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## THERE IS A CULTURE IN THE LAND: Saving Abuja's First Peoples from Cultural Extinction



# **THERE IS A CULTURE IN THE LAND:**

## **Saving Abuja's First Peoples from Cultural Extinction**

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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  
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*...fighting for Justice to Guarantee Peace*

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# About this Brief

This policy brief is part of CHRICED's ongoing commitment to advancing the cultural, political, and economic rights of Abuja's Original Inhabitants (AOIs). It synthesizes years of fieldwork, community dialogues, archival documentation, and collaborative research conducted with Indigenous communities across the Federal Capital Territory. The brief aims to illuminate the urgent threat of cultural extinction

facing the AOIs and to provide actionable policy pathways for government institutions, civil society, and development partners. It is designed as both an evidence-based resource and an advocacy tool—one that amplifies Indigenous voices, challenges structural injustices, and calls for a more inclusive and culturally grounded governance framework for Nigeria's capital.

## Dedication

This brief is dedicated to the elders, custodians, and knowledge-keepers of Abuja's Original Inhabitants—those who have carried the stories, rituals, languages, and sacred traditions of their people across generations, often in the face of displacement, erasure, and silence.

It is also dedicated to the youth who continue to

seek connection with their heritage, and to the communities who refuse to let their identity fade.

May this work honour your resilience, affirm your dignity, and contribute to a future where your culture thrives openly on the land of your ancestors.

## Acknowledgements

CHRICED extends profound gratitude to the Indigenous communities of the Federal Capital Territory whose courage, insights, and lived experiences form the heart of this brief. We acknowledge the traditional leaders, elders, women's groups, youth associations, and cultural practitioners who generously shared their knowledge, stories, and aspirations during consultations and field engagements.

We appreciate the contributions of our community partners, including the Attachi People Initiative, Mairo Women Foundation, and AOI Pedia, whose documentation efforts and cultural revival projects continue to illuminate the richness and vulnerability of AOI heritage.

Special thanks go to the University of Abuja and the team behind the Abuja Original Inhabitants Heritage and Cultural Centre for their collaboration and commitment to building a sustainable institutional home for Indigenous knowledge.

We also recognize the support of the MacArthur Foundation, whose investment in cultural rights and community empowerment has strengthened the capacity of AOI communities to advocate for justice and recognition.

Finally, we acknowledge the CHRICED research team, field officers, and policy analysts whose dedication and rigorous work made this brief possible.

# Executive Summary

Abuja's Original Inhabitants (AOIs) stand at a historic crossroads. Nearly fifty years after the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) was carved out of their ancestral homeland, the communities who first nurtured, governed, and sanctified this land now face the possibility of cultural extinction. Their languages, sacred sites, governance systems, and traditional livelihoods are disappearing at a pace that threatens to erase centuries of history within a single generation.<sup>1</sup>

This crisis is not abstract. It is lived daily by families who have watched their ancestral farmlands become highways, their sacred hills blasted for construction, and their burial grounds paved over for estates. In one Gbagyi community near Airport Road, elders recount how a sacred grove—once the site of annual rituals marking the transition of seasons—was bulldozed overnight to make way for a commercial complex. “We woke up and our history was gone,” one elder said, pointing to the concrete structure now standing where generations once gathered to pray. Stories like this are not isolated; they echo across the 17 chiefdoms of the FCT.

Despite Nigeria's constitutional commitment to cultural diversity and its obligations under international human rights instruments, the FCT remains a governance vacuum where Indigenous cultural rights are neither recognized nor protected.<sup>2</sup> The absence of legal safeguards has allowed unregulated urban expansion, extractive activities, and political decisions to override Indigenous survival. As a result, AOI communities are experiencing a form of structural violence—one that displaces not only people, but memory, identity, and belonging.

The threat is not only material; it is existential. Several AOI languages are now endangered, spoken fluently only by elders. Traditional governance institutions—once central to conflict resolution, land stewardship, and community cohesion—have been sidelined in formal decision-making. Youth, disconnected from cultural spaces and pressured by urban assimilation, increasingly grow up without the stories, rituals, and knowledge systems that once defined their identity. Without urgent intervention, these cultural systems may vanish entirely.<sup>3</sup>

Yet this brief is not only a warning—it is a call to action. The survival of AOI culture is not merely a matter of heritage preservation; it is a test of Nigeria's democratic maturity. A capital city that erases its first peoples undermines its own legitimacy. Conversely, a capital that protects and celebrates its Indigenous heritage strengthens national unity, deepens democratic inclusion, and affirms the dignity of all communities.

