Who Is Afraid of Openness in Governance?

Nigeria's fourth Open Government Partnership Action Plan is ready. The country is waiting on one signature.

There is a particular kind of silence that follows a finished piece of policy work in Nigeria. The drafts are done. The consultations are concluded. The stakeholders have signed off. Civil society has been engaged. Young people have spoken, and for once, been heard. And then, just at the point where the work is meant to become real, to translate from paper into the lived experience of citizens the document goes to wait. It waits in an in-tray. It waits on an agenda. It waits, in our case, for a signature.

Nigeria's fourth National Action Plan under the Open Government Partnership, known by its administrative name as **NAP IV,** is in that waiting room today. It is co-created, multi-stakeholder, technically sound, and reflective of one of the most inclusive policy development processes the country has run in recent memory. It also remains, at the time of writing, without formal presidential endorsement. The question implicit in that fact — the question this article wishes to put squarely on the public table — is the one the title asks. Who is afraid of openness in governance?

A Commitment Nigeria Made

The Open Government Partnership is not a Nigerian invention. It is a global initiative, launched in 2011, that brings together governments and civil society around three reinforcing commitments: transparency in how power is exercised, accountability for how public resources are used, and meaningful citizen participation in the decisions that shape national life. Seventy-plus countries are members. Each is expected to develop, every two to four years, a National Action Plan setting out specific, time-bound reforms its government will undertake to advance those three commitments.

Nigeria joined the Partnership in 2016, under the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari, and has since produced three full National Action Plans. The first, covering 2017 to 2019, focused on the foundations: fiscal transparency, beneficial ownership disclosure, anti-corruption frameworks, and citizen engagement architecture. The second and third plans built on that base, expanding into extractive industries transparency, access to information, public service delivery, and inclusion of women and youth in governance processes. Across these cycles, Nigeria has been recognised internationally as one of the more ambitious OGP members on the African continent — not because it has delivered everything it promised, but because it has consistently brought serious commitments to the table and engaged civil society as a genuine partner in shaping them.

NAP IV, the fourth iteration, was developed through the same co-creation methodology that has become the signature of Nigeria's OGP process. Government agencies, civil society organisations, private sector actors, and citizen groups sat in the same rooms, sometimes physical, sometimes virtual and negotiated what the country would commit to over the next implementation cycle. Notably, and this is a point worth dwelling on, young Nigerians were not consulted as an afterthought. They were embedded in the process. Organisations such as the Nigeria Youth Futures Fund worked deliberately to ensure that grassroots youth perspectives from communities in the North-East to the Niger Delta, from campuses to rural local government areas found their way into the document. The result is a National Action Plan that, for the first time, can credibly be said to reflect the policy priorities of a generation that constitutes more than 60 per cent of the country's population.

Nigeria has been recognised as one of the more ambitious OGP members on the African continent. The reputation was earned in rooms. The risk is that it now dies in an in-tray.

The Gap Between Drafting and Doing

There is a specific failure mode that recurs across Nigerian governance, and NAP IV is now standing on the edge of it. The failure mode runs roughly as follows. A reform process is launched, often with significant political fanfare. Stakeholders are convened. Drafts are circulated. Consultations are held in every geopolitical zone. The right boxes are ticked. A document emerges that, by any reasonable measure, reflects what was discussed. And then the process stalls not because anyone formally rejects the document, but because the final, decisive act of executive endorsement simply does not happen. Months pass. Then quarters. Then the political season shifts, the document fades from agenda papers, and what was meant to be a binding national commitment quietly becomes a historical artefact.

This is the failure mode NAP IV is currently exposed to. The plan exists. It has been validated. It enjoys the support of the very civil society and youth constituencies whose endorsement is supposed to give it legitimacy. What it does not yet have is the signature of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, and without that signature, the implementation clock has not started ticking. Reforms that should already be underway strengthened access to information frameworks, expanded fiscal disclosure mechanisms, new citizen engagement structures, sub-national OGP commitments, youth participation provisions sit in suspended animation.

