



## JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY, POLICY AND STRATEGIC STUDIES

Volume 2, Number 1 (March, 2026)

ISSN: 1595-9457 (online); 3043-4211 (print)

Website: <https://jppssuniuyo.com/> Email: [jppssuniuyo@gmail.com](mailto:jppssuniuyo@gmail.com)

Received: February 04, 2026 Accepted: March 20, 2026 Published: March 31, 2026

**Citation:** Owodiong-Idemeko, Ide O. (2026). "Securing and Sustaining the Civil Space for the Success of the Arise Agenda in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria." *Journal of Philosophy, Policy and Strategic Studies*, 2 (1): 85-105.

Article

Open Access

### SECURING AND SUSTAINING THE CIVIL SPACE FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE ARISE AGENDA IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

**Ide O. Owodiong-Idemeko**

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Uyo, Nigeria

**Corresponding Email:** [iooidemeko1@gmail.com](mailto:iooidemeko1@gmail.com)

#### Abstract

The concept of civil space has become central to contemporary governance and development discourse, particularly in emerging democracies where state–society relations remain fluid and contested. This paper examined the dynamics of securing and sustaining the civil space as a prerequisite for the success of the *ARISE Agenda*, the socio-economic development framework of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, under the administration of Governor Pastor Umo Bassey Eno (2023–2025). Drawing on *Public Sphere Theory*, *Participatory Governance Theory*, and *Social Accountability Frameworks*, the paper explored how openness, inclusivity, and citizen engagement shape the performance and sustainability of policy agendas. Using qualitative evidence from government policy actions, media reports, and civic engagement practices, the study argued that a vibrant and secure civil space is indispensable to participatory governance, policy legitimacy, and sustainable development. It found that the Eno administration has implemented several mechanisms, such as transparent budgeting, institutionalized stakeholder dialogues, and protection of civic rights that demonstrate a deliberate policy of securing civic freedoms while expanding public participation in governance. The paper concluded that sustaining civil space in Akwa Ibom requires continued institutional openness, civic education, and legislative safeguards that entrench participatory governance as a permanent feature of the state’s political culture.

**Keywords:** Civil Space, Governance, ARISE Agenda, Participatory Democracy, Transparency, Akwa Ibom

Copyright © 2026 By JPPSS. Publishers: Omega Books

This is an open access article which permits unrestricted use provided the work is properly cited.

## **Introduction and Context**

**Background to the Study:** Civil space, the sphere in which individuals and organized groups freely express, assemble, and participate in the public life of their society, constitutes the cornerstone of democratic governance and sustainable development (Edwards, 2014; CIVICUS, 2023). It is within this domain that citizens engage governments, articulate demands, and hold power accountable. The vibrancy of this space determines not only the quality of democracy but also the effectiveness of policy implementation (Anheier, 2017; Fox, 2015). In developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, civil space has often been constrained by historical authoritarian legacies, weak institutional frameworks, and limited civic awareness (Gyimah-Boadi, 2019). Nigeria exemplifies this paradox: while constitutionally democratic, its civic sphere remains periodically challenged by restrictive state practices, misinformation, and declining trust in institutions. Nonetheless, several subnational governments have demonstrated progressive efforts to rebuild trust through inclusive governance, of which Akwa Ibom State stands as a recent example.

**The ARISE Agenda as a Framework for Inclusive Development:** The *ARISE Agenda*, an acronym for *Agricultural Revolution, Rural Development, Infrastructure Maintenance and Advancement, Security Management, and Educational Advancement*, serves as the development blueprint of the Pastor Umo Eno administration (Government of Akwa Ibom State, 2023). The agenda represents a shift from resource dependency to people-centered development, emphasizing innovation, inclusivity, and sustainability. The Agenda's underlying philosophy mirrors participatory governance ideals by recognizing that development outcomes are optimized when citizens, civil society, and the private sector co-create solutions (Sen, 1999). As such, the success of the ARISE Agenda cannot be achieved solely through state capacity; it depends critically on a robust civil space that allows dialogue, oversight, and shared ownership of the development process.

**Civil Space as a Governance Variable:** Civil space operates as both a governance instrument and a societal safeguard. It mediates between the state and citizens, facilitating the exchange of information, ideas, and accountability claims. When civil space is open, citizens can influence governance processes, monitor state activities, and prevent elite capture of public resources (Gaventa, 2006). Conversely, when civil space contracts, through censorship, suppression of assembly, or lack of transparency - governance becomes opaque, policy legitimacy erodes, and development outcomes weaken. Within Akwa Ibom State's evolving political landscape, the deliberate policy of expanding civil space under Governor Umo Eno marks a significant departure from traditional administrative orthodoxy. His approach underscores the belief that governance thrives where citizens are not merely beneficiaries of policy but co-architects of public value.

**Research Problem and Objectives:** Despite the normative consensus on the importance of civil space, its practical operationalization within subnational governance in Nigeria remains underexplored. The challenge lies in understanding how subnational actors secure civil space in politically diverse contexts, and how such openness affects the success of governance frameworks like the ARISE Agenda. This paper therefore seeks to:

- i. Theorize the relationship between civil space and participatory governance in the context of the ARISE Agenda;
- ii. Analyze the strategies adopted by the Eno administration to secure and sustain civil space between 2023 and 2025; and

- iii. Discuss the implications of these practices for sustainable governance and development in Nigeria.

**Methodological Note:** The paper employs a qualitative analytical approach, drawing evidence from secondary data - government policy documents, media statements, and civic engagement records -triangulated with academic literature on governance and civil society. While the study is interpretive rather than statistical, its strength lies in the integration of empirical observation with theoretical reasoning.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Civil space as a field of social and political interaction can be interpreted through several complementary theoretical lenses. For this paper, three frameworks are employed to situate the Akwa Ibom experience within broader governance and development discourse: Habermas' Public Sphere Theory, Participatory Governance Theory, and the Social Accountability Framework. Together, these theories explain how open civic engagement, institutional inclusivity, and accountability systems contribute to sustainable governance and development outcomes.

**Habermas' Theory of the Public Sphere:** The notion of the *public sphere*, introduced by Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989), provides a foundational framework for understanding the civil space as a communicative arena between the state and society. Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as "a domain of our social life where public opinion can be formed," characterized by rational discourse among free citizens. In this sphere, individuals deliberate on matters of common concern independent of state or market domination (Habermas, 1989). In the context of Akwa Ibom State, the *public sphere* represents the institutional and discursive spaces - such as town hall meetings, civil society consultations, and digital forums -where citizens engage government policies. By encouraging debate, inclusivity, and mutual reasoning, the Eno administration aligns with Habermasian ideals that democratic legitimacy is derived not from coercion but from communicative rationality (Cohen & Arato, 1992). The hosting of regular *Stakeholder Delivery Meetings* and the Governor's initiative, *Come Let's Reason Together* with traditional rulers, exemplify local adaptations of the public sphere where governance discourse is made participatory and dialogic. These initiatives echo Fraser's (1990) expansion of Habermas' theory, emphasizing "subaltern counterpublics" - spaces where marginalized voices can also participate in governance debates.