This policy brief presents a compelling case for urgent, coordinated action to safeguard the cultural rights of Abuja's Original Inhabitants. It draws on CHRICED's extensive fieldwork, community partnerships, and documentation efforts to highlight the pathways of cultural erosion, the resilience of Indigenous communities, and the policy reforms required to reverse the trend. It argues that cultural extinction is not inevitable—it is a policy choice. It is a choice Nigeria must refuse to make.

**“ A capital city that erases its first peoples undermines its own legitimacy. Conversely, a capital that protects and celebrates its Indigenous heritage strengthens national unity, deepens democratic inclusion, and affirms the dignity of all communities. ”**

1. Barnabas, S. G. (2018). Abuja Peoples of Nigeria as Indigenous Peoples in International Law. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 25(2), 431–457.

2. Okegbe, I. O., & Charles, O. E. (2023). Indigenous Peoples' Rights Under International Law and the Legal Impediments to Their Full Realisation in Nigeria. *Delta State University Law Review*.

3. United Nations General Assembly. (2007). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

# Background and Context

Long before Abuja became the administrative and political heart of Nigeria, the region was home to deeply rooted Indigenous communities whose histories stretch back centuries. These communities—spread across **17 chiefdoms and nine tribes**, including the **Gbagyi, Gwari, Gade, Bassa, Koro, Ganagana, Amwamwa, Egbira, and Gwandara**<sup>4</sup>—developed sophisticated cultural systems anchored in land, spirituality, and communal governance. Their identities were not abstract constructs; they were lived daily through rituals, farming cycles, festivals, oral histories, and the stewardship of sacred landscapes.



For the AOIs, land is not merely a physical asset. It is a living archive of memory. Hills are not just geological formations—they are ancestral guardians. Rivers are not simply water bodies—they are spiritual pathways. Shrines are not relics—they are active sites of communion with the unseen. Burial grounds are not forgotten spaces—they are the resting places of lineage, authority, and continuity. Every cultural practice, from naming ceremonies to harvest festivals, is tied to specific locations that hold meaning passed down through generations.

## The Disruption of 1976: A Turning Point in Indigenous History

The creation of the Federal Capital Territory in 1976 marked a profound rupture in the lives of the AOIs. Through compulsory land acquisition, entire communities were uprooted from territories they had inhabited for centuries. The planning philosophy that guided Abuja's development treated Indigenous land as “empty space,” a blank slate upon which a modern

capital could be constructed.<sup>5</sup> This framing erased the presence of Indigenous peoples from the national imagination and justified their displacement as a necessary sacrifice for national progress.

For many AOI families, the displacement was sudden and disorienting. In one community near Karshi, elders recall how government officials arrived with maps and bulldozers, informing residents that their homes, farmlands, and shrines now belonged to the state. Compensation was minimal or non-existent, and relocation sites lacked the cultural, spiritual, and economic foundations that had sustained their communities for generations. “We were told to move, but no one told us how to rebuild our lives,” one elder recounted. “We left behind our ancestors, our stories, our identity.”

The consequences of this displacement were not merely economic—they were cultural and psychological. Sacred sites were destroyed or rendered inaccessible. Ritual cycles were interrupted. Traditional governance structures lost their territorial anchors. Intergenerational knowledge transmission weakened as families were scattered across unfamiliar urban and peri-urban settlements.

## Urban Planning and the Erasure of Indigenous Presence

Abuja's development model, influenced by modernist planning ideals, prioritized administrative efficiency, security, and elite habitation. Indigenous settlements were often excluded from master plans or labelled as “informal,” making them vulnerable to demolition. As new districts emerged—Maitama, Asokoro, Wuse, Garki,

*Indigenous settlements were often excluded from master plans or labelled as “informal,” making them vulnerable to demolition. As new districts emerged—Maitama, Asokoro, Wuse, Garki, Gwarinpa—the cultural landscapes of the AOIs were systematically overwritten.*

4. CHRICED (2025). Abuja Original Inhabitant Heritage Centre Groundbreaking: A Monument to Justice

5. Akinola, S. R. (2017). Internal Colonialism and the Politics of Capital City Development in Nigeria.

Gwarinpa—the cultural landscapes of the AOs were systematically overwritten.

