

CSOs CALL ON INEC TO REMOVE ALL ADMINISTRATIVE IMPEDIMENTS TO PVC ACCESS BY CITIZENS

**HELD ON FEBRUARY 25, 2023 AT THE LCCI CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION CENTRE,
ALAUSA, LAGOS**

As the deadline for the collection of the Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) at the Local Government level set by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) comes to an end on 29th January 2023, it is heart-breaking to behold the anguish and the pains of many Nigerian registrants who have made frantic efforts to collect their PVCs without success. Our grassroots observers have been observing the PVC distribution exercise nationwide since December 12, 2022. We have also received hundreds of calls and text messages from citizens across the country seeking assistance from our organisations to access their PVCs. The feedback from the field and the experience of citizens show that the PVC distribution exercise has been fraught with several logistic and administrative challenges, which has made it difficult for a critical number of registrants to have access to their PVCs. The affected registrants have done their duties as citizens; they have complied with INEC processes, timeliness, and directives at the various INEC offices and PVC collection centres nationwide but are now on the verge of being defeated by the system of PVC distribution put in place by INEC.

Contrary to the generally known attitude of last-minute rush by Nigerians in pursuit of collective objectives, the attitude and conduct of Nigerians in regard to the collection of their PVCs have been generally commendable and encouraging in many collection centres across the country. Though there were reported cases of very low turnout in some centres, there has been notable commitment and zeal on the part of thousands and thousands of Nigerians. But most unfortunately, while INEC can be commended for its positive interventions and strategies in carrying out certain other responsibilities, we will be remiss in our duties as Nigerians if we do not call the Commission out for its obvious administrative lapses that now threaten to disenfranchise many eligible Nigerians who have demonstrated a keen interest in their country's electoral processes, especially with regards to the collection of their PVCs.

Observed Administrative Lapses:

- 1. Inadequate capacity of INEC to match citizens' demand for PVC with supply:** Staff in some INEC Centres were grossly inadequate to respond effectively to the demands of citizens, especially in crowded centres. The few staff at such centres were overwhelmed. The result is that citizens had to wait for long hours and return to collection centres for several days in a roll without being able to receive their PVCs. In such distribution centres, the demand for PVCs outmatched INEC's capacity to supply them.
- 2. Inability of INEC to supply all PVCs on time within the deadline:** As we speak, many citizens are yet to collect their PVCs, not because they have not made the effort but because INEC had failed to supply the PVCs at the time it promised to do so. In some centres, we observed many cases of "PVCs Not Found". Some PVCs, especially for those that were transferred, replaced, or omitted are only just being made available this week, only a few days before the January 29 deadline. This means that those affected have only several days to collect their PVCs from the local government.

- 3. Inadequate or ineffective internal communication:** There were apparent lapses in communication between the State INEC and INEC headquarter, and between the State and Local Governments, especially with regard to the time when anticipated PVCs would be available for distribution. This created a speculative situation, in which citizens were subjected to a run-around. For instance, INEC staff in some centres would tell registrants whose PVCs were not ready to come back in a week or two, and yet when they return at the appointed time, they are asked to go and return at another time. And there were instances where registrants were simply told that their PVCs were not found without any further information as to what next to do.
- 4. Inconsistency in the Procedure for distribution of PVCs:** There did not appear to be a standard operating procedure in the distribution of PVCs. For instance, some centres allowed proxy collection of PVCs while others absolutely forbade it. This has raised concerns about the fate of thousands of student-registrants across the country who might not be able to appear in person to collect their PVCs. Many of these students registered in their places of residence during the ASUU strike and are now back in school. Many are not able to travel back home to collect their PVCs within the stipulated deadline.

Our Suggestions

Therefore, INEC has a moral obligation to remedy these administrative lapses by further extending the deadline for PVC collection. The current deadlines were informed by the fact that INEC expected all PVCs to be ready and available for collection at the various centres several weeks before the deadline. Considering that this has not been the case and that INEC has not been able to match the demand for PVCs with timely and effective supply, it is imperative that it extends the deadline. It would be most unfair to expect that those citizens who have made several trips to PVC collection centres without getting their PVCs and those whose PVCs have only just been made available this week would forego their right to their PVCs and vote in the elections simply because they were unable to receive their PVCs before the current deadline. It is not their fault. They must not be made to pay the price for the administrative lapses on the PVC supply side.

Secondly, we urge INEC to allow proxy collection on behalf of students, pregnant women, the Elderly, and Persons with Disabilities, upon presentation of proper identification by the proxy. This should not be too difficult to execute; after all, Embassies allow the proxy collection of visas.

Thirdly, INEC should significantly increase the number of staff attending to registrants at the collection Centres and drastically reduce the waiting time, such that no registrant spends more than 30 minutes to collect his or her PVC. This should significantly increase the number of people served in a day.

Fourthly, the Commission should publish the list of uncollected PVCs in all the collection centres and on its website to help registrants verify the status of their PVCs and reduce unnecessary trips to collection centres.

Fifthly, in the interest of fairness and transparency, the Commission should provide effective clarifications on the situation of registrants whose PVCs fall in the “Not Found” category.

There is a lot of confusion about it and many of those concerned do not understand what that means for their voting rights. Providing better public enlightenment on this issue will help to dispel misperceptions, suspicions of discrimination and conspiracy theories.

The Commission must constantly bear in mind that it is set up to ensure that the conduct of elections is free and fair. It exists to serve the best interests of the electorate. That fairness and a level playing field must be seen and actualised in all phases of the electoral process. It is not fair to give some registrants only a few days to collect their PVCs in the last week of the process when thousands of others had six weeks since December 12, 2022. Neither is it fair to those who made several visits to collection centres and waited long hours in vain because of the slowness of the service. The registrants showed up. It was the Commission that did not supply them with their PVCs before the close of work each day. It is only fair that the Commission take the responsibility for these lapses.

Since registrants cannot vote without PVCs the Commission would be inadvertently disenfranchising citizens if it insists on sticking to the January 29, deadline. The right of eligible citizens to vote is inalienable and cannot be sacrificed on the altar of exigencies. If registrants in the last Ekiti and Osun elections could collect their PVCs only days before the elections, there is all the more reason to do so in this 2023 General Election.

Finally, we commend the Commission for the many logistic and administrative issues it has been able to resolve in response to citizens' feedback and we anticipate that it will respond to these suggestions that we have proffered in the same spirit. We assure the Commission that, as Civil Society Organisations, we will continue to be supportive of its best efforts to deliver an inclusive, credible, free, and fair general election.

Signed

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