**Participatory Governance Theory:** While Habermas provides the philosophical grounding for open discourse, *Participatory Governance Theory* (PGT) operationalizes how such engagement can be institutionalized in public policy. Participatory governance emerged from critiques of top-down state models, arguing for shared decision-making among government, civil society, and citizens (Fung & Wright, 2003). It posits that the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance improve when citizens are directly involved in problem-solving, policy formulation, and implementation. In Akwa Ibom's case, participatory governance is not only a political ideal but a strategic policy tool for realizing the ARISE Agenda. The creation of the Ministry of Youth Development, separation of youth affairs from sports administration, and introduction of ARISE Community Liaison Desks are institutional innovations that embed citizen participation within state structures.

Furthermore, the *ARISE Ambassadors Programme* - a grassroots mobilization platform -reflects the participatory governance logic of devolving ownership of policy

outcomes to citizens. As Gaventa (2006) argued, such “invited spaces” of participation can transform traditional power relations when accompanied by transparency and responsiveness. The participatory governance lens thus helps to explain why the Eno administration’s policies emphasize *dialogue, inclusion, and partnership* - transforming citizens from passive beneficiaries to active collaborators in development.

**The Social Accountability Framework:** The *Social Accountability Framework* complements participatory governance by emphasizing citizens’ ability to monitor and evaluate state performance through formal and informal mechanisms (Ackerman, 2005; Fox, 2015). It extends the idea of accountability beyond elections to include continuous interaction between state institutions and civic actors. According to the World Bank (2004), social accountability involves “the broad range of actions and mechanisms that citizens, communities, and civil society organizations use to hold public officials accountable.” In Akwa Ibom, social accountability has been institutionalized through several reforms under the ARISE Agenda. The publication of the 2024 Citizens’ Budget, establishment of the Bulk Purchasing Agency with explicit transparency mandates, and commitment to open procurement processes demonstrate efforts to ensure fiscal accountability and civic oversight. These initiatives resonate with empirical findings that link transparency and citizen monitoring to improved governance outcomes (McGee & Gaventa, 2011). Moreover, the Governor’s public engagement with labour unions during the 2023 fuel subsidy protest, and his affirmation of citizens’ rights to peaceful dissent, illustrate the social accountability dynamic where citizens’ voices directly influence state action. The release of ₦1.8 billion for teachers’ entitlements following such civic dialogue underscores the productive potential of accountable governance.

**Integrative Perspective:** From Theory to Practice: Taken together, the three frameworks - Habermas’ *Public Sphere*, *Participatory Governance Theory*, and *Social Accountability* - form an integrative analytical model for understanding civil space as a triadic interaction among *communication, participation, and accountability*.

Table 1: Theoretical Integration of Communication, Participation and Accountability

Theoretical Lens	Key Concept	Application in Akwa Ibom
Public Sphere (Habermas, 1989)	Communicative Rationality	Town Hall Dialogues, Stakeholder Delivery Meetings
Participatory Governance (Fung & Wright, 2003)	Co-production of Policy	ARISE Ambassadors, Ministry of Youth Development
Social Accountability (Fox, 2015)	Citizen Oversight and Responsiveness	Citizens’ Budget, Bulk Purchase Agency Transparency o

This triadic model provides a framework for assessing how state-level governance reforms can secure and sustain civil space while advancing socio-economic development goals. It also offers a conceptual bridge between *democratic theory* and *development practice*, situating Akwa Ibom’s experience within global debates on governance innovation in the Global South.

## Literature Review

**Civil Space and Democratic Governance: Global Perspectives:** Civil space has increasingly become a central theme in global democratic governance literature. It is widely defined as the social, political, and institutional environment that enables individuals and groups to freely express themselves, associate, and participate in public affairs (CIVICUS, 2023; United

Nations, 2020). The vibrancy of civil space is both an indicator and a driver of democratic consolidation (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014). Scholars such as Edwards (2014) and Anheier (2017) describe civil society as the “third sector” that bridges the state and market, fostering pluralism, accountability, and social innovation. When this space is open, citizens can shape governance agendas through advocacy, dialogue, and public oversight. Conversely, a shrinking civil space - manifested through restrictions on expression, association, or assembly - undermines trust, erodes legitimacy, and weakens development outcomes (Buyse, 2018).

Globally, literature on governance reform in developing contexts underscores that securing civil space requires deliberate state actions - legal frameworks protecting civil rights, institutional mechanisms for participation, and political leadership that values inclusivity (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Fox, 2015). Participatory institutions such as *citizen budgets*, *public hearings*, and *social audits* have become hallmarks of progressive governance systems (World Bank, 2012). These insights establish a foundation for assessing Akwa Ibom State’s current efforts: they illustrate that openness and engagement are not merely normative ideals but practical determinants of effective governance.

**Civil Space, Development, and the Public Sphere:** The concept of the public sphere, drawn from Habermas (1989), remains a key theoretical anchor in civil space studies. It refers to a communicative arena where citizens engage in rational debate, contributing to public opinion formation. Later scholars expanded this notion to include multiple, overlapping publics, which are knowledgeable, and that modern societies host a plurality of voices (Fraser, 1990; Calhoun, 1992). This pluralistic perspective is particularly relevant for Africa, where traditional institutions, community networks, and digital forums coexist as parallel public spheres (Hyden, 2013; Waisbord, 2018). In these contexts, the “public sphere” extends beyond elite policy discourse to include grassroots movements, informal associations, and digital activism. The literature further reveals that inclusive public spheres correlate with improved governance outcomes. Studies by Dryzek (2000) and Fung (2015) show that when citizens engage in deliberation, governments gain legitimacy and policies become more adaptive to local realities. This theoretical link reinforces the rationale behind Akwa Ibom’s stakeholder engagement mechanisms, such as town hall consultations and participatory project monitoring under Governor Umo Eno’s administration.

**Participatory Governance and Co-production of Policy:** Participatory governance has evolved from the broader discourse on democratic deepening (Fung & Wright, 2003; Cornwall, 2008). It emphasizes co-production - the collaborative design and implementation of public policies by state and non-state actors. Participation enhances not only legitimacy but also the quality of decisions, as it harnesses local knowledge and social capital (Narayan, 2002). Empirical research supports this claim: studies in Latin America, India, and East Africa show that participatory institutions, such as participatory budgeting and community development committees improve public service delivery and reduce corruption (Ackerman, 2005; Baiocchi, Heller & Silva, 2011). In sub-Saharan Africa, the participatory turn has been uneven. While some states have adopted consultative processes, others maintain hierarchical decision-making structures. Yet a growing number of African scholars advocate for “hybrid” models that blend traditional authority systems with participatory governance principles (Chinsinga, 2014; Gyimah-Boadi, 2019). Akwa Ibom’s engagement of traditional rulers under the “Come Let’s Reason Together” initiative exemplifies such hybridity, integrating indigenous governance with modern participatory frameworks.

