



Policy Brief

Special Edition

VOLUME 1, ISSUE #14

August, 2025

A CAPITAL BUILT ON EXCLUSION: *Restoring Justice, Representation, and Political Belonging for Abuja's Original Inhabitants*



...Fighting for Justice to Guarantee Peace

A CAPITAL BUILT ON EXCLUSION:

Restoring Justice, Representation, and Political Belonging for Abuja's Original Inhabitants

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The Resource Centre for Human
Rights & Civic Education
(CHRICED)



FCT
Original
Inhabitants
Empowering communities to sustain livelihoods

The John D. and
Catherine T. MacArthur
Foundation

MacArthur
Foundation



...fighting for Justice to Guarantee Peace

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ISSN: 3121-8873

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First Published in 2025 by

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About this Brief

This policy brief examines the long-standing political exclusion of Abuja's Original Inhabitants (OIs)—the Indigenous custodians whose ancestral lands were transformed into Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Despite their foundational sacrifice, OIs remain marginalized in political representation, federal appointments, land governance, and development benefits.

Drawing on the Abuja Original Inhabitants Project, community testimonies, legal analysis, and international human-rights frameworks, this brief presents a compelling case for constitutional reform, institutional inclusion, and restorative justice.

A Human-Rights Imperative

“We gave Nigeria our land. All we ask is to have a voice in how that land is governed.”

— Testimony from an Indigenous elder,
Kuje Area Council

This policy brief centres the lived experiences of OIs, highlighting the urgent need for reforms that honour their dignity, protect their rights, and strengthen Nigeria's democracy.

Dedication

This policy brief is dedicated to the Original Inhabitants of Abuja—the **Gbagyi, Gwari, Gade, Bassa, Koro, Ganagana, Amwamwa, Egbira, and Gwandara**, and all Indigenous communities whose ancestral lands gave birth to Nigeria's capital.

To the elders who carry the memory of villages erased by development, yet continue to speak truth with grace and courage.

To the women who rebuild community after every displacement, who hold families together through uncertainty, and whose resilience sustains the cultural heartbeat of the FCT.

To the youth who inherit a city that grew from their land but not yet from their

rights—may your voices rise, your leadership flourish, and your future be shaped by justice rather than exclusion.

To the traditional leaders who safeguard identity, history, and dignity even when institutions fail to recognize their authority.

To every family that has lost land, heritage, or opportunity in the making of Abuja—this work honors your sacrifice and affirms your rightful place in the story of Nigeria's democracy.

May this brief contribute, in some small way, to restoring the political belonging, recognition, and justice that Abuja's Original Inhabitants have long been denied.

Acknowledgement

This policy brief was made possible through the generous support of the **MacArthur Foundation**, whose commitment to advancing human rights, social justice, and inclusive governance continues to strengthen the voices of Abuja's Original Inhabitants. Their partnership has enabled sustained advocacy, community engagement, and evidence-based research that inform this publication.

We extend our appreciation to the **CHRICED program, media and research team** whose tireless work—spanning field documentation, community consultations, data analysis, and drafting—shaped the substance and depth of this brief. Their commitment to amplifying Indigenous perspectives and ensuring accuracy at every stage was invaluable.

Special recognition goes to the **Executive Director of CHRICED**, whose painstaking review, editorial guidance, and unwavering insistence on clarity, rigor, and human-rights framing elevated this document to its final standard. His leadership ensured that the lived experiences of Abuja's Original Inhabitants were presented with dignity, precision, and moral force.

We also acknowledge the contributions of community leaders, youth advocates, women's groups, and partner organizations whose insights and testimonies enriched the narrative and strengthened the call for justice.

Executive Summary

Abuja is often described as the “center of unity,” a city built to symbolize fairness, neutrality, and national cohesion. Yet for the Indigenous communities whose ancestral lands were transformed into the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja has become a symbol of exclusion rather than unity. Nearly

Nearly five decades after the FCT's creation, Abuja's Original Inhabitants (OIs) continue to face political marginalization, economic dispossession, and institutional invisibility

five decades after the FCT's creation, Abuja's Original Inhabitants (OIs) continue to face political marginalization, economic dispossession, and institutional invisibility.