This erasure was not only physical but symbolic. Maps, planning documents, and public narratives rarely acknowledged the Indigenous origins of the land. As a result, many Nigerians today are unaware that Abuja was not an empty territory but a thriving Indigenous region with its own history, governance systems, and cultural identity.

### Cultural Erosion as Structural Violence

Scholars such as Taiiaki Alfred and James Anaya argue that for Indigenous peoples, culture is inseparable from land, governance, and self-determination. When land is taken, culture is disrupted. When governance systems are sidelined, identity weakens. When sacred sites

are destroyed, spiritual continuity is broken. Cultural erosion, therefore, is not a natural evolution—it is a form of structural violence.<sup>6</sup>

This violence is often invisible, unfolding quietly through policy decisions, planning frameworks, and development practices that fail to recognize Indigenous rights. Yet its impact is profound: languages fade, rituals disappear, youth become disconnected from their heritage, and communities lose the cultural anchors that once held them together.

Today, nearly five decades after the creation of the FCT, the AOs continue to navigate the consequences of this historical disruption. Their struggle is not only for land—it is for recognition, dignity, and the right to exist as distinct cultural communities within Nigeria's capital.

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6. Alfred, T. & Anaya, J. (Referenced in Barnabas, 2018).



Pottery wares by the Mairo Women Foundation supported by MacArthur Foundation through CHRICED, exhibited at the Foundation-Laying Ceremony of the Abuja Original Inhabitants Heritage Centre, University of Abuja, Nigeria Photo: CHRICED

# Pathways of Cultural Extinction

The cultural extinction threatening Abuja's Original Inhabitants (AOIs) is unfolding through multiple, interconnected pathways. These pathways are not theoretical—they are lived realities that shape the daily experiences of Indigenous families across the FCT. Each pathway represents a layer of loss: loss of land, loss of language, loss of identity, loss of memory, and ultimately, loss of peoplehood. Understanding these pathways is essential for designing effective policy responses.

## 1. Loss of Ancestral Lands and Sacred Sites

Land dispossession remains the most visible and devastating driver of cultural erosion. Across the FCT, sacred hills, ancestral farmlands, shrines, and burial grounds have been destroyed, fenced off, or converted into commercial and residential estates. These sites are not merely physical spaces—they are cultural anchors that hold centuries of spiritual meaning.

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In one community near Kuje, elders recount how a sacred hill known as *Dutsen Mai Rai*—believed to be the dwelling place of ancestral spirits—was blasted during quarrying operations. The explosion not only destroyed the hill but also disrupted a ritual cycle that had been practiced for generations. “When the hill fell, something in us fell too,” an elder said, describing the emotional and spiritual rupture.<sup>7</sup>

Such losses weaken traditional authority structures, disrupt ritual practices, and sever the intergenerational bonds that sustain Indigenous identity. When sacred sites disappear, the stories, songs, and ceremonies tied to them fade as well.

## 2. Language Endangerment and Knowledge Erosion

Language is the vessel through which culture travels across generations. Yet several AOI languages—such as Gbagyi, Gade, and Bassa—are now endangered. In many communities, children grow up speaking only English or Hausa, with little exposure to their mothertongues.

Urban displacement accelerates this trend. Families relocated to peri-urban settlements often live alongside diverse ethnic groups, making Indigenous languages less dominant in daily communication. Schools rarely teach AOI languages, and there are few structured programs for language preservation.

*When language disappears, so does the knowledge embedded within it—proverbs, oral histories, ecological wisdom, and spiritual teachings.*

A young Gbagyi mother in Lugbe described her struggle: “My children understand Gbagyi, but they cannot speak it. I am losing them to the city.” Her story reflects a broader pattern of cultural amnesia among AOI youth.<sup>8</sup>

When language disappears, so does the knowledge embedded within it—proverbs, oral histories, ecological wisdom, and spiritual teachings.

## 3. Extractive and Infrastructure Pressures

The rapid expansion of Abuja's infrastructure—roads, bridges, estates, quarries, and mining sites—has placed immense pressure on Indigenous landscapes. Extractive activities often occur without proper environmental assessments or community consultation.