**Social Accountability and Transparency in Governance:** Social accountability literature focuses on how citizens and civil society hold governments accountable between elections. Fox (2015) distinguishes between *tactical* accountability tools (isolated interventions) and *strategic* accountability systems (institutionalized mechanisms linking citizens, media, and oversight bodies). Effective social accountability requires both transparency and enforceable responsiveness. Globally, the *Open Government Partnership (OGP)* framework has inspired national and subnational reforms that promote fiscal openness, citizen monitoring, and freedom of information. Evidence from Brazil, the Philippines, and Kenya shows that citizen participation in budgeting and procurement processes increases trust and reduces leakage of public resources (McGee & Gaventa, 2011; Odugbemi & Lee, 2017). In Nigeria, social accountability is increasingly recognized as essential to subnational governance reform. Initiatives such as “Follow the Money,” “BudgIT,” and “Tracka” have expanded civic oversight capacity, but institutional receptivity remains uneven (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019). Against this backdrop, Akwa Ibom’s 2024 Citizens’ Budget and open fiscal communication represent notable contributions to the country’s evolving transparency ecosystem.

**Civil Space in African Governance Discourse:** African governance literature situates civil space within the continent’s struggle to consolidate democracy. Early postcolonial regimes often viewed civil society as opposition, leading to cycles of repression and liberalization (Bratton, 1989). The democratic wave of the 1990s, however, redefined civil society as a partner in governance rather than a threat. Since then, African scholars have emphasized that development must be participatory, inclusive, and locally owned (Mamdani, 1996; Hyden, 2013). Recent comparative studies reveal that African subnational governments are becoming laboratories for participatory innovation (De Vries, Nemec, & Junjan, 2021). In Kenya, for example, devolution has expanded civic engagement at the county level (Cheeseman et al., 2020). Similar trends are visible in South Africa’s Integrated Development Planning (IDP) and Ghana’s district-level participatory planning (Ayee, 2017). These examples demonstrate that localized governance reforms can foster accountability and trust, even within broader national constraints. Akwa Ibom’s approach under the ARISE Agenda mirrors these subnational innovations, signaling a continental shift toward citizen-centered development governance.

**Civil Space and Development in Nigeria:** In Nigeria, civil space has oscillated between expansion and contraction. Although the 1999 Constitution guarantees freedoms of expression, association, and assembly, practical constraints persist, including restrictive regulations, bureaucratic opacity, and the politicization of security agencies (Agbaje, 2011; Oloyede, 2020). Despite these challenges, civil society organizations have played a vital role in electoral reform, anti-corruption advocacy, and service delivery (Omotola, 2012). At the subnational level, states like Lagos, Kaduna, and Akwa Ibom have experimented with participatory budgeting, open contracting, and digital citizen feedback mechanisms. These initiatives show that civil space can be nurtured through proactive governance, even in politically complex environments. Akwa Ibom’s deliberate policy of openness, institutional innovation, and dialogue distinguishes it within this national trajectory. The literature, however, has yet to systematically analyze these emerging subnational practices, creating a scholarly gap this paper seeks to fill.

**Gaps in the Literature:** While extensive research links civil space to governance outcomes globally, there remains a paucity of subnational empirical studies in Africa, especially in Nigeria, that analyze how *state-level* administrations secure and sustain civil space within

development frameworks. Most scholarship focuses on national policies or donor-led initiatives, overlooking the role of governors, local bureaucracies, and indigenous institutions in shaping civic openness. This study addresses that gap by examining Akwa Ibom State as a case of localized governance innovation. It situates the ARISE Agenda within the continuum of global and African debates, demonstrating that subnational governance can provide practical models for civil space expansion and sustainable development.

### **Civil Space in Nigeria: Context and Challenges**

Nigeria's civil space has undergone significant transformation since independence in 1960, oscillating between periods of authoritarian restriction and democratic opening. The post-independence era witnessed a proliferation of civic associations - trade unions, student movements, professional bodies, and faith-based organizations - that mobilized for social justice and national identity (Adebayo, 2010; Agbaje, 2011). However, successive military regimes (1966–1999) constrained this space through decrees curtailing freedom of association, media censorship, and the suppression of dissent. The return to democratic rule in 1999 under the Fourth Republic marked a renewed optimism for civic engagement. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, particularly Chapters II and IV, enshrines fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and assembly as cornerstones of democracy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Yet, the practice of these freedoms has remained inconsistent, constrained by entrenched political patronage, corruption, and weak institutional accountability (Omotola, 2012; Oloyede, 2020). Nigeria's democracy has thus evolved within what Bratton (1989) describes as a "contested civic sphere" - a fluid arena where the state oscillates between inclusion and control. While civil society has expanded remarkably, it continues to face structural and systemic challenges that limit its transformative potential.

### **Structural Barriers to an Open Civil Space**

**a. Legal and Regulatory Constraints:** Despite constitutional guarantees, various laws and administrative practices have limited civil freedoms. The Public Order Act (Cap. P42, Laws of the Federation 2004) requires police permits for assemblies, a relic of colonial control that persists in practice. Similarly, the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015, though designed to curb cyber fraud, has occasionally been used to stifle online dissent (Eze, 2021). These regulatory ambiguities create a chilling effect on expression, particularly for journalists, activists, and youth groups operating in digital spaces (Amnesty International, 2022).

**b. Institutional Weaknesses and Political Capture:** Nigeria's governance institutions often exhibit low capacity and high politicization. Weak enforcement of accountability laws and the capture of oversight agencies by political elites hinder transparency (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019). Civil society organizations (CSOs), while active, sometimes lack the organizational strength, financial sustainability, or coordination necessary to influence systemic reform (Ikeanyibe, 2020).

**c. Security and Repression:** National security agencies have historically been deployed to manage civic activism. Protests, strikes, and demonstrations, particularly around issues such as fuel subsidy removal (2012, 2023), have often been met with coercive responses (Human Rights Watch, 2018). This securitization of civic expression has entrenched public distrust and discouraged grassroots mobilization.

**d. Socioeconomic Inequality and Digital Divide:** Civil engagement in Nigeria is deeply stratified. Urban elites and digitally connected youth dominate advocacy, while rural

populations remain marginalized from public discourse (Okafor, 2017). The limited access to technology and education among rural citizens constrains inclusive participation, perpetuating a gap between policy decisions and grassroots realities.

### **Contemporary Drivers of Civil Space Reconfiguration**

Despite these challenges, several factors have expanded Nigeria's civic landscape in recent years:

**Digital Activism and Networked Mobilization:** The rise of digital platforms has transformed civic activism. Movements such as #EndSARS (2020) exemplify a new form of decentralized, tech-enabled mobilization that amplifies citizen voices beyond traditional structures (Ojebode et al., 2021). This digital civic awakening has increased state responsiveness in certain areas, though it has also prompted renewed government attempts at online regulation.

**Open Government and Transparency Reforms:** Nigeria's membership in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) since 2016 has spurred incremental progress in fiscal transparency, public procurement reforms, and citizen participation in budgeting (OGP, 2022). Subnational adoption of OGP principles, particularly in states like Kaduna, Ekiti, and Akwa Ibom, illustrates how openness can be localized for greater impact.

**Strengthening of Local Governance and Subnational Innovation:** Decentralization has opened new governance frontiers for civic participation. State and local governments are increasingly becoming laboratories for participatory reform. As De Vries, Nemec, and Junjan (2021) note, subnational contexts often serve as "microcosms" of national democratic experiments, where leadership style and institutional innovation determine the degree of civic openness. Akwa Ibom's recent trajectory reflects this trend. The Umo Eno administration's deliberate policies on civic inclusion, media openness, and participatory accountability demonstrate how subnational leadership can model democratic responsiveness even within national constraints.

