

KEYNOTE SPEECH BY THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF NEITI, DR. ORJI OGBONNAYA ORJI, AT THE SAGNI REGIONAL ROUNDTABLE ON 14 YEARS OF THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (FOI) ACT AND EXTRACTIVES TRANSPARENCY IN NIGERIA NEITI HOUSE, ABUJA | 4TH JUNE 2025

Protocols!

1. It is my pleasure to welcome you all to NEITI House for this important Roundtable Dialogue on the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act and Extractives Transparency in Nigeria.
2. I sincerely thank the Centre for Transparency Advocacy (CTA), the Federal Ministry of Justice, and the Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption (RoLAC) IIDEA Programme for convening this forum through the Strengthening Accountability and Governance in Nigeria Initiative (SAGNI), which seeks to promote transparency, accountability, and good governance. We are also honored to offer this venue free of charge demonstrating our commitment to openness and public disclosure.
3. The Roundtable themed “14 Years of FOI and Extractives Transparency in Nigeria: Strengthening Access and Citizens Engagement” is apt. The FOI Act, signed into law 14 years ago, represents a major milestone in Nigeria’s in upholding one of the fundamental principles of democracy- access to information, free speech and responsible civic engagement is more than a legal document—it is a tool of empowerment that enables citizens to ask informed questions, promotes open government, and strengthens accountability across public institutions.
4. On compliance, in the last four years, In we have received and responded to 72 FOI requests, operated a functional FOI portal, submitted annual compliance reports, and embedded access to information into our work culture. We do this not just to meet statutory obligations, but because we believe in the spirit and transformative power of open government.
5. What is even more concerning is that these same actors often ignore or downplay NEITI’s substantial contributions to transparency and accountability. There has been little or no acknowledgment of our efforts to recover billions of naira and dollars in collaboration with anti-corruption agencies; our public work on gas flaring, host community development, environmental remediation, and energy transition; our disclosures through industry reports, our Beneficial Ownership Portal, and the soon-to-be-launched NEITI Data Centre. This selective engagement—ignoring the facts while amplifying spurious claims—raises fundamental questions about the motives behind such FOI activism.

6. In fact, during our engagements and through direct experience, we have seen how the FOI Act is sometimes used not as a tool of public empowerment, but as a weapon of disinformation. This is not just unfortunate—it is dangerous. The FOI Act must not become a theatre for baseless accusations, especially in sectors as sensitive as extractives, where transparency and public trust are paramount.
7. However, as we commemorate this anniversary, we must also reflect—honestly and responsibly—on the challenges, limitations, flagrant abuses and misapplications of FOI that have confronted the implementation of this Act. While the FOI Act was designed to enhance access to public records and reinforce citizens' participation in governance in overall public interest, these noble objectives have been hijacked by some faceless individuals and groups in persistent misuse and abuse for purposes of blackmail, extortion and other tendencies.
8. At NEITI, for instance, we have observed an unfortunate and growing trend—where certain individuals or groups, often under constantly shifting names and identities, repeatedly exploit the FOI process not to seek information in good faith, but to harass institutions, spread misinformation, and pursue narrow personal interests. Their requests, often laced with rude, civil, accusatory and misleading language, are frequently recycled—even after comprehensive responses in full compliance with the law have been made. The experiences of Heads of Federal Agencies appear unanimous that most are under siege for purposes of blackmail and extortion.
9. Let me be clear: NEITI we must work with credible civil society Organisations who are in greater majority and who indeed conceived, worked very hard to put the law in place as part of efforts to push the boundaries of civic space. NEITI as one of the key government institutions that provided the necessary support to the Civil Society must rise to the challenge of protecting, safe guarding the integrity of FOI as a law. We therefore propose an amendment that puts stringent sanctions to any abuse, misuse, or misapplication of the law to extort, blackmail, harass, intimidate institutions, through false accusations. This has become necessary to rebuild public trust and ensure that public disclosure, access to information not just our obligation; but an institutional identity.
10. But transparency must also come with responsibility. When FOI requests are misused as instruments of blackmail or institutional intimidation, the integrity of the entire framework is undermined. This behavior erodes trust, distracts public agencies from core mandates, and casts a shadow over the credible work of legitimate civil society actors.
11. Nonetheless, the momentum for reform is growing. The recent Supreme Court judgment of April 2025 affirming the applicability of the FOI Act across all 36 states is a landmark decision that laid to rest long-standing doubts. Similarly, the Head of Service's directive for all MDAs to establish FOI Units is a welcome development. These steps offer us a new

opportunity to entrench a culture of openness, accountability, and citizen-centred governance.

12. Let me also commend the coalition of civil society organisations that pursued the EDOSACA case for 14 years. Their courage and perseverance in securing judicial interpretation of the FOI Act reflect the best of civil society's role in democratic governance.
13. As we mark this milestone, let us recommit to using the FOI Act with integrity, responsibility, and a shared sense of purpose. Let civil society engage constructively, public institutions respond transparently, and citizens stay informed.
14. At NEITI, we remain committed. Our mandate under the EITI Standard demands nothing less. From licensing and contracts to state-owned enterprise disclosures and environmental expenditures, we continue to make extractive data accessible, usable, and impactful. We also continue to push for FOI and EITI compliance at the subnational level—because transparency must not stop at the federal level; it must reach the communities where resources are extracted, and where development must follow.
15. To conclude, the FOI Act is not just a law—it is a promise. A promise of transparency, accountability, and an informed citizenry. Fourteen years later, let us not allow that promise to be undermined—by complacency, by poor implementation, or by misuse. Let us instead uphold it together, with vigilance and integrity.
16. I look forward to the thoughtful conversations and actionable outcomes that will emerge from today's dialogue.
17. Thank you for your attention and commitment.