It is important to be precise about what this delay costs. It is not merely a procedural inconvenience. It is, in three concrete ways, a substantive harm to Nigerian governance.

First, it erodes public trust. Citizens who participated in good faith in the co-creation process, particularly young citizens who often suspect that consultation is a ritual rather than a substantive exercise, are owed evidence that their participation produced something real. Each week the document sits unsigned is a week in which that evidence is withheld. The cumulative effect on civic trust already at historic lows, as repeated Afrobarometer and NOIPolls surveys have shown is corrosive.

Second, it dissipates reform momentum. Open government reforms are not self-executing. They depend on a coalition of public servants, civil society actors, and reform-minded politicians sustaining attention and energy across multiple years. That coalition assembled around the development of NAP IV. The longer the gap between drafting and operationalisation, the harder it becomes to reassemble that coalition when implementation eventually begins. Reform energy, like compound interest, accumulates when activated promptly and decays when delayed.

Third, it sends a signal, perhaps unintentionally about how seriously the executive takes the open government agenda. Nigeria's international standing within the Partnership rests on a track record of delivery. That track record is now being placed in jeopardy by inaction on a document the country itself, through its agencies and citizens, painstakingly produced.

Who, Then, Is Afraid?

This brings us to the question in the title. It is, I should say plainly, a rhetorical question, but only partially so. The deeper question it points to is one worth asking seriously: in a polity that has made open government a stated value, what explains the hesitation around a document that operationalises that value?

Three possible answers present themselves, and none is flattering.

The first is bureaucratic inertia. Documents move at the speed of the institutions that handle them, and the Nigerian federal bureaucracy is not famous for velocity. If this is the explanation, the remedy is straightforward: the Presidency must designate a named official, with a named deadline, to shepherd NAP IV through the remaining endorsement steps. The OGP Nigeria Secretariat, which has coordinated the technical work with admirable diligence, should not be left to navigate the political-administrative interface alone.

The second is competing priorities. Any sitting administration faces a triage problem; there are always more documents demanding executive attention than there is executive time. If NAP IV has been deprioritised because it is perceived as less urgent than other

files, then the constituency that built it, civil society, youth networks, reform-minded officials has a responsibility to make the case for its urgency. That case is not difficult to make a country undergoing significant fiscal reform, navigating a contested information environment, and approaching another election cycle has every reason to want a functioning open government framework in place, and to want it in place soon.

The third possibility is more uncomfortable, and worth naming explicitly. It is that openness, in the specific sense the Partnership defines it, is genuinely uncomfortable for those who hold power. Transparency exposes how decisions are made and resources allocated. Accountability creates consequences for poor stewardship. Citizen participation diffuses power that has historically been concentrated. A government that is sincerely committed to openness is a government that voluntarily constrains its own discretion. That is a hard thing to do, and it would be naïve to pretend that the resistance to such constraint disappears just because a country has signed a Partnership declaration.

If this third explanation carries any weight in the current delay and I do not assert that it does, only that it cannot be dismissed then the answer to the title's question becomes uncomfortably specific. Those who are afraid of openness in governance are those for whom openness threatens existing patterns of authority, advantage, or impunity. They are not always easy to identify, but they are usually possible to outvote in the court of public opinion, provided the public is paying attention.

Reform energy, like compound interest, accumulates when activated promptly and decays when delayed.

Why Youth Voice in NAP IV Matters

There is a tendency, particularly among older commentators on Nigerian governance, to treat youth participation as a kind of ceremonial seasoning necessary for the optics of inclusion but not load-bearing for the substantive policy work. The development of NAP IV pushed firmly against that tendency. Young Nigerians did not merely sign attendance sheets at consultations. They shaped commitments. They surfaced governance challenges that older drafters had not adequately understood around digital civic space, around the lived experience of police accountability reform, around the gap between formal participation rights and the practical pathways to exercise them. They did the unglamorous, technical work of refining language and pushing back on weak commitments.