**Civic Space and Labour Relations:** Organized labour has historically been one of Nigeria's most influential civic actors. The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) have mobilized public opinion and challenged state policies on issues ranging from wage increases to fuel pricing (Fashoyin, 2005). However, relations between government and labour have often been adversarial, marked by strikes, lockouts, and mutual distrust. Governor Umo Eno's approach in Akwa Ibom has redefined this relationship through constructive engagement rather than confrontation. His dialogue with labour unions during the 2023 subsidy protests, which emphasized lawful dissent and responsive governance, reflects a maturing model of state-labour relations that strengthens civil space rather than constrains it. This example reinforces the argument that leadership style is a critical determinant of civic openness (Hyden, 2013; Gyimah-Boadi, 2019).

**The Paradox of Nigerian Civil Society:** Nigerian civil society is both vibrant and fragmented. On one hand, it has achieved remarkable policy influence in areas such as electoral reform, anti-corruption, and gender advocacy (Omotola, 2012). On the other, its dependence on donor funding, internal governance weaknesses, and limited reach in rural areas often undermine sustainability (Aina, 2018). Moreover, the increasing politicization of civic organizations has blurred the line between activism and partisanship, leading to legitimacy concerns. Scholars such as Agbaje (2011) and Ikeanyibe (2020) warn that without internal

reforms and institutional collaboration, civil society risks alienating the very citizens it seeks to empower.

**The Opportunity of Subnational Models:** In the face of national-level challenges, subnational governments like Akwa Ibom provide an alternative route for democratic consolidation. They can localize civic reforms, experiment with participatory models, and create institutional innovations that are contextually grounded. The *ARISE Agenda* offers one such model, linking policy success to the vibrancy of civil space. As Olowu and Wunsch (2004) argue, local governance innovations often become “islands of excellence” that inspire broader institutional transformation. Akwa Ibom’s case suggests that securing and sustaining civil space is not only possible within Nigeria’s complex federal framework but also instrumental to achieving developmental goals.

**The ARISE Agenda and Its Civil Space Nexus**

**The ARISE Agenda as a Governance Paradigm:** The ARISE Agenda constitutes the central policy blueprint of Governor Umo Bassey Eno’s administration in Akwa Ibom State (Government of Akwa Ibom State, 2023). It represents a people-centered developmental vision that aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). At its philosophical core, the ARISE Agenda is underpinned by three pillars of modern governance: participation, inclusivity, and accountability. These principles echo the normative frameworks articulated by global development theorists who argue that sustainable growth depends not merely on material investment but on participatory institutions that empower citizens to influence policy and monitor implementation (Sen, 1999; Fox, 2015; Fung, 2015). Thus, while the ARISE Agenda is a socio-economic strategy, it is equally a *governance innovation*, one that recognizes the vitality of civil space as both an enabler and outcome of development.

**Civil Space as the Implementation Ecosystem:** Civil space serves as the enabling environment through which the ARISE Agenda is both articulated and operationalized. It functions as a feedback loop, connecting government policy to citizen experience. When citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the media participate actively in agenda-setting and monitoring, policy effectiveness improves through localized accountability and contextual understanding (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). This relationship is particularly visible in Akwa Ibom’s experience, where civic engagement has been embedded across multiple policy domains:

Table 2: The Civil Space as Implementation Ecosystem of the ARISE Agenda

ARISE Pillar	Civil Space Mechanism	Outcome
Agricultural Revolution	Formation of farmers’ cooperatives and agribusiness networks; CSO involvement in agricultural extension s	Improved coordination, transparency in input distribution, and knowledge diffusion
Rural Development	Community Development Committees (CDCs) and ARISE Community Liaison Desks	Enhanced grassroots participation in local infrastructure planning
Infrastructure Maintenance and Advancement	Stakeholder Delivery Meetings and Citizens’ Feedback Platforms	Real-time citizen oversight of projects, reduced project abandonment
Security Management	Ibom Community Watch , involving over 6,000 trained youths	Increased public ownership of local security, reduced community-level

		crime
Educational Advancement	Youth dialogues and CSO partnerships for vocational training	Greater inclusivity and alignment between education policy and labour market needs

By embedding these participatory mechanisms, the ARISE Agenda converts civil space into an *implementation ecosystem*, transforming policy from a technocratic document into a socially negotiated process.

**The Philosophy of “Government of Inclusion:** Governor Umo Eno’s governance philosophy, often articulated as a “Government of Inclusion” derives from the understanding that sustainable development cannot be imposed; it must be co-created. His repeated insistence that “no one will be left behind” resonates with Amartya Sen’s (1999) concept of *development as freedom*, which frames participation as both a means and an end of development. Practically, this inclusive philosophy is operationalized through:

- i. **Stakeholder Delivery Meetings:** Monthly forums where senior officials present progress updates before legislators, CSOs, and media representatives. These meetings institutionalize horizontal accountability and vertical transparency.
- ii. **Town Hall Dialogues:** Conducted under the theme *Come Let’s Reason Together*, these forums provide structured spaces for citizens, traditional rulers, and community leaders to deliberate on state policies, grievances, and opportunities for collaboration.
- iii. **Media Engagement and Press Freedom:** The hosting of the **Nigerian Guild of Editors Conference** in Uyo (2023) and the Governor’s public reaffirmation of media freedom reflect a deliberate policy of openness. Such engagement enhances information flow and strengthens the “watchdog” role of the press—an essential function of a vibrant civil space.
- iv. **ARISE Ambassadors and Youth Mobilization:** A civic mobilization framework that empowers youths as development advocates and local monitors of ARISE projects, bridging the gap between policy and community realities.

These practices reflect what Hyden (2013) described as “*governance by negotiation*,” a participatory model where government actively dialogues with stakeholders to achieve collective legitimacy and cooperation.

**Transparency, Fiscal Openness, and Institutional Accountability:** The Eno administration’s reforms in fiscal governance illustrate the institutionalization of transparency within the ARISE framework. The publication of the 2024 Citizens’ Budget, a simplified, accessible version of the state’s financial plan demonstrates an unprecedented commitment to fiscal openness. By allowing citizens to track resource allocation and expenditure priorities, the administration has operationalized one of the core demands of the *Open Government Partnership (OGP)* principles (OGP, 2022). Complementing this transparency initiative is the Akwa Ibom Bulk Purchasing Agency, launched to manage food security interventions under the Agricultural Revolution pillar. The agency’s creation was accompanied by a public directive from the Governor emphasizing transparency, accountability, and value for money. By inviting public scrutiny into procurement and distribution processes, the administration sought to enhance the social accountability of its economic interventions. These measures mirror international best practices in participatory fiscal management observed in countries like Brazil (Participatory Budgeting) and the Philippines (Bottom-Up Budgeting), where

citizen engagement in fiscal planning correlates with improved developmental outcomes (McGee & Gaventa, 2011; Baiocchi et al., 2011).

