



31 August 2023

Communiqué: West Africa Civil Society Week 2023 (#WACSW23)

Embracing Democracy, Peace, and Prosperity: A Collective Call for a Stronger West Africa

Preamble

We, the participants of the maiden West Africa Civil Society Week 2023 (WACSW23), representing over 100 civil society organizations from across West Africa and partners from East and Southern Africa, convened in Lagos, Nigeria, from August 29 to 31, 2023. Under the auspices of the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) and West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS), the meeting deliberated on critical issues affecting democracy, peace and prosperity in the region. We engaged in candid discussions, shared experiences, and collectively formulated strategies and demands to address challenges and contribute to a peaceful and prosperous West Africa.

Challenges and Concerns

The maiden WACSW23 occurred against the backdrop of alarming democratic recession, growing authoritarianism, shrinking civic space, increasing public disaffection over bad governance and recurring coups d'état in West Africa. Indeed, during the days of the convening, there was a military coup in Gabon, in Central Africa, further underscoring the relevance of, as well as the urgency with which the prevailing challenges must be addressed.

While we recognize that our region is at a crossroads, with citizens increasingly expressing frustration due to unfulfilled democratic dividends and a lack of responsive governance, we unequivocally oppose coups and military interventions in politics as a panacea to the governance challenges facing the region. We emphasize the need for citizens' voices to be heard, and for their legitimate concerns to be acknowledged and addressed through peaceful and democratic means.

To this end, we strongly denounce the coups d'état that have happened in our region, and the recent one in Gabon in the Central African region. We also condemn all other forms of unconstitutional changes of government and manipulated tenure elongation that undermine the democratic principles our region aspires to uphold. We further express our deep concern over the disturbing trend of recession in democratic practices and values, and reiterate our commitment to democratic governance, constitutional rule, and democratic electoral practices as fundamental principles for sustainable development and peace.

Resolutions:

- 1. Non-Military Interventions:** We call upon the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to exercise caution and prioritise peaceful approaches in responding to governance crises in the region. We stand united against any military intervention in Niger, or in any part of the region, by ECOWAS that could have destabilizing ramifications within the region. We advocate for the restoration of constitutional order through dialogue and negotiation, in line with the principles of democracy and the interests of the people.
- 2. Protecting Civic Space and Inclusive Development:** We emphasise the importance of protecting, strengthening, and expanding civic space at this critical juncture, with particular emphasis to enable civil society organisations to thrive and contribute effectively to democratic governance, national and regional development. We reject any attempts to curtail freedom of expression, association, and assembly, which are fundamental to the functioning of a vibrant civil society. We call on governments to uphold human rights and ensure the safety of civil society actors.
- 3. Moral Authority of ECOWAS:** We call upon ECOWAS to reassert its moral authority and regain the trust of its citizens. There is no better time than now for the 'ECOWAS of the People' mantra to translate into tangible commitment to the promotion of the well-being of the people of West Africa. We advocate for the operationalization of the ECOWAS Social and Economic Council (ECOSOCC) to strengthen collaboration between ECOWAS and civil society, moving forward.
- 4. ECOWAS should Adopt the Provisions of the Supplementary Protocol:** We appeal to ECOWAS to adopt the revised supplementary protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (as amended), as well as commit to a uniform application of the provisions of the protocol in response to unconstitutional change of government.
- 5. Civil Society Solidarity:** We highlight the importance of unity among civil society organizations to amplify our impact and contributions to democracy, peace, and prosperity of the region.
- 6. Amplify Youth Agency:** Supporting and safeguarding the engagement of young people by providing platforms, training, and resources and ensuring that their voices are genuinely considered in the Civic Space.
- 7. Peace and Prosperity through Collaboration:** We recognize that achieving lasting peace and prosperity in West Africa requires collective and multi-stakeholder efforts. We urge governments, ECOWAS, and development partners to prioritize the well-being of citizens over political interests. Civil society plays a vital role in advocating for the rights and welfare of the people, and we commit to sustained engagement, collaborative action, and innovative approaches to advance these goals.
- 8. Inclusive Actions for Progress:** We underscore the importance of the principle of leaving-no-voices-behind and, in this regard, urge both state and non-state actors to prioritise inclusion, especially the involvement of the youth and women, in all actions geared towards the progress of our region.

In conclusion, the West Africa Civil Society Week 2023 has been a pivotal moment for dialogue and deeper reflection during these difficult times in the region. We emerged from this inaugural meeting with a renewed commitment to defending democracy, promoting peace, and ensuring prosperity in West Africa. We urge governments, ECOWAS, and development partners to join us in these efforts.

Signed:

Representatives of Civil Society Organizations across West Africa
Issued on this day, 31 August 2023, in Lagos, Nigeria.