The transformation of Abuja into a modern capital brought wealth and opportunity—but not for the people whose land made it possible

Their experience reflects a profound human-rights concern: a population displaced for national development but denied meaningful participation in the governance of the land that once belonged to them.

This policy brief examines the historical roots of this injustice, the constitutional contradictions that sustain it, and the urgent need for reforms that align with Nigeria's human-rights obligations. Drawing on the 2025 Abuja Original Inhabitants Project—supported by the MacArthur Foundation and implemented by CHRICED and nine sub-grantees—the brief highlights the lived realities of OIs and the growing momentum for structural change.

1. Background: A Capital Built on Displacement and Broken Promises

1.1 Historical Context

When the Federal Military Government enacted Decree No. 6 of 1976, the Indigenous communities of Abuja were told that their sacrifice was for the nation's future. But the promises of inclusion, compensation, and development never materialized in full.

In Jiwa, an elderly Gbagyi man recalls the day government officials arrived with survey equipment:

“They said the land was for all Nigerians. But after they took it, we were left with nothing to stand on—not even the right to decide what happens here.”

Families were uprooted from ancestral farmlands. Sacred sites were cleared. Communities were relocated to unfamiliar terrain with inadequate infrastructure. The transformation of Abuja into a modern capital brought wealth and opportunity—but not for the people whose land made it possible.

1.2 Constitutional Contradictions

The 1999 Constitution appears to guarantee equality for the FCT. Section 299 states that the FCT should be treated “as if it were one of the states of the Federation,” while Sections 48 and 49 provide for legislative representation. Section 42 prohibits discrimination based on ethnic origin or place of birth.¹

1. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), Sections 299, 42.

Yet the FCT remains the only federating unit without an elected governor, state executive council, or autonomous political leadership. Instead, Section 302 vests executive authority in a federally appointed Minister—an arrangement that denies Ols the right to elect leaders who understand their history, culture, and needs.²

This contradiction has produced a governance vacuum where Ols are citizens without political agency in their own homeland.

1.3 International Human-Rights Obligations

Nigeria is bound by the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, domesticated as national law. Article 13 guarantees participation in government, while Article 20 affirms the right to self-determination.³

The persistent exclusion of Ols violates these rights. It also undermines Nigeria's commitments under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which emphasizes the right of Indigenous communities to participate in decisions affecting their lands, cultures, and futures.

2. The Democratic Deficit: Key Challenges Facing Abuja's Original Inhabitants

2.1 Political Statelessness

In communities like Kuje and Bwari, young people often express frustration at being unable to aspire to executive political office within their own territory. As one youth advocate put it during a 2025 town hall:

"We can vote for a president, but not for a governor. We can elect lawmakers, but not the people who control our land. How is this justice?"

The absence of an elected executive structure leaves Ols politically stateless—citizens without the power to shape the governance of their ancestral land.

Across the six area councils of the FCT, the feeling of political statelessness is not an abstract constitutional concept—it is a lived reality that shapes daily life. During a 2025 civic forum in Gwagwalada, a young Indigenous woman named Rifkatu stood up and spoke with a quiet intensity that

silenced the room.

"My parents were born here. I was born here. My children will be born here. Yet we cannot elect the person who governs us. How can we belong to a place that does not allow us to choose our own leaders?"

Her words captured a sentiment echoed across Indigenous communities: the FCT's governance structure denies Ols the fundamental right to political self-determination. While residents of every other federating unit can aspire to govern their state, Ols cannot contest for a gubernatorial position because the FCT has no governor. Executive authority rests in the hands of a Minister appointed by the President—someone who may have no cultural, historical, or social connection to the land or its people.⁴

This arrangement leaves Ols without meaningful influence over decisions that affect their land, livelihoods, and future. It

2. African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act, Cap A9 LFN 2004.

3. African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act, Cap A9 LFN 2004

4. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), Section 302.

also contradicts Nigeria's obligations under the African Charter, which guarantees the right of all peoples to participate freely in the government of their country.⁵

2.2 Exclusion from Federal Appointments

The exclusion of OIs from federal appointments is not merely a statistical imbalance—it is a pattern that reinforces political invisibility. In 2025, when the list of ambassadorial nominees was released without a single Indigenous representative, frustration rippled through communities from Karu to Bwari.