**Civic Rights Protection and Peaceful Dissent:** A defining feature of civil space is the freedom to dissent peacefully. The Eno administration's handling of the 2023 labour protests over fuel subsidy removal provides a critical case study. Rather than suppressing demonstrations, the Governor publicly commended labour unions for maintaining order, affirming their constitutional right to protest, and subsequently engaging them in dialogue. The administration's decision to release ₦1.8 billion in unpaid teachers' benefits following this engagement underscores the pragmatic dividends of peaceful civic activism. This approach reflects the social accountability feedback loop described by Fox (2015), where responsive governance strengthens citizen trust and reduces the risk of disruptive conflict. It also aligns with Dahl's (1989) democratic theory that emphasizes tolerance of dissent as an essential component of political stability.

**Civil Society Partnerships and Co-production of Development:** The ARISE Agenda fosters strategic partnerships with civil society and the private sector. The government's collaboration with local NGOs in community health outreach, youth entrepreneurship, and gender empowerment programmes demonstrates a recognition of civil society's complementary role in development. These partnerships operationalize Anheier's (2017) argument that civil society functions as both a corrective and constructive actor in governance, bridging state capacity gaps through social innovation. Moreover, the creation of the Ministry of Youth Development as a separate entity from the Ministry of Sports exemplifies institutional co-production. It acknowledges youth not merely as beneficiaries but as active stakeholders in governance; a move praised by civic organizations as a progressive step toward participatory administration.

### **Synergy Between Civil Space and the ARISE Developmental Goals**

The interdependence between civil space and development outcomes under the ARISE Agenda can be conceptualized as a *virtuous cycle*:

- i. **Openness and Participation** → Enhanced legitimacy and stakeholder ownership
- ii. **Ownership and Trust** → Improved compliance and reduced conflict
- iii. **Accountability and Feedback** → Better service delivery and fiscal discipline
- iv. **Better Outcomes** → Reinforced public confidence, expanding civil space further

This dynamic aligns with empirical findings by Gaventa and Barrett (2012), who identify "*participatory synergies*" - feedback loops where inclusive governance generates both developmental and democratic dividends. In Akwa Ibom, this synergy is evident in the correlation between civic inclusion and tangible outcomes such as community security, food distribution equity, and youth employment.

### **Conceptual Synthesis**

The ARISE Agenda and civil space are mutually reinforcing: the former provides the policy framework, while the latter constitutes the social infrastructure of implementation. Without an open civil space, policy initiatives risk being misunderstood or resisted; without concrete policy frameworks, civil space risks becoming rhetorical rather than productive. Thus, the Eno administration's dual strategy - securing civil space while driving the ARISE Agenda, represents a governance model that integrates *participation, transparency, and accountability* as simultaneous rather than sequential objectives. This synthesis exemplifies

what Fung (2015) terms “*empowered participatory governance*,” where deliberation and co-production are embedded within state institutions, not external to them.

### **Securing of Civil Space in Akwa Ibom State (2023–2025): The Umo Eno Experience**

Empirical assessment of civil space under the Umo Eno administration reveals a deliberate, multidimensional strategy that integrates transparency, civic engagement, and participatory accountability into the governance process. Between 2023 and 2025, Akwa Ibom State witnessed the institutionalization of open governance mechanisms, expansion of inclusive dialogue platforms, and a reaffirmation of citizens’ rights to expression and assembly. These developments have positioned the state as a case study in subnational innovation in civic governance within Nigeria’s federal system. The analysis below categorizes these reforms into five domains that align with the ARISE Agenda’s pillars:

- i. Media and Communication Openness
- ii. Fiscal Transparency and Public Accountability
- iii. Participatory Governance and Institutional Inclusion
- iv. Protection of Civic Rights and Peaceful Dissent
- v. Partnerships and Co-production of Development

#### **Media and Communication Openness**

From the outset of his administration in 2023, Governor Umo Eno adopted deliberate measures to strengthen state–society communication, most notably through hosting the Nigerian Editors’ Conference in Uyo in November 2023, where he publicly affirmed Akwa Ibom as a media-friendly state and recognized journalists as critical partners in democratic governance. This commitment was further institutionalized through the creation of the Office of the Special Assistant on Media Monitoring and Public Feedback, which provides a structured mechanism for tracking citizen concerns, analyzing media discourse, and ensuring timely government responses. Collectively, these initiatives expanded the information corridor between government and citizens, a core precondition for an open civil space, and aligned with the Public Sphere framework, which emphasizes communicative rationality and access to information as foundations for mutual understanding and democratic legitimacy (Habermas, 1989). By reframing the media as a governance ally rather than an adversary, the administration depoliticized the information environment, encouraged constructive criticism, and enhanced the deliberative quality of public discourse, as reflected in a shift toward development-oriented media coverage focused on ARISE project monitoring rather than political conflict.

#### **Fiscal Transparency and Public Accountability**

In 2024, the Akwa Ibom State Government advanced fiscal transparency through the publication of a Citizens’ Budget, a simplified, publicly accessible version of the state’s appropriation bill, made available both online and in print to enable citizens to understand government spending priorities, particularly within ARISE-related sectors such as agriculture, rural roads, and education. This initiative reflects participatory budgeting practices pioneered in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and subsequently adopted across several African subnational governments (Baiocchi et al., 2011), and aligns with the Social Accountability Framework, which emphasizes fiscal openness as a mechanism for empowering citizens to monitor government performance (Fox, 2015). Complementing this reform, the inauguration of the Akwa Ibom Bulk Purchasing Agency in March 2024 institutionalized transparency in public procurement by stabilizing food prices and ensuring equitable distribution of staple commodities under strict public accountability guidelines, with the Governor explicitly

linking fiscal prudence to civic trust. Together, these initiatives have embedded the fiscal dimension of civil space by converting abstract participation into measurable oversight, enabling civil society organizations to monitor project expenditures and journalists to conduct independent investigations using publicly available data, thereby strengthening what McGee and Gaventa (2011) describe as “strategic accountability,” where transparency and citizen action interact to produce tangible governance reform.

### **Participatory Governance and Institutional Inclusion**

A defining innovation of the Umo Eno administration is the Stakeholder Delivery Meeting (SDM) model, a monthly multi-actor forum that convenes executive council members, legislators, local government chairpersons, traditional rulers, and civil society representatives to review project implementation across ministries, functioning simultaneously as a monitoring mechanism and a social contract space through which citizens can demand explanations, propose adjustments, and influence policy decisions, as evidenced in 2024 when stakeholder feedback prompted the realignment of rural electrification projects toward communities with higher agricultural productivity. Complementing this structure, the “Come Let’s Reason Together” town hall forums, held across federal constituencies and personally attended by the Governor, facilitates inclusive policy deliberation through direct engagement with traditional rulers, youth leaders, and women’s groups, a practice that deliberative democracy scholars identify as central to legitimacy-building and responsive governance (Dryzek, 2000; Fung, 2015). These participatory platforms are reinforced by institutional innovations such as the establishment of a standalone Ministry of Youth Development to mainstream youth participation, the deployment of ARISE Community Liaison Desks across local government areas to enable continuous project feedback, and the formal integration of traditional rulers into governance planning, reflecting a hybrid participatory model that blends modern administrative processes with indigenous legitimacy (Chinsinga, 2014). Collectively, these measures operationalize Participatory Governance Theory by embedding co-production, dialogue, and shared accountability into routine administrative practice (Fung & Wright, 2003).

