meeting ended on a pleasant note as members gathered together to felicitate with a member of the AGFCS whose birthday happened to fall on the day of the meeting.