At a peaceful protest in Area 1, an elderly Bassa man held a placard that read:

“We gave Nigeria land. Why can't Nigeria give us representation?”

He explained that his father had surrendered their farmland during the early days of Abuja's construction, believing the government's assurances that Indigenous communities would be partners in the capital's development. Decades later, he still waits for that promise to be fulfilled.

Despite Abuja's national significance, OIs remain underrepresented in:

- Ministerial appointments
- Ambassadorial postings
- Federal boards and agencies
- National committees and commissions

This exclusion contradicts Section 42 of the

“My parents were born here. I was born here. My children will be born here. Yet we cannot elect the person who governs us. How can we belong to a place that does not allow us to choose our own leaders”

Constitution, which prohibits discrimination based on ethnic origin or place of birth.⁶ It also undermines the principle of equitable representation essential to a functioning democracy.

2.3 Weak Institutional Representation

Traditional institutions remain central to the cultural identity of OIs, yet they lack formal authority within the FCT's governance architecture. Chiefs and community leaders are often consulted informally, but they have no constitutional mandate to influence decisions on land allocation, resettlement, or development planning.

During a 2025 dialogue in Kuje, a traditional leader described the frustration of being treated as a ceremonial figure:

“They call us custodians of the land, but they do not allow us to speak when the land is being taken.”

Civil society organizations advocating for OIs faces similar challenges. Their efforts are often fragmented, underfunded, or overshadowed by the political weight of federal institutions. Without a unified platform or formal representation mechanism, Indigenous voices struggle to influence major policy decisions.

2.4 Socio-Economic Consequences of Political Marginalization

Political exclusion has deepened socio-economic inequalities across Indigenous communities. In resettlement areas like Wasa and Shere, families live in overcrowded conditions with limited access to clean water, healthcare, and quality education.

A mother in Shere described how her children walk long distances to a school with

5. African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act, Cap A9 LFN 2004, Article 13.

6. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), Section 42

leaking roofs and insufficient teachers:

“We see the beautiful schools in the city, but our children are not part of that Abuja.”

Land dispossession has also eroded traditional livelihoods. Many OIs who once relied on farming now struggle to survive in an economy dominated by formal employment and commercial development—sectors where they face

systemic barriers.

These inequalities are not accidental; they are the predictable outcome of a governance system that excludes Indigenous communities from decisions about land, development, and resource allocation.

“They call us custodians of the land, but they do not allow us to speak when the land is being taken”

3. Advocacy and Interventions in 2025: A Turning Point for Visibility and Justice

The 2025 phase of the Abuja Original Inhabitants Project marked a profound shift in how Indigenous communities in the FCT articulated their rights, mobilized their voices, and confronted decades of political exclusion.⁷ Supported by the MacArthur Foundation and implemented by CHRICED and nine sub-grantees, the project created new spaces for civic participation, legal advocacy, and international engagement. For many OIs, it was the first time their

stories were documented, their grievances validated, and their rights framed within a global human-rights context.

3.1 Civic Mobilization and Awareness

Across the six area councils, town halls organized by the Abuja Original Inhabitants Youth Empowerment Organization (AOIYEO) became powerful platforms for truth-telling. In a packed hall in Abaji, a young Gbagyi man named Musa stood

7. CHRICED (2025). *Abuja Original Inhabitants Project: Advocacy and Mobilization Report*.



Network of Lawyers for Indigenous Rights at the FCT High Court in Kuje, representing the Original Inhabitants of Abuja. Photo: CHRICED

before more than 60 participants and shared a story that resonated deeply:

“My grandfather used to say that our land was our identity. Today, the land is gone, and the identity is fading. We are treated like strangers in the place where our ancestors are buried.”⁸

The room fell silent. For many in attendance, it was the first time they had heard their own pain reflected so clearly in someone else's voice.