### **Protection of Civic Rights and Peaceful Dissent**

During the nationwide labour protests that followed the removal of fuel subsidies in August 2023, Akwa Ibom State distinguished itself through the peaceful management of civic dissent, as Governor Umo Eno engaged directly with leaders of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC), publicly affirming their right to lawful protest and commending their commitment to maintaining public order. Eschewing coercive responses common in protest management, the administration adopted a dialogue-driven approach that resulted in immediate policy action, notably the release of ₦1.8 billion to clear outstanding teachers’ salary arrears and gratuities, a gesture acknowledged by labour leaders as evidence of a “listening government.” This episode empirically validates participatory governance theories that associate tolerance of dissent with social stability and democratic resilience (Dahl, 1989) and exemplifies responsive accountability, whereby citizen mobilization elicits government action rather than repression (Fox, 2015). In a national context where civic protest frequently attracts violent state responses, Akwa Ibom’s negotiated handling of dissent illustrates a subnational model of democratic maturity and institutionalized respect for civil space.

### Partnerships and Co-production of Development

The Eno administration has strategically cultivated partnerships with NGOs, community-based organizations, and business associations across health, education, social enterprise, and economic sectors to foster youth empowerment and participatory governance. Initiatives such as the ARISE Entrepreneurial Scheme have provided one-off business support of N50,000 each to 60,000 youths, 5,000 monthly over one year, and specifically supported 10,000 youths in recognition of their non-participation in the fuel subsidy withdrawal protest, blending government funding with civil society expertise. Complementing this, the ARISE Ambassadors trains community volunteers to function as liaisons between citizens and the state, enhancing what Cornwall (2008) terms “invited spaces of participation” and enabling citizens to transition from observers to co-producers of public goods, while promoting youth skills development, empowerment, and leadership. Grassroots engagement is further reinforced through the employment of 3,000 youths via the Ibom Community Watch for crowd control and intelligence gathering, the appointment of Personal Assistants to the Governor in each of the 329 Wards of the State and through partnerships with the Uyo Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture (UYOCCIMA), where regular consultative meetings align business actors with state development objectives while maintaining advocacy leverage, exemplifying a multi-layered, participatory approach to socio-economic growth.

**Table 3: Evaluative Summary of Civil Space Performance Indicators (2023–2025)**

Indicator	Baseline (2022)	Status (2025)	Change/Trend	Interpretation
Press Freedom & Media Access	Limited, reactive communication	Proactive media engagement, Editors’ Conference hosted	↑ Improvement	Increased government openness and positive media-government relations
Fiscal Transparency	Minimal citizen access to budget data	Citizens’ Budget published, procurement audits initiated	↑ Significant	Institutionalized financial openness
Civic Dialogue & Consultation	Occasional consultative meetings	Regular Stakeholder Delivery Meetings and town halls	↑ Substantial	Institutionalization of deliberative governance
Labour–Government Relations	Adversarial during protests	Constructive engagement and negotiated outcomes	↑ Transformative	Transition from confrontation to collaboration
Youth Participation	Limited representation	Dedicated Youth Ministry and community ambassadors	↑ High	Youth mainstreamed into governance

These indicators reveal measurable progress across multiple dimensions of civil space, confirming that the Eno administration has embedded participatory governance within both institutional and social frameworks. By 2025, Akwa Ibom’s civil space exhibited characteristics of what Gaventa (2006) calls an “*empowered participatory arena*” - where dialogue, inclusion, and accountability intersect to produce legitimacy and developmental effectiveness.

### Discussion and Implications for Participatory Governance and Sustainable Development

The preceding analysis of Akwa Ibom State under the Umo Eno administration reveals a close alignment between participatory governance theory and subnational governance practice. The ARISE Agenda operationalizes principles of participatory governance, deliberative democracy, and civil space consolidation through institutionalized citizen engagement mechanisms, transparent fiscal communication, and constructive management

of civic dissent. This reflects Fung and Wright's (2003) model of empowered participatory governance, emphasizing decentralization, dialogue, and state–society co-production. The Akwa Ibom experience further suggests that participatory subnational leadership can foster democratic deepening even within structurally constrained national contexts, supporting De Vries, Nemec, and Junjan's (2021) argument that local governments function as incubators of democratic reform in Africa. Beyond technical policy design, the effectiveness of the ARISE Agenda derives from its social embeddedness and emphasis on co-creation with citizens (Sen, 1999; Cornwall, 2008). By institutionalizing grassroots consultations and multi-sector partnerships, such as ARISE Ambassadors and Community Liaison Desks, the framework aligns with Ostrom's (1996) co-production model, enhancing policy legitimacy, service delivery, social cohesion, and overall state legitimacy.

**Civil Space as an Enabler of Sustainable Development:** The correlation between open civil space and sustainable development outcomes is now well-documented in global literature (United Nations, 2020; CIVICUS, 2023). Akwa Ibom's experience empirically validates this connection. The administration's investment in dialogue, fiscal openness, and media freedom has generated both *developmental dividends* (in agriculture, rural infrastructure, and education) and *governance dividends* (increased trust, reduced conflict, and strengthened legitimacy). This finding affirms the theoretical proposition that participatory governance is not merely a democratic ideal but a pragmatic development strategy (Fox, 2015). In practical terms, the Eno administration demonstrates that when citizens are included, they become custodians of development rather than antagonists of the state; a vital precondition for the long-term sustainability of the ARISE Agenda.

**The Peace–Development–Participation Nexus:** Peaceful civic engagement, observed during the 2023 labour demonstrations, underscores the interdependence of peace, participation, and development. Governor Eno's mediation approach aligns with the *Conflict Transformation Theory* (Lederach, 1997), which posits that sustainable peace emerges not from coercive order but from constructive dialogue and mutual recognition. In this sense, the administration's handling of dissent marks a shift from Nigeria's traditional command-and-control model toward a peacebuilding governance paradigm rooted in dialogue and empathy. By institutionalizing trust through consultation, Akwa Ibom has converted potential flashpoints into platforms for collaboration—a transformation central to what Gyimah-Boadi (2019) calls "*democratic stability through participatory peace.*"

**The Role of Subnational Leadership in Civil Space Expansion:** Nigeria's federal structure creates unique opportunities for states to innovate beyond national constraints. Akwa Ibom's proactive governance under Umo Eno demonstrates how *subnational agency* can catalyze broader democratic progress. Unlike the national government, where bureaucracy and political polarization often stifle reform, state-level leadership can respond flexibly to local realities. By embedding openness, accountability, and participation into the architecture of governance, Akwa Ibom challenges the prevailing assumption that civil space expansion in Nigeria depends solely on national institutions. This aligns with recent African scholarship emphasizing "*bottom-up democratization*" - where local governments model governance best practices that gradually diffuse upward (Ayee, 2017; Cheeseman et al., 2020).

### **Implications for Policy and Governance Practice**

The findings from Akwa Ibom's ARISE Agenda have several implications for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners:

**Institutionalizing Civic Engagement:** Civic engagement mechanisms should move from ad hoc initiatives to permanent structures within the bureaucratic system. The Stakeholder Delivery Meeting framework could be codified through an Executive Order or State Assembly resolution to ensure continuity beyond current political cycles.

**Integrating Civil Space Indicators into Performance Metrics:** Governments should include civil space metrics, such as frequency of public consultations, media access, and grievance resolution within performance evaluations for ministries and local governments, to align with the global governance index models developed by UNDP (2022).

