Country Focus Report

Sierra Leone

July 2025

A) Introduction to the Enabling Environment

What we understand by an Enabling Environment is the combination of laws, rules and social attitudes that support and promote the work of civil society. Within such an environment, civil society can engage in political and public life without fear of reprisals, openly express its views, and actively participate in shaping its context. This includes a supportive legal and regulatory framework for civil society, ensuring access to information and resources that are sustainable and flexible to pursue their goals unhindered, in safe physical and digital spaces. In an enabling environment, the state demonstrates openness and responsiveness in governance, promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making. Positive values, norms, attitudes, and practices towards civil society from state and non-state actors further underscore the supportive environment.

To capture the state of the Enabling Environment, we use the following six principles:

Six key enabling principles:

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms
2. Supportive legal and regulatory framework
3. Accessible and sustainable resources
4. Open and responsive State
5. Supportive public culture and discourses on civil society
6. Access to a secure digital environment

In this Country Focus Report, each enabling principle is assessed with a quantitative score and complemented by an analysis and recommendations written by our Network Members. Rather than offering a singular index to rank countries, the report aims to measure the enabling environment for civil society across the 6 principles, discerning dimensions of strength and those requiring attention.

The findings presented in this report are grounded in the insights and diverse perspectives of civil society actors who came together in a dedicated panel with representatives from civil society to discuss and evaluate the state of the Enabling Environment. Their collective input enriches the report with a grounded, participatory assessment. This primary input is further supported by secondary sources of information, which provide additional context and strengthen the analysis.

Brief Overview of the Country Context

Sierra Leone has operated as a multi-party democracy since the promulgation of its 1991 Constitution. Following the end of the 11-year civil conflict (1991–2002), the country witnessed a notable expansion in civic space, with civil society organisations (CSOs) playing a critical role in state-building, human rights advocacy, citizen participation, and democratic accountability. Internationally, Sierra Leone ranks among the top 25 countries for democratic participation.

However, the credibility of the 2023 elections marked a significant decline compared to previous post-conflict electoral processes. The political environment was deeply polarised and highly contested, dominated by the two main parties—the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC)—which have alternated power since independence in 1961. The elections were marred by controversy, with both international and domestic observers, including The Carter Center and National Election Watch (NEW), raising serious concerns about the transparency of vote counting and results tabulation.

Over the past decade—and particularly in the last five years—the enabling environment for CSOs has deteriorated. Restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and assembly have intensified, with increasing reports of arrests and intimidation targeting activists and dissenting voices. This shrinking civic space undermines peaceful coexistence and limits opportunities for meaningful civic engagement.

Despite these challenges, the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression, the press, association, and assembly, as enshrined in Sections 25 and 26. Upholding these constitutional protections remains essential for fostering an inclusive and participatory democratic society.

B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

Principle 1: Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms
Score: 2.90[1](Obstructed)

Recent assessments show that the civic space in Sierra Leone is obstructed. These trends have highlighted the clampdown on fundamental freedoms of citizens, media activists, and civil society representatives, particularly in the last year. The 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone guarantees freedoms of expression, association, and assembly in Sections 25 and 26. However, successive governments have violated human rights, using intimidation to induce self-censorship among CSOs.

1.1 | Freedom of Association

Although Sierra Leone's 1991 Constitution in section 26 formally protects the right to freedom of association, recent developments reveal a growing disconnect between legal guarantees and the lived reality for civil society actors. State authorities increasingly deploy legal and administrative mechanisms to suppress dissent and control civic space. This is evident in the alleged manipulation of the Sierra Leone Bar Association elections in May 