These forums did more than raise awareness—they built solidarity. Women, youth, elders, and traditional leaders sat side by side, discussing constitutional rights, land governance, and political participation. Participants learned how the FCT's unique governance structure affects their daily lives and how constitutional reforms could restore their political agency. AOIYEO's engagements reached more than 180 people, strengthening civic literacy and empowering communities to speak with a

unified voice.

3.2 Legal Advocacy and Policy Engagement

The Network of Lawyers for Indigenous Rights played a critical role in reframing OI exclusion as a constitutional and human-rights issue.⁹ Their legal clinics and policy dialogues helped communities understand the implications of Sections 299 and 302 of the Constitution, the African Charter, and Nigeria's obligations under international law.

During a legal clinic in Kwali, a widow named Esther described how her family's farmland was taken for a government project without consultation or compensation. She held up a faded photograph of her late husband standing in their former cassava field.

“This land fed my children,” she said. “Now we beg for land to farm. Who speaks for us?”

The lawyers explained how the absence of an elected FCT executive and the concentration of power in the hands of an

8. AOIYEO (2025). *Civic Engagement and Youth Participation Summary*.

9. Network of Lawyers for Indigenous Rights (2025). *Legal Interventions and Constitutional Review Submissions*.



Dr. Zikirullahi M. Ibrahim, Executive Director of CHRICED, making a presentation in Geneva before the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) Photo: CHRICED

appointed Minister create structural barriers to justice. They also supported communities in drafting petitions, documenting land claims, and preparing submissions for legislative hearings.

3.3 Community Empowerment and Social Mobilization

Organizations such as Helpline Social Support Initiatives, the FCT Traditional Rulers Wives Association, and Maijagora focused on empowering women and youth—groups often doubly marginalized by gender and political exclusion.

Each time they moved us, they said it was for development. But development for who? We are always the ones pushed aside

In a women's leadership workshop in Bwari, participants shared stories of being excluded from land discussions, resettlement negotiations, and community decision-making. One woman, Amina, described how her family was relocated three times in ten years:

"Each time they moved us, they said it was for development. But development for who? We are always the ones pushed aside."

4. Policy Implications: A Critical Window for Reform

The momentum generated in 2025 has created a rare opening for structural reform in the Federal Capital Territory. For decades, the political exclusion of Abuja's Original Inhabitants (OIs) was treated as an administrative anomaly—an unfortunate side effect of the FCT's unique status. But the stories emerging from Indigenous communities, combined with national and international advocacy, have reframed the issue as a **human-rights crisis** rooted in

These programs helped women build advocacy skills, understand their rights, and participate more confidently in governance processes.

3.4 International Advocacy and Global Visibility

Perhaps the most transformative moment of 2025 came when OI delegates travelled to Geneva to address the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP). Standing before an international audience, they described the political statelessness, land dispossession, and cultural erosion facing more than two million Indigenous residents of the FCT.¹⁰

One delegate, speaking with emotion, told the assembly:

"Abuja is the capital of Africa's largest democracy. Yet the people who gave Nigeria the land for its capital have no say in how that land is governed."

Their testimony reframed OI exclusion as a global human-rights concern, drawing international attention and strengthening pressure on Nigerian authorities to act.

systemic discrimination. The implications are profound, touching on constitutional justice, democratic legitimacy, and Nigeria's global reputation.

4.1 Growing Legislative Attention

In recent months, debates in the National Assembly have increasingly referenced the democratic deficit facing OIs. Lawmakers have raised concerns about the contradiction between Section 299 of the

10. United Nations EMRIP (2025). *Session Reports on Indigenous Peoples' Rights*.

Constitution—which states that the FCT should be treated “as if it were one of the states of the Federation”—and the reality of an unelected executive structure.¹¹

During a 2025 public hearing, an Indigenous youth leader from Bwari stood before the committee and spoke with a clarity that left legislators visibly moved:

“You cannot call us citizens when we have no say in who governs us. You cannot call this a democracy when the people whose land built the capital are denied the rights every other Nigerian enjoys.”

Her testimony underscored the urgency of constitutional reform. Legislative attention is no longer symbolic—it is a recognition that



L: Dr. Zikirullahi M. Ibrahim, Executive Director of CHRICED, with other Original Inhabitants delegates at the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) 2025 in Geneva. Photo: CHRICED

the FCT's governance model is incompatible with Nigeria's democratic principles.