In communities around Mpape and Karshi, quarrying has destroyed hills that once served as cultural landmarks. Mining operations have polluted rivers used for rituals and domestic life. Road construction has cut through ancestral

7. Attachi People Initiative (2024). Documentation of Sacred Site Loss in the FCT.

8. AOI Pedia (2024). Digital Archive of Endangered Indigenous Languages.

farmlands, displacing families and disrupting traditional livelihoods.<sup>9</sup>

These activities not only degrade the environment but also erode the cultural geography that sustains Indigenous identity.

#### 4. Marginalisation of Traditional Institutions

Traditional governance systems—once central to land stewardship, conflict resolution, and cultural preservation—have been sidelined in formal decision-making. Chiefs and elders are rarely consulted in urban planning processes, despite their deep knowledge of the land and its cultural significance.

This exclusion weakens their authority and limits their ability to protect cultural heritage. In some communities, traditional leaders report learning about development projects only after bulldozers arrive. Without institutional recognition, Indigenous governance structures struggle to defend sacred sites, preserve rituals, or transmit values to younger generations.<sup>10</sup>

#### 5. Youth Disconnection and Cultural Amnesia

Perhaps the most alarming pathway of cultural extinction is the growing disconnection between

AOI youth and their heritage. Many young people in the FCT grow up in urban or peri-urban environments where Indigenous cultural practices are not visible or valued.

*Without deliberate cultural transmission, Indigenous identity risks becoming symbolic—reduced to names, festivals, or attire—rather than a lived, daily practice.*

Urban poverty, limited access to cultural spaces, and the pressures of assimilation contribute to this disconnection. Youth often lack opportunities to learn traditional crafts, participate in rituals, or hear the stories that once shaped community identity.

A youth leader in Bwari described the challenge: “We want to learn, but there is no place to learn. Our elders are dying, and the knowledge is dying with them.”<sup>11</sup>

Without deliberate cultural transmission, Indigenous identity risks becoming symbolic—reduced to names, festivals, or attire—rather than a lived, daily practice.

9. Abubakar, I., & Doan, P. (2010). *New Spaces, New Identities: The Transformation of Indigenous Cultures*

10. CHRICED Community Dialogue Reports (2023–2024).

11. Mairo Women Foundation (2024). *Youth Cultural Disengagement Study*.



Fifth and sixth from left: Prof. John Palfrey, President of the MacArthur Foundation, and Dr. Zikirullahi M. Ibrahim, Executive Director of CHRICED, with MacArthur Foundation delegates at the Foundation-Laying Ceremony of the Abuja Original Inhabitants Heritage Centre, University of Abuja, Nigeria. Photo: CHRICED

# Evidence & Symbolic Erasure

CHRICED's long-term engagement with Abuja's Original Inhabitants (AOIs) has generated a rich body of evidence that documents both the severity of cultural erosion and the remarkable resilience of Indigenous communities. Through community dialogues, field research, digital archiving, and partnerships with grassroots organizations, CHRICED has witnessed firsthand how cultural systems are being dismantled—and how communities are fighting to preserve what remains.

Across the FCT, elders speak of disappearing sacred sites, fading languages, and the weakening of traditional authority. These testimonies are not abstract data points; they are lived experiences that reveal the emotional and spiritual toll of cultural loss. In one community in Bwari, an elder described how a sacred river once used for purification rituals had been diverted during road construction. “The river was our cleansing place,” he said. “Now it is a dry path. Our children will never know what it meant to us.”<sup>12</sup>

“Across the FCT, elders speak of disappearing sacred sites, fading languages, and the weakening of traditional authority. These testimonies are not abstract data points; they are lived experiences that reveal the emotional and spiritual toll of cultural loss.”

## Community-Driven Documentation and Cultural Revival

CHRICED-supported initiatives have played a crucial role in capturing these stories and preserving Indigenous knowledge. The Attachi People Initiative, for example, has meticulously documented the disappearance of sacred spaces and the erosion of traditional authority due to unchecked urban encroachment. Their work includes mapping sacred hills, cataloguing oral histories, and recording rituals that are at risk of being forgotten.

Similarly, the Mairo Women Foundation has

revitalized Indigenous pottery traditions, demonstrating how cultural practices can serve as both economic lifelines and vehicles for cultural transmission. In their workshops, older women teach younger generations the techniques, stories, and symbolism embedded in traditional pottery. One young participant shared, “I never knew pottery was part of who we are. Now I feel connected to my grandmother in a new way.”<sup>13</sup>

Digital initiatives such as AOI Pedia have also emerged as powerful tools for cultural preservation. By recording Indigenous histories, rituals, and knowledge systems, these platforms create accessible archives that safeguard cultural memory for future generations. They also provide a space for youth to reconnect with their heritage in a format that resonates with their digital lives.