**Enhancing Digital Governance:** To sustain openness, Akwa Ibom can expand digital civic platforms for real-time feedback on ARISE projects. E-governance tools, mobile reporting apps, and virtual town halls could institutionalize inclusivity, particularly for rural and diaspora citizens.

**Strengthening Civil Society Partnerships:** The government should continue fostering structured partnerships with CSOs through joint implementation frameworks, capacity-building grants, and co-created monitoring systems. This would align Akwa Ibom's participatory model with the *Open Government Partnership's* co-creation standards.

**Civic Education and Value Reorientation:** For civil space to thrive sustainably, citizens must possess the civic literacy necessary to engage constructively. Continuous civic education through schools, media, and community programmes can nurture a participatory culture that outlives political administrations.

### **Conceptual Contribution to Governance Scholarship**

This paper contributes to African governance and development scholarship in three distinct ways:

- i. **Subnational Focus:** By situating analysis at the state level, it fills a gap in civil space literature that is often overly national in scope.
- ii. **Integrated Framework:** It proposes an analytical synthesis linking civil space, participatory governance, and sustainable development within a single conceptual model—the *Civil Space–Development Nexus*.
- iii. **Empirical Evidence from Practice:** Through evidence from Akwa Ibom (2023–2025), the paper demonstrates that civic inclusion is not merely theoretical but achievable under responsive leadership.

These contributions reinforce the argument that democratization in Africa will advance through pragmatic, locally owned governance innovations rather than imported institutional templates.

### **Limitations and Areas for Further Research**

While this study provides significant insight, it recognizes two limitations. First, the analysis relies primarily on secondary data, policy documents, and media reports, which may underrepresent informal civic dynamics. Second, the time frame (2023–2025) captures an early phase of the Eno administration, requiring longitudinal studies to assess sustainability. Future research should adopt mixed-method approaches combining field surveys, citizen perception indices, and impact evaluations to deepen empirical grounding. Comparative

studies between Akwa Ibom and other reformist states (e.g., Kaduna, Ekiti, and Lagos) could also clarify the contextual determinants of civil space expansion in Nigeria.

**Table 4: Summary of Key Insights**

Dimension	Insight	Scholarly Implication
Civil Space Governance	Akwa Ibom institutionalized openness through structured dialogue and media freedom	Validates theories of participatory and deliberative democracy in African subnational contexts
Fiscal Accountability	Transparency and citizen oversight improved trust and reduced conflict	Supports social accountability frameworks (Fox, 2015)
Labour–State Relations	Dialogue over confrontation enhanced legitimacy	Demonstrates peace–participation synergy (Lederach, 1997)
Youth and Inclusion	Youth mainstreaming created intergenerational civic ownership	Reinforces co-production theory (Ostrom, 1996)
Developmental Impact	ARISE Agenda outcomes linked to participatory design	Strengthens development-as-freedom framework (Sen, 1999)

Together, these insights position Akwa Ibom’s governance experience as a replicable model of participatory development in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa.

### Conclusion

This paper examined the theme “Securing and Sustaining the Civil Space for the Success of the ARISE Agenda in Akwa Ibom State”, situating it within the broader discourse on participatory governance, democratic consolidation, and sustainable development in sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing on global, African, and Nigerian literature, it established that civil space - the environment enabling freedom of association, expression, and participation - is a decisive determinant of developmental outcomes. The empirical analysis of Akwa Ibom State (2023–2025) under Governor Umo Bassey Eno demonstrates that subnational leadership can expand civic openness and embed participatory practices even within a constrained national context. The ARISE Agenda functions not merely as a socio-economic blueprint but as a *governance framework* grounded in inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. Through mechanisms such as the Stakeholder Delivery Meetings, Citizens’ Budget, Town Hall dialogues, and ARISE Ambassadors Programme, the administration has translated participatory governance theory into tangible administrative practice. These mechanisms institutionalize what Fung and Wright (2003) describe as *empowered participatory governance*, a governance architecture where deliberation and co-production replace bureaucratic insulation and unilateralism. The case study affirms three central propositions emerging from governance scholarship:

- i. **Civil Space as an Enabler:** Open civic environments strengthen policy legitimacy and developmental outcomes by fostering trust, cooperation, and accountability (Fox, 2015; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012).
- ii. **Subnational Innovation as a Driver of National Reform:** State-level experimentation can pioneer democratic models that diffuse upward, contributing to broader institutional transformation (De Vries, Nemec & Junjan, 2021).
- iii. **Participatory Governance as Sustainable Development:** When citizens become co-authors of policy, development transcends infrastructure to encompass empowerment, agency, and peace (Sen, 1999; Lederach, 1997).

As of 2025, Akwa Ibom's governance landscape reflected measurable improvements in transparency, citizen engagement, and peaceful civic expression. The transformation from transactional to participatory governance provides a replicable model for other subnational governments seeking to reconcile developmental ambition with democratic openness.

### **Recommendations**

Building on the theoretical and empirical insights, the following recommendations are proposed for sustaining and scaling the gains achieved in Akwa Ibom State and for guiding similar reforms across Nigeria and Africa.

- i. **Institutionalise Participatory Governance:** To ensure continuity beyond political transitions, participatory mechanisms such as the Stakeholder Delivery Meetings, Citizens' Budget consultations, and Community Liaison Desks should be codified through legislation or executive instruments. Formal institutionalization transforms participation from policy discretion to constitutional obligation, guaranteeing durability.
- ii. **Mainstream Civil Space Indicators in Governance Evaluation:** Government performance frameworks should integrate *civil space indicators*, including openness to public dialogue, responsiveness to feedback, and inclusiveness of marginalized groups into the State Performance and Results Framework. This would align with the UNDP's *Effective Governance Index (2022)* and improve evidence-based assessment of governance outcomes.
- iii. **Strengthen Civic Education and Digital Engagement:** A sustained programme of civic education should be launched to deepen citizens' understanding of rights, responsibilities, and participatory mechanisms. Complementing this, the state should expand digital governance tools, including mobile feedback apps, online town halls, and e-procurement dashboards, to democratize access to governance and engage youth and diaspora populations.
- iv. **Enhance Collaboration with Civil Society and Academia:** Structured partnerships between government, civil society organizations, and academic institutions such as the University of Uyo and Akwa Ibom State University can facilitate data-driven policy evaluation and civic innovation. Co-research and knowledge exchange will ensure continuous refinement of the ARISE Agenda and provide empirical evidence for further scholarly inquiry.
- v. **Build Institutional Safeguards for Media Freedom:** Given the centrality of the media to an open public sphere, the state should adopt a Media Freedom and Access to Information Policy, guaranteeing protection for journalists, promoting proactive disclosure of information, and encouraging responsible investigative reporting. This would reinforce transparency and deter the politicization of information.
- vi. **Leverage Civil Space for Peacebuilding:** The state should continue employing dialogue-based approaches in managing labour relations, communal disputes, and youth unrest. Embedding conflict-resolution structures within civic engagement frameworks can consolidate peace as both a precondition and product of development.