4.2 Federal Pressure for Inclusion

The federal government is increasingly under pressure to address exclusionary

practices, particularly in appointments. The 2025 ambassadorial nominations, which excluded OIs entirely, sparked protests across the FCT. At a demonstration in Garki, a middle-aged Gbagyi man held a handwritten sign that read:

11. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), Section 299.

“We are not asking for favors. We are asking for fairness.”

His message captured the essence of the struggle: OIs are not seeking special treatment but equal access to opportunities that should be available to all Nigerians. Media coverage of the protests amplified public scrutiny, prompting federal officials to acknowledge the need for more inclusive appointment processes.¹²

This shift reflects a growing recognition that political exclusion is not only unjust but also politically unsustainable.

4.3 Momentum for Structural Reform

The 2025 EMRIP engagement in Geneva elevated OI issues to the international stage. Delegates highlighted Nigeria's obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, particularly Articles 13 and 20, which guarantee participation in government and the right to self-determination.¹³

International observers expressed concern that the FCT's governance structure violates these rights. This global attention has strengthened calls for reforms such as:

- Granting the FCT full statehood
- Establishing an elected executive structure
- Creating an independent FCT electoral commission

“As Africa's largest democracy, Nigeria is expected to uphold the rights of Indigenous peoples and ensure equitable governance. Continued exclusion of OIs contradicts these expectations and exposes the country to criticism in global human-rights forums.”

- Ensuring Indigenous representation in federal appointments

These proposals are no longer theoretical—they are part of an active national conversation.

4.4 Risks of Inaction

The consequences of failing to act are significant. In communities like Shere, Wasa, and Durumi, frustration is growing. During a 2025 focus group, a young mother in Durumi described how her family had been displaced twice in ten years:

“Each time they move us, they say it is for development. But development never reaches us. We are always the ones who lose.”

Her story reflects a broader truth: political exclusion fuels cycles of displacement, poverty, and marginalization. Without structural reform, these inequalities will deepen, undermining social cohesion and eroding trust in government institutions.

Inaction also threatens Nigeria's international standing. As Africa's largest democracy, Nigeria is expected to uphold the rights of Indigenous peoples and ensure equitable governance. Continued exclusion of OIs contradicts these expectations and exposes the country to criticism in global human-rights forums.

12. CHRICED (2025). *Abuja Original Inhabitants Project: Advocacy and Mobilization Report*.

13. African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act, Cap A9 LFN 2004, Articles 13 & 20

5. Recommendations

The stories emerging from Abuja's Indigenous communities are not simply accounts of hardship—they are calls to action. They reveal a population that has endured displacement, political invisibility, and socio-economic marginalization, yet continues to advocate peacefully for justice. The following recommendations reflect both the legal imperatives and the human realities that demand urgent reform.

5.1 To the Federal Government and National Assembly

a. Grant Full Statehood to the FCT: The National Assembly should initiate constitutional amendments to recognize the FCT as a state with full executive and legislative structures. This reform would finally allow OIs and other residents to elect a governor and state executive council—restoring political agency to a population that has been denied it for nearly five decades.¹⁴

We are not asking for power. We are asking for dignity—the dignity of choosing the people who make decisions about our lives

During a 2025 consultation in Gwagwalada, an Indigenous teacher described what statehood would mean for her community: *“We are not asking for power. We are asking for dignity—the dignity of choosing the people who make decisions about our lives.”* Her words reflect the deep emotional weight behind the demand for statehood.

b. Ensure Equal Representation and Indigenous Inclusion: Federal authorities should adopt affirmative action mechanisms that guarantee OI representation in ministerial appointments, ambassadorial

postings, and federal boards. This is not preferential treatment—it is corrective justice. Section 42 of the Constitution prohibits discrimination based on ethnic origin or place of birth, yet OIs remain systematically excluded from national leadership roles.¹⁵

A young man in Karu expressed the frustration shared by many:

“How can Abuja speak for Nigeria when Abuja's own people have no voice?”

c. Establish an Independent FCT State Electoral Commission: An autonomous electoral commission is essential for credible local elections and grassroots democracy. Indigenous participation in the commission's structure and mandate will ensure fairness and rebuild trust in governance processes.¹⁶

In a 2025 workshop, a community leader in Abaji explained:

“We cannot keep voting in elections that do not reflect our realities. We need a system that sees us.”

d. Guarantee Indigenous Leadership in Area Councils: Area councils are the closest governance structures to Indigenous communities, yet OIs often struggle to secure leadership positions due to structural barriers. Reforms should prioritize Indigenous leadership, review electoral boundaries, and ensure party processes do not perpetuate exclusion.