This matters for two reasons. The first is principled. A National Action Plan that purports to advance citizen participation while excluding the demographic majority of those citizens is a contradiction in terms. NAP IV avoided that contradiction. Its co-creation process is one of the strongest in Nigeria's OGP history precisely because the youth inclusion was substantive rather than symbolic.

The second is strategic. If NAP IV is now allowed to languish, the message sent to a generation that was asked to invest energy and credibility in the process is that their participation does not, in the end, count for very much. The cost of that message — in civic disengagement, in emigration intent, in the corrosion of belief that formal channels of participation can produce real change — is far higher than the cost of expediting a signature. We cannot ask young Nigerians to choose voice over exit and then, when they choose voice, withhold the evidence that their voice was heard.

What Should Happen Now

The path forward is neither complicated nor controversial. It requires four things, in roughly the order set out below.

First, the President should issue a public statement affirming his administration's commitment to NAP IV and confirming the timeline for its formal endorsement. This costs nothing politically. It signals seriously. It reassures the constituency that built the document. And it places implementation firmly back on the national agenda.

Second, the Presidency should designate a senior official at the level of Secretary to the Government of the Federation or equivalent to oversee the final endorsement and the launch of implementation. NAP IV cannot be the orphan file of an over-stretched Special Adviser. It needs an institutional home with the authority to move it.

Third, the OGP Nigeria Secretariat should be empowered, with the resources and political backing it requires, to begin the operational preparation for implementation immediately upon endorsement. The Secretariat has done strong technical work to date. It deserves to be set up to succeed in delivery, not asked to improvise around resource gaps.

Fourth, the multi-stakeholder coalition that built NAP IV including the civil society organisations, youth networks, professional associations, and reform-minded agencies that did the work should be formally convened to track implementation against named milestones. Open government, by its nature, is not something that can be delivered through executive action alone. It requires sustained citizen demand and structured citizen oversight.

A Country That Says What It Means

Nigeria has, over the past decade, accumulated a meaningful body of formal commitments to openness in governance. The Freedom of Information Act of 2011. The

Fiscal Responsibility Act. The Public Procurement Act. Membership in the Open Government Partnership. Subscription to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. Endorsement of the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption. Each of these instruments commits the Nigerian state, on paper, to a particular standard of openness.

The gap between what those instruments say and what citizens experience is the open question of Nigerian governance in this era. NAP IV is, in a small but important way, an opportunity to close that gap. It would mean very little, in the end, if Nigeria signed a fourth National Action Plan that simply joined the others on a shelf. It would mean a great deal if the country signed a fourth National Action Plan and then, demonstrably, delivered on it. The choice between those two outcomes is being made now, by the executive's decision to act with urgency or to allow the moment to pass.

OGP Week 2026 offers a natural and visible occasion for that choice to be made publicly. A presidential statement during OGP Week, affirming endorsement and committing to implementation, would do more for Nigeria's standing on openness than any communiqué or working group report. It would also do something less measurable but more important: it would honour the citizens, particularly the young citizens, who took the country at its word and gave their time to building the document. They have done their part. The question that remains is whether the executive will do its part with comparable seriousness.

So, to return to where we began. Who is afraid of openness in governance? The honest answer is that some are afraid, some are merely inattentive, and some are simply waiting to be told that this matters enough to act on. The role of citizens, civil society, the media, and the young people whose commitments are embedded in NAP IV is to make sure the third group hears the message clearly. Sign the document. Begin the implementation. Honour the work. The country is watching.

An Opinion Piece
Submitted for publication during OGP Week 2026

Olushola Ojajuni writes from Abuja. He is the MERL Coordinator for the Nigeria Youth Futures Fund (NYFF), implemented by LEAP Africa