



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot Sierra Leone

May 2025



CAMPAIGN
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GOVERNANCE

Summary

The enabling environment for civil society in Sierra Leone is restricted, marked by growing legal, political, and operational constraints. Restrictive laws—most notably Part Three of the 1965 Public Order Act and the Cybercrime Act of 2021—have been used to suppress dissent and shrink civic space. These laws have enabled the targeting of activists and journalists, undermining freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

Recent incidents underscore this trend. Activists Hawa Hunt, Thomas Babadie, and Wadi Williams were arrested for expressing dissent or attempting to protest. Dutch journalist Sophie Van Leeuwen was detained and forced to flee after investigating alleged links between a drug lord and the First Family. Other journalists, including Thomas Dixon and Melvin Tejan Mansaray, faced intimidation or exclusion for criticizing state institutions.

Civil society operations are further hindered by the rigid implementation of the NGO Policy Framework, which imposes excessive bureaucratic controls on registration and renewal processes. This undermines the autonomy of CSOs and restricts their ability to operate independently. Compounding these challenges is a decline in accessible funding, particularly following reductions in USAID support.

Government engagement with civil society remains selective, often limited to development-focused initiatives like women's empowerment. Advocacy-oriented CSOs face greater resistance, especially when calling for transparency or accountability.

The digital space is also insecure. The Cybercrime Act is frequently used to shield officials from scrutiny rather than protect citizens. The 2024 social media blackout exemplifies the state's willingness to restrict digital freedoms. These dynamics collectively erode the enabling environment for civil society in Sierra Leone.

Context

Sierra Leone has operated as a multi-party democracy since the 1991 Constitution was promulgated. However, the political space has been dominated by two parties, the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) and the All Peoples Congress (APC), which have alternated in power since independence in 1961. The deterioration of the enabling environment for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) observed over the [past decade](#) continues into May 2025, with no signs of improvement.

Notable [violations of freedom of expression and association](#) include for example the Speaker of Parliament [banning](#) journalist and commentator Melvin Tejan Mansaray from accessing the Parliament precincts in January 2025 for criticising the parliament's removal of the former Auditor General Lara Taylor Pearce and her Deputy Tamba Momoh. These violations reflect a [broader trend over the last five years](#), which was exacerbated by the enactment of the [Cyber Security and Crimes Act](#) 2021. This Act has been used as a tool to shrink civic space, particularly through Section 44, which criminalises cyberbullying but leaves the definition of the offence too broad and vague. The police have leveraged this section to [silence](#) those who criticise the government. The recently enacted Counter-Terrorism Act also poses a significant threat to rights and freedoms if it is enacted in the current draft form, with activists and journalists particularly at risk.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

The [1991 Constitution](#) of Sierra Leone guarantees the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly under Sections 25 and 26. However, recent CIVICUS Monitor assessments indicate that civic space in the country is [obstructed](#). Over the past decade, successive governments have [violated human rights](#) and used intimidation tactics, inducing self-censorship among CSOs. For instance, staff members of the [National Election Watch \(NEW\)](#) were threatened in June 2023 for releasing Process and Results Verification for Transparency (PRVT) data related to the 2023 elections. Similarly, lawyer Henrietta Kargbo [received threats](#) over her social media posts in July 2024. In December 2024, Hawa Hunt was arrested after posting a video criticising President Bio and First Lady Fatima Bio. She was detained for over two months [without bail](#). Following [sustained pressure](#) from rights groups, including Amnesty International, and the [resignation](#) of the Sierra Leone Consul to Canada in protest, the First Lady [publicly called](#) for Hunt's release. The charges were subsequently [dropped by the prosecution](#), which had escalated the case to the High Court.

As of May 2025, civic space remains polarised, with increased hate speech by bloggers associated with the two major political parties, the [SLPP](#) and the [APC](#), targeting critical voices. Pro-government bloggers receive political rewards, while human rights activists [face threats](#), forcing some to flee or remain silent. For example, on 13th October 2022, [Myk Berewa](#), an SLPP blogger, was rewarded by President Bio with [an appointment](#) as the Director of Communications at State House. Meanwhile, there are [allegations](#) of bloggers receiving financial support from politicians and their families, and being granted privileges to attend high-level government events. Activists Thomas Babadie and Wadi Williams were arrested for attempting to protest to demand the release of the 2023 election results data.

[Security forces](#) and officials, including of [parliament](#), suppress dissent. Notable examples include journalist and lecturer Thomas Dixon, who went into hiding in December 2024 after [being threatened](#) by the Inspector General of Police for alleging his “abuse of power”. Similarly, in January 2025, journalist Abdul Tejan Mansaray was [banned](#) from entering the Parliament's precincts by the Speaker of Parliament for criticising the removal of the auditor general.