## The Abuja Original Inhabitants Heritage and Cultural Centre

One of the most significant developments in recent years is the establishment of the **Abuja Original Inhabitants Heritage and Cultural Centre**, a collaborative effort between CHRICED and the University of Abuja. This Centre, supported by the **MacArthur Foundation**, represents a transformative shift from fragmented preservation efforts to a sustainable, institutional model anchored in community ownership and academic partnership.

The Centre is envisioned as:

- A **repository** for Indigenous artefacts, histories, languages, and oral traditions
- A **research and teaching hub** for scholars, students, and cultural practitioners
- A **platform for intergenerational cultural transmission**, where elders can teach youth
- A **policy and advocacy centre** linking Indigenous communities with decision-makers

During a community consultation session, a Gade elder expressed hope: “For the first time,

12. CHRICED Cultural Documentation Reports (2023–2025).

13. Ibid.

we feel seen. This Centre will tell our story long after we are gone.”<sup>14</sup>

### Symbolic Erasure in the Capital's Public Landscape

While physical erasure is devastating, symbolic erasure is equally damaging. Abuja's public spaces—its monuments, architecture, and national symbols—fail to acknowledge the Indigenous peoples whose land forms the foundation of the capital. The Abuja City Gate, for instance, contains no Indigenous motifs, narratives, or historical references. Major national sites such as Aso Rock, the National Assembly Complex, and key roundabouts reflect state power but not Indigenous identity.

This absence is striking when compared to other Nigerian states:

- **Lagos** proudly displays Yoruba iconography such as the Aro Meta
- **Osun** integrates sacred groves and Yoruba cosmology into its public identity
- **Abia** showcases Igbo heritage through monuments and cultural symbols
- **Cross River** embeds Indigenous motifs in tourism and public architecture

In contrast, Abuja's symbolic landscape presents a sanitized version of national identity—one that excludes the very communities who first

inhabited the land. This invisibility reinforces the perception that AOIs are outsiders in their own homeland, further entrenching cultural erasure.<sup>15</sup>

### The Emotional Cost of Invisibility

Symbolic erasure carries deep emotional consequences. During a CHRICED dialogue, a young Gbagyi woman said, “When I walk through the city, I see no sign that my people ever existed. It feels like we are ghosts.” Her words capture the psychological impact of being erased from the visual and narrative fabric of the nation's capital.

*When I walk through the city, I see no sign that my people ever existed. It feels like we are ghosts.*

The lack of Indigenous representation in public spaces sends a powerful message: that AOI cultures are not valued, not recognized, and not part of the national story. Reversing this erasure is essential for restoring dignity, belonging, and historical justice.

*The lack of Indigenous representation in public spaces sends a powerful message: that AOI cultures are not valued, not recognized, and not part of the national story.*

14. Momoh, C. T. (2025). *Two Million Abuja Indigenous People Face Extinction*. Development Diaries.

15. Adeyanju, S., & David, O. (2025). *NGO Launches Cultural Rights Project for FCT Original Inhabitants*. Abuja City Journal.



A Gbagyi masquerade dance display by one of the Original Inhabitant tribes entertaining guests at the Foundation-Laying Ceremony of the Abuja Original Inhabitants Heritage Centre, University of Abuja, Nigeria. Photo: CHRICED

# Legal Frameworks and Policy Gaps

Nigeria's legal and normative landscape contains strong commitments to cultural rights, human dignity, and the protection of Indigenous peoples. Yet, for Abuja's Original Inhabitants (AOIs), these commitments remain largely theoretical. The gap between law and lived reality is wide, and it is within this gap that cultural erosion has taken root. Understanding the legal frameworks—and the failures in their implementation—is essential for charting a path toward justice and cultural survival.

## Nigeria's Legal and International Obligations

Nigeria is a signatory to several international and regional instruments that affirm the rights of Indigenous peoples to preserve their culture, land, and identity.