5.2 To Civil Society Organizations

a. Sustain Civic Education and Political Literacy: Civil society must continue empowering OIs with knowledge of their rights. Civic education is not merely

14. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), Section 299.

15. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), Section 42.

16. Network of Lawyers for Indigenous Rights (2025). *Legal Interventions and Constitutional Review Submissions*.

informational—it is transformational. It gives communities the tools to challenge injustice and advocate for reform.

b. Strengthen Leadership Development: Investments in leadership training for Indigenous youth and women are essential. In 2025, a young woman in Bwari shared how leadership training changed her perspective:

“For the first time, I felt like my voice mattered. I want other girls to feel that too.”

c. Deepen Coordinated Advocacy and Strategic Litigation: Civil society organizations should collaborate on unified campaigns and strategic litigation to challenge discriminatory governance arrangements. Legal action has already begun to shift public discourse—continued pressure can drive institutional change.

6. Conclusion

The political exclusion of Abuja's Original Inhabitants is one of the most enduring injustices in Nigeria's democratic history. It is a story of a people who gave their land for the nation's capital but were denied a place in its political future. Yet it is also a story of resilience, dignity, and unwavering hope.

In a 2025 community dialogue, an elderly Gbagyi woman summed up the struggle with quiet strength:

5.3 To the Media

a. Mainstream OI Political Exclusion: Media organizations should frame OI exclusion as a national democratic issue. This is not a local grievance—it is a constitutional and human-rights concern.

b. Amplify Indigenous Voices: Journalists should prioritize Indigenous perspectives in reporting on governance, land rights, and development. Human stories have the power to shift public opinion and influence policy.

c. Promote Investigative and Accountability Journalism: Investigative reporting can expose exclusionary practices in land administration, appointments, and governance decisions. Accountability journalism is essential for transparency and reform.

“We are not fighting the government. We are fighting to be seen.”

Her words capture the essence of this brief. The path forward requires courage from lawmakers, commitment from civil society, and integrity from the media. Above all, it requires recognizing that justice for Abuja's Original Inhabitants is not optional—it is essential to the legitimacy of Nigeria's democracy.

The time to act is now.

About CHRICED

The **Resource Centre for Human Rights and Civic Education (CHRICED)** is a trailblazing Nigerian nonprofit with nearly two decades of impact in advancing human rights, democratic governance, and civic empowerment. With **special consultative status at the United Nations ECOSOC** and certification by **NGOsource** as equivalent to a U.S. public charity, CHRICED offers donors a **high-impact, low-risk investment** in community-led development.

We believe that **informed citizens are the bedrock of democracy**—and we've built a reputation for turning that belief into measurable change.

Mission & Strategic Alignment

CHRICED exists to build a **democratic, inclusive, and accountable society** by empowering citizens to actively shape governance and demand transparency. Our work is rooted in globally recognized frameworks:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
- Nigerian Constitution

We align seamlessly with donor priorities such as:

- Strengthening democratic institutions
- Promoting transparency and accountability
- Supporting marginalized and indigenous communities
- Advancing gender equity and social inclusion
- Expanding access to education and healthcare

What Sets CHRICED Apart

We don't just implement projects—we **design scalable solutions** that shift systems. Our core strengths include:

- Evidence-based research & advocacy
- Civic education & grassroots mobilization
- Project management & rigorous M&E
- Strategic communication &

public engagement

- Legislative advocacy & policy reform
- Coalition-building across sectors

Our multidisciplinary team, robust financial systems, and proven donor compliance make us a **trusted partner for long-term impact.**



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