In February 2025, Dutch journalist Sophia Van Leeuwen and her colleague Joseph Turay [were arrested and detained](#) after investigating claims that international drug lord Jos Leijekkers [had been living freely](#) in Sierra Leone. Although Van Leeuwen was released after hours of interrogation, her SD card was confiscated and her computer and camera were wiped. Turay has since fled the country, fearing for his life. In her first public statement after her release, Van Leeuwen [stated](#) that there is no press freedom in Sierra Leone

The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) continue to misuse the [1965 Public Order Act](#) to deny citizens the right to protest. Section 17 of the Act requires citizens to notify the Inspector General of Police before holding a protest, but this is often misinterpreted as requiring prior approval. This misapplication was evident in December 2024, with the [arrest](#) of civil society activist Thomas Babadi and political leader Wadi Williams, who were detained for over two weeks on allegations of public disorder but were never charged, after attempting to protest the delayed release of the 2023 presidential election results. In contrast, [pro-government supporters](#) have been allowed to protest freely in support of the ruling party.

This pattern reflects a broader trend of state capture of institutions that are supposed to be independent. An example is the Sierra Leone Bar Association in May 2024, which came under scrutiny following a controversial [Annual General Meeting](#) that resulted in the election of a candidate favoured by the ruling party to head the association. In response, an

alternative group—the [Lawyers Society](#)—was formed to provide an independent voice, but it too has faced suppression by state [institutions](#).

The [Counter Terrorism Act, 2025](#) aims to address threats to national security by defining and penalising act of terrorism, which is good for public safety. However certain provisions of the Act pose significant risks to freedoms of expression, journalists’ and activists’ independence, and civic engagement. The vague and broad language used in the Act creates the potential for misuse, which could restrict press freedom and the work of activists and human rights defenders. The Act defines “terrorist acts” broadly, including actions “that create fear in a section of the public”, and this allows for subjective interpretation, which may lead to criminalisation of dissent. Sections 21 and 22 criminalise distribution of any publication, and this could be misused against journalists reporting issues of public concern, with similar fears against Sections 12, 13, 18 and 19 of the law. Sections 12 and 15 can also be misused against journalists reporting on civil disobedience or protests, which could be misinterpreted to aiding terrorism. There are also harsh penalties which range from 25 to 30 years’ imprisonment for supposed acts of terrorism, which can be misused against political opponents, whistle blowers, journalists and activists. All these provisions clearly contravene Sections 25 of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights. Clearly there is a lack of safeguards for press freedom and exercising civil liberties, and there is no fine line between acts of terrorism, and human rights and freedoms.

2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

Section 26 of the [1991 Constitution](#) of Sierra Leone specifically affirms the right to form or join civic groups, including trade unions and other associations. Despite these constitutional protections, successive governments since 2007 have sought to limit the ability of CSOs to hold authorities accountable. Efforts to control CSOs have been implemented through policies such as the [NGO Policy Regulations](#) and the Development Cooperation Framework (DCF). The current [National NGO Policy Framework](#) (2023–2028) emerged in response to [push-back](#) from civil society against earlier versions that included restrictive provisions, which caused delays and subjected CSOs to excessive scrutiny.

One notable example of state resistance to independent CSOs is the Lawyers Society of Sierra Leone, which was [formed](#) in November 2024, following a controversial congress of the Sierra Leone Bar Association. Despite fulfilling all legal requirements, the Lawyers Society has been denied registration by the Corporate Affairs Commission, reportedly due to government concerns over its growing influence and its perceived challenge to the now state-aligned Bar Association. Bureaucratic [delays at the Freetown City Council](#) have further obstructed its registration, largely because the Society includes a significant number of the country’s registered lawyers, making it a powerful alternative voice.

While the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development has introduced some reforms—such as sectoral coordination meetings between policy and civic actors at both national and local levels (in areas like water, sanitation, and agriculture)—and has streamlined NGO registration through [an online portal](#), these improvements have not translated into greater civic freedom. A harmonised service-level agreement between NGOs and the government has also been introduced, reducing the agreement-signing process from each line ministry they interface with, based on the projects they implement. However, the guiding principles of the framework still require NGOs to align their work with government priorities, limiting their independence and impact.