These include:

### 1. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights

Articles 17 and 22 of the African Charter guarantee the right of every individual and community to cultural development and the protection of cultural values. The Charter also recognizes the collective rights of peoples—an important distinction for Indigenous communities whose identities are communal rather than individual. Nigeria domesticated the Charter through the African Charter Act, making it enforceable in Nigerian courts.<sup>16</sup>

### 2. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

UNDRIP affirms the rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their cultural institutions, protect their sacred sites, and participate in decisions affecting their lands and resources. It also mandates **Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)** before any development project can proceed on Indigenous land. Although UNDRIP is not legally binding, it represents a global standard that Nigeria has endorsed.

### 3. UNESCO Conventions on Cultural Heritage

Nigeria is party to UNESCO conventions that protect both tangible and intangible cultural

heritage. These conventions obligate states to safeguard languages, rituals, traditional knowledge, and sacred sites—areas where the AOIs are most vulnerable.

## 4. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

Section 21 of the Constitution directs the state to “protect, preserve and promote the cultures of Nigeria's diverse peoples.” While this provision is non-justiciable, it reflects a constitutional commitment that should guide policy and administrative action.

Despite these frameworks, the AOIs remain one of the least protected Indigenous groups in the country. Their cultural rights are recognized in principle but violated in practice.

## The Governance Gap: Why AOIs Remain Unprotected

The FCT occupies a unique legal and administrative position in Nigeria. Unlike states, it is governed directly by the Federal Government through the Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA). This structure has created a governance vacuum where Indigenous rights fall through the cracks.

### 1. No Indigenous Cultural Protection Framework for the FCT

While many states have cultural bureaus or heritage protection laws, the FCT lacks a dedicated framework for safeguarding Indigenous culture. There is no statutory recognition of AOI communities, no cultural protection zones, and no mechanisms for preserving sacred sites. As a result, development projects proceed without considering cultural impacts.

### 2. Absence of Sacred Site Mapping and Protection

There is no official inventory of sacred hills, rivers, shrines, or burial grounds in the FCT. Without documentation, these sites are vulnerable to demolition, mining, or commercial development. Communities often learn of

16. United Nations Human Rights Committee (2016). *Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

impending destruction only when bulldozers arrive.

### 3. AOI Languages Excluded from School Curricula

Despite constitutional and UNESCO commitments, AOI languages are not taught in FCT schools. Children grow up without structured exposure to their mother tongues, accelerating language loss and weakening cultural identity.

### 4. No Sustainable Financing for Cultural Preservation

Cultural preservation efforts rely heavily on NGOs, community groups, and donor-funded projects. There is no dedicated budget line within the FCTA for Indigenous cultural protection, making long-term planning difficult.

### 5. Lack of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)

Development projects in the FCT rarely involve meaningful consultation with Indigenous communities. Traditional leaders report that they are often informed of decisions after plans

have been finalized. This violates international standards and undermines Indigenous governance systems.<sup>17</sup>

### The Human Impact of Policy Failures

The consequences of these policy gaps are deeply personal. During a CHRICED policy dialogue, a Gwari chief described how his community's ancestral farmland was allocated to a private developer without consultation. "We were told the land was needed for national development," he said. "But what about our development? What about our history?" His question captures the emotional and political tension at the heart of the AOI struggle.

Another community leader in Kwali recounted how a sacred grove used for initiation rites was cleared for a housing estate. "Our boys cannot become men in the way our fathers taught us," he lamented. "We are losing our future."

These stories illustrate that policy failures are not bureaucratic oversights—they are lived injustices that erode identity, dignity, and belonging.

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17. CHRICED Policy Assessment Report (2024).



M: Prof. John Palfrey, President of the MacArthur Foundation, with Prof. Matthew Adamu, acting VC of the University of Abuja, and Abuja traditional rulers unveiling the plaque at the Foundation-Laying Ceremony of the Abuja Original Inhabitants Heritage Centre, University of Abuja, Nigeria. Photo: CHRICED

# Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

The survival of Abuja's Original Inhabitants (AOIs) depends on deliberate, coordinated, and sustained policy action. Cultural extinction is not an inevitable outcome of modernization; it is the result of choices—choices about whose history is preserved, whose identity is recognized, and whose rights are protected. This final section outlines a comprehensive set of recommendations that respond directly to the pathways of cultural erosion identified in earlier pages. These recommendations are grounded in CHRICED's fieldwork, community consultations, and analysis of global best practices for Indigenous cultural protection.