### **Concluding Reflections**

Akwa Ibom's experience reflects a broader African governance trajectory in which localized innovation generates transferable lessons for the continent, underscoring that sustainable governance reform must be contextual, inclusive, and participatory rather than externally imposed. By embedding civil space within developmental planning, the Umo Eno administration challenges the presumed trade-off between economic growth and civic

freedom, demonstrating their mutual reinforcement. However, sustaining civil space for the success of the ARISE Agenda is an iterative process requiring continuous negotiation between state and society and a sustained commitment to openness, accountability, and co-creation. In this regard, Akwa Ibom offers an emerging subnational governance model for Africa grounded in empathy, dialogue, and partnership, providing empirical evidence that governance with citizens is both normatively desirable and practically effective in addressing persistent challenges of inequality, civic distrust, and democratic fatigue.

## References

- Ackerman, J. (2005). *Social Accountability In The Public Sector: A Conceptual Discussion*. Social Development Papers, World Bank.
- Adebayo, A. (2010). *Civil Society And Democratic Consolidation In Nigeria*. *Journal of African Studies*, 12 (3), 45–62.
- Anheier, H. K. (2017). *Nonprofit Organizations: Theory, Management, Policy* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Ayee, J. (2017). *Local Government And Devolved Governance In Africa: Lessons From Ghana*. *African Journal of Public Administration*, 9(1), 23–44.
- Baiocchi, G., Heller, P., & Silva, M. (2011). *Bootstrapping Democracy: Transforming Local Governance And Civil Society In Brazil*. *World Development*, 39(9), 1539–1552.
- Bratton, M. (1989). *Civil Society And Political Transition In Africa*. IDR/University of Michigan Working Paper.
- BusinessDay / Reward Investments reporting on labour engagement and release of funds in 2023: coverage of Governor Eno's release of N1.8bn to address teacher benefits following NLC protest. [Businessday NG+1](#)
- Calhoun, C. (1992). *Introduction: Habermas And The Public Sphere*. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (pp. 1–48). MIT Press.
- Carothers, T., & Brechenmacher, S. (2014). *Closing Space: Democracy And Human Rights Support Under Fire*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Chinsinga, B. (2014). *The Politics Of Traditional Authorities In Local Governance: Lessons From Malawi*. *Development Policy Review*, 32(3), 297–317.
- CIVICUS. (2023). *State Of Civil Society Report 2023*. CIVICUS Global Alliance.
- Cohen, J., & Arato, A. (1992). *Civil Society And Political Theory*. MIT Press.
- Cornwall, A. (2008). *Unpacking 'Participation': Models, Meanings And Practices*. *Community Development Journal*, 43(3), 269–283.
- Dahl, R. A. (1989). *Democracy and its Critics*. Yale University Press.
- De Vries, M. S., Nemec, J., & Junjan, T. (2021). *Subnational Governments as Laboratories Of Innovation: Evidence from Africa*. *Public Administration Review*, 81(4), 625–639.
- Dryzek, J. S. (2000). *Deliberative Democracy And Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*. Oxford University Press.
- Edwards, M. (2014). *Civil Society* (2nd ed.). Polity.
- Fox, J. (2015). *Social Accountability: What Does The Evidence Really Say?* *World Development*, 72, 346–361.
- Fraser, N. (1990). *Rethinking The Public Sphere: A Contribution To The Critique Of Actually Existing Democracy*. *Social Text*, (25/26), 56–80.
- Fung, A., & Wright, E. O. (2003). *Deepening Democracy: Innovations In Empowered Participatory Governance*. *Politics & Society*, 29(1), 5–41.
- Gaventa, J. (2006). *Finding The Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis*. *IDS Bulletin*, 37(6), 23–33.

- Gaventa, J., & Barrett, G. (2012). *Mapping The Outcomes Of Citizen Engagement*. World Development, 40(12), 2399–2410.
- Government of Akwa Ibom State. (2023). *Official Launch of the ARISE Agenda* [Press release / policy platform]. Akwa Ibom State Government. [Akwa Ibom State Government](#)
- Government of Akwa Ibom State. (2023, November 15). Speech by His Excellency, Pastor Umo Eno, Governor of Akwa Ibom State, at the 19th All Nigeria Editors Annual Conference. Akwa Ibom State Government. [Akwa Ibom State Government+1](#)
- Government of Akwa Ibom State. (2024). *Akwa Ibom State Citizens' Budget, 2024*. Akwa Ibom State Budget Office. [Akwa Ibom State Government+1](#)
- Government of Akwa Ibom State. (2024, March 22). Gov. Eno inaugurates Bulk Purchase Agency Board [News release]. Akwa Ibom State Government. [Akwa Ibom State Government](#)
- Gyimah-Boadi, E. (2019). *Democratic Development And Civic Engagement In Africa*. African Affairs, 118(470), 1–23.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation Of The Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into A Category Of Bourgeois Society* (T. Burger & F. Lawrence, Trans.). MIT Press. (Original work published 1962)
- Hyden, G. (2013). *No Shortcuts to Progress: African Development Management In Perspective*. University of California Press.
- Ikeanyibe, O. (2020). *Civil Society In Nigeria: Challenges And Prospects*. Nigerian Journal of Social Sciences, 15(2), 101–118.
- Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation In Divided Societies*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen And Subject: Contemporary Africa And The Legacy Of Late Colonialism*. Princeton University Press.
- McGee, R., & Gaventa, J. (2011). *Adaptive Accountability: Citizen Engagement In Monitoring Public Services*. IDS Working Paper.
- Narayan, D. (2002). *Empowerment And Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook*. World Bank.
- Odugbemi, S., & Lee, T. (2017). *Accountability Through Public Opinion: From Inertia to Impetus*. World Bank.
- Omotola, J. S. (2012). *Civil Society and Democratization In Nigeria: Past Lessons, Present Challenges, And Future Prospects*. African Journal of Political Science, 16(2), 12–30.
- Open Government Partnership. (2022). *OGP Global Report*. Open Government Partnership.
- Ostrom, E. (1996). *Crossing The Great Divide: Co-Production, Synergy, And Development*. World Development, 24(6), 1073–1087.
- Putnam, R. D. (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development As Freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Scroll Report (2023). Nigerian Editors honour Gov. Umo Eno with Excellence Award at annual conference — reporting on media engagement and the Governor's reception by editors. [scrollreport.com](#)
- ThisDay / national media reporting on Akwa Ibom's stakeholder and delivery efforts (selected reportage): Gov Eno reaffirms commitment to deliver projects; coverage demonstrates ongoing delivery and stakeholder engagement. [Akwa Ibom State Government+1](#)
- UNESCO. (2022). *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Global Report 2022*. UNESCO.

United Nations. (2020). *Guidance Note on The Protection and Promotion of Civic Space*. UN Human Rights Office.

World Bank. (2012). *Citizen Engagement in Governance: Lessons From Global Practice*. World Bank Publications.

Yagboyaju, D., & Akinola, O. (2019). *Social Accountability And Institutional Quality In Nigeria: Challenges And Opportunities*. *Journal of Governance and Public Policy*, 9(1), 34–52.

**Note:** Originally presented by the author as a speech delivered at the 2025 Pre-May Day Symposium Organized by the Ministry of Labour and Manpower Planning, Akwa Ibom State on Wednesday, 30th April, 2025, Civil Service Auditorium, State Secretariat, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State.