The misuse of legal instruments to suppress dissent is further illustrated by the case of Dutch journalist Sophie Van Leeuwen, who was accused of espionage under the [Cybercrime Act](#) and the outdated [Cap 170 law](#). Despite having been accredited to work in Sierra Leone

and being known to the Ministry of Information, she was targeted in an apparent attempt to intimidate her into abandoning her investigative work.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Funding for civil society actors in Sierra Leone is relatively inaccessible. CSOs rely heavily on international donors, with a limited number of multilateral donors such as the European Union (EU), Irish Aid, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) supporting civil society work. Organisations like Trócaire, Christian Aid and CordAid act as intermediaries to fund most CSO activities. These organisations, often supported by their home-country development agencies, are regarded as having [advanced technical and implementation capacities](#). This has led to limited access to funding for local CSOs in critical sectors such as health, education, and social services.

The funding environment for civil society in Sierra Leone has become increasingly challenging, with significant reductions in support from key international partners such as USAID and UK Aid. The [suspension](#) of USAID funding to many CSOs by U.S. President Donald Trump in January this year has worsened the situation. As a result, a five-year peacebuilding project implemented by CSOs—funded by USAID—has been stopped and project funds have been frozen, forcing the organisations to lay off all staff hired specifically for the initiative. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom is preparing to scale back its development assistance in Sierra Leone, particularly in the sectors of education, health, and energy. This reduction is a consequence of the UK government's [decision to cut its aid budget](#) from 0.5% to 0.3% of Gross National Income, reallocating funds to increase national defence spending in line with NATO commitments.

Additionally, many international CSOs and intergovernmental agencies now prefer to implement their programmes directly, side-lining local CSOs in critical sectors such as health, education, and social services. Examples include Welthunger Hilfe, Catholic Relief Services, National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI), Plan International, Save the Children, and the United Nations Population Fund.

Article 9.1.2 of the NGO Policy Framework allows the government to provide incentives including financial support to CSOs, but the practice over time is that [these contracts typically](#) go to organisations that are not critical of the government and are focused on service delivery. Many CSOs complain that the government's open calls for funding proposals are [not publicised](#) and that funding is not awarded through a fair and competitive process, leading to calls for the depoliticisation of government-CSO interactions.

Generally, CSOs are constrained in accessing funding due to limited capacity to compete for donor funds. In addition, CSOs must regularise their registration to avoid government accusations of illegality, often a pre-requisite to apply for funding, which complicates collaboration with donors. Only a few CSOs have the financial sustainability to run their programmes by diversifying their revenue streams, such as through rental income, managing farms, or operating small-scale enterprises.

4. State openness and responsiveness

The relationship between the government and CSOs in Sierra Leone is mixed and often shaped by political convenience. Most state agencies tend to collaborate with CSOs that align with their agendas or when such partnerships help enhance their legitimacy and meet donor expectations. The government retains the discretion to choose which CSOs it engages with.

For example, during the passage of the Criminal Procedure Act in 2024, which faced widespread criticism from activists and citizens for eliminating the jury system in criminal cases, the government still managed to secure support from select CSOs to push the

legislation through. In contrast, the Safe Motherhood Bill, currently under consideration in Parliament, has seen more inclusive collaboration. The Ministry of Information and Civic Education and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation are actively working with activists and rights groups to raise awareness about the bill's importance and to advocate for its passage.

There have also been positive examples of government-CSO collaboration in public engagement. The Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED) partnered with CSOs to organise NGO Week in March 2025, which featured sponsored walks, workshops and meetings to showcase the contributions of CSOs and NGOs across the country. Similarly, the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs worked closely with CSOs focused on gender and women's empowerment to plan and celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March.

Most recently in April 2025, a delegation from CSOs was accredited by the Ministry of Gender to attend the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) meeting in New York. They joined the official Sierra Leone delegation to contribute to global discussions on women's rights and participation.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

The political culture in Sierra Leone presents a complex and often hostile environment for CSOs, particularly those engaged in advocacy and accountability work. Public and official attitudes toward CSOs vary widely, [often depending on the nature of their advocacy](#) and perceived political alignment. While some CSOs are appreciated for their development work by government officials, those that challenge government actions or demand transparency frequently face antagonism.

In October 2024, Abdul Fatoma, the Director of the Centre for Human Rights and Development International, noted on his [Facebook](#) page that he was subjected to abusive language from judges after statements he made [accusing judges](#) of inappropriate behaviour. In January 2025, a journalist was [banned](#) from Parliament by the Speaker for criticising the wrongful act of removing the Auditor General from auditing the accounts of the Presidency. CSO leaders, activists, and journalists such as [Marcella Samba Sesay](#) and [Thomas Dixon](#) have been subjected to intimidation, including [public shaming](#) on social media, in attempts to silence them. Ahead of the Lawyers Society's Annual General Meeting in February 2025, reports indicate that the Secretary to the President [warned the keynote speaker](#)—the President of the Kenya Lawyers Society—that her security could not be guaranteed if she travelled to Sierra Leone. As a result, [she opted to deliver her address virtually](#), highlighting the climate of fear surrounding independent civic engagement.