## Immediate Actions

### 1. Conduct an Urgent Audit and Mapping of Indigenous Cultural and Sacred Sites

The FCTA should collaborate with AOI communities, traditional leaders, and cultural experts to map sacred hills, rivers, shrines, burial grounds, and historical settlements. This mapping exercise must be community-led to ensure accuracy and cultural sensitivity. Without documentation, these sites remain vulnerable to demolition and commercial development.

### 2. Impose Moratoriums on Development Affecting Identified Heritage Areas

Pending the completion of the cultural mapping, the FCTA should halt all development activities in areas suspected to contain sacred or culturally significant sites. This moratorium is essential to prevent further irreversible losses.

### 3. Establish a Rapid Response Cultural Protection Taskforce

This taskforce—comprising community representatives, cultural experts, and government officials—should intervene quickly when sacred sites are threatened. Communities often report that by the time they raise alarm, bulldozers have already arrived. A rapid response mechanism can prevent such tragedies.

## Medium-Term Reforms

### 4. Integrate AOI History and Culture into FCT School Curricula

Education is one of the most powerful tools for cultural preservation. The FCTA should work with the Universal Basic Education Board to incorporate AOI history, cultural practices, and Indigenous knowledge systems into primary and secondary school curricula. This will ensure that AOI children grow up with a strong sense of identity and belonging.

### 5. Introduce Indigenous FCT Languages into Schools

At least one AOI language—such as Gbagyi or Gade—should be taught as a mandatory or elective subject in FCT schools. Language revitalization programs should also include teacher training, community-based language clubs, and digital learning tools.

### 6. Establish Protected Indigenous Cultural Zones

Certain areas of the FCT should be designated as cultural protection zones where development is restricted and cultural activities are supported. These zones can serve as living cultural landscapes where rituals, festivals, and traditional governance practices continue uninterrupted.

### 7. Support Community-Led Documentation and Cultural Transmission Initiatives

Government funding should be allocated to community groups, women's associations, youth organizations, and cultural practitioners who are actively preserving Indigenous knowledge. These groups are already doing the work—what they need is institutional support.

## Long-Term Structural Reforms

### 8. Operationalize the Abuja Original Inhabitants Heritage and Cultural Centre

The Centre should be integrated into FCT cultural policy. It must serve as a hub for research, archiving, cultural education, and policy advocacy. Its success will depend on

strong community ownership and sustained government commitment.

### **9. Domesticate and Apply UNDRIP and African Charter Standards in FCT Governance**

The FCTA should adopt a formal Indigenous Rights Policy Framework aligned with UNDRIP and the African Charter. This framework should include mechanisms for cultural protection, land rights, and Indigenous participation in decision-making.

### **10. Mandate Indigenous Cultural Symbolism in Public Spaces**

Abuja's public architecture, monuments, and symbolic landscapes should reflect the history and identity of its first peoples. This includes incorporating Indigenous motifs in public buildings, naming streets and districts after AOI communities, and erecting monuments that honor Indigenous heritage.

### **11. Institutionalize Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)**

FPIC must become a mandatory requirement for all development projects in the FCT. Indigenous communities should have the right to approve or reject projects that affect their land, culture, or livelihoods. This is not only an international standard—it is a matter of justice.

### **Conclusion: A Call to Restore Justice, Memory, and Belonging**

The cultural extinction of Abuja's Original Inhabitants is not a distant threat—it is unfolding now, in real time. Sacred sites are disappearing, languages are fading, and youth are growing up disconnected from their heritage. Yet, amid this crisis, there is resilience. Elders continue to teach. Women continue to create. Youth continue to search for identity. Communities continue to fight for recognition.

During a CHRICED community forum, an elder from the Gbagyi community said, “We are not asking for much. We are only asking to exist.” His words capture the essence of this struggle: the right to exist as a people, with dignity, memory, and identity intact.

Protecting AOI culture is not merely an act of preservation—it is an act of justice. It is a recognition that the land on which Nigeria's capital stands has a history older than the city itself. It is an affirmation that development must not come at the cost of erasing the people who first called this land home.

Nigeria has an opportunity to build a capital city that honors its Indigenous roots, celebrates its cultural diversity, and upholds the rights of all its people. The time to act is now. The future of Abuja's first peoples depends on it.<sup>18</sup>

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18. CHRICED (2025). *Policy Brief on Indigenous Cultural Rights in the FCT*.

## 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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The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

MacArthur Foundation