The public space is quite toxic and restrictive, particularly for CSOs demanding accountability and human rights, leading to self-censorship. In 2023, the Office of National Security issued a [statement](#) against National Election Watch (NEW) after they published their Process and Result Verification for Transparency (PRVT) findings on the election results. As a result, NEW leaders had to leave the country temporarily. More recently, Parliament has [been criticised](#) by CSOs such as the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) and [Legal Link](#) for passing the Counter-Terrorism Law on 11 March 2025, because it will be bad for civic and political freedoms, which critics [argue blurs](#) the line between civil liberties and acts of terrorism. There is [growing concern](#) that the law could be used to suppress dissent, silence journalists, and target opposition voices.

Despite these challenges, the civil society landscape remains vibrant and collaborative. CSOs in Sierra Leone work across a wide range of thematic areas and are active in networks and coalitions. There is a strong commitment to inclusivity, particularly in promoting gender equality and the rights of persons with disabilities, which has helped ensure broad participation and [minimal marginalisation](#) within the sector.

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Access to a secure and open digital environment in Sierra Leone has deteriorated over the past decade, with significant restrictions imposed under the current Bio administration. Notably, during the anti-government protests on 10 August 2022, the government [disrupted internet access](#) to suppress the flow of information. However, this trend is not new—under the previous administration of President Ernest Bai Koroma, internet access was also [shut down](#) during the 2018 run-off elections, hindering the transmission of voting results.

Although Section 25 of the [1991 Constitution](#) guarantees freedom of expression, and Sierra Leone is a signatory to international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, these commitments have not prevented the government from curtailing digital freedoms. Laws such as the [Cybercrime Act](#) of 2021 and the [1965 Public Order Act](#) are frequently used to target activists, journalists, and CSOs critical of the government.

In December 2024, Hawa Hunt, a Canadian-Sierra Leonean, [was arrested](#) live on television [for criticising](#) President Bio and the First Lady during the 2023 general elections. She was detained for nearly three months before being released following public outcry and international pressure. Similarly, journalist Thomas Dixon [went into hiding](#) in December 2024 after posting on Facebook about alleged interference by the Inspector General of Police in ongoing investigations. That same year, lawyer Henrietta Kargbo [was arrested](#) for criticising the President on X (formerly Twitter). The government is also moving forward with a Counter-Terrorism Act, which was adopted by Parliament and is expected to further restrict civic space. Critics argue that the bill fails to clearly distinguish between legitimate civil liberties and acts of terrorism, raising fears that it could be used to suppress dissent and silence opposition voices.

The Cybercrime Act is often applied selectively—to shield government officials and their families from public scrutiny, while largely ignoring cyberbullying and online harassment [perpetrated](#) by pro-government actors. This double standard has created a chilling effect, pushing many activists and CSOs into self-censorship to avoid public ridicule or state retaliation.

Challenges and Opportunities

Civil society organisations in Sierra Leone continue to face significant challenges, particularly from government harassment targeting activists who speak out on human rights, civil liberties, and accountability. This pressure is likely to intensify following the release of the [2023 Auditor General's Report](#), which exposed [corruption in key government institutions](#), including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Revenue Authority. If the Counter-Terrorism Bill, recently passed by Parliament, is signed into law by President Bio, it could further restrict civic space and embolden state actors to suppress dissent.

Some CSOs have compromised their independence due to close ties with the ruling government or in pursuit of financial benefits, [effectively aligning themselves](#) with state interests. This trend is exacerbated by a shrinking pool of funding opportunities. The global reduction in donor support—driven in part by the Trump administration's rollback of international aid and shifting priorities in Europe amid the ongoing war in Ukraine—has forced many CSOs to scale back or redirect their activities due to limited resources.

Despite these setbacks, several CSO consortia remain steadfast in their commitment to defending human rights and promoting transparency. CSOs such as the Budget Advocacy Network and National Election Watch continue to play a vital role in holding the government accountable.

At the same time, there are opportunities to strengthen the enabling environment for civil society. CSOs can diversify their funding sources through crowdfunding and develop social

enterprise models to sustain their operations in the absence of traditional donors. Activists can also leverage international platforms—such as the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council, and global media—to spotlight governance issues and advocate for reforms, especially as Sierra Leone currently holds a seat on the UN Security Council.

Additionally, there is a pressing need for CSOs to re-engage with the government and reopen dialogue on key issues affecting their operational independence. Constructive engagement can help rebuild trust and create space for more inclusive and transparent governance.

This publication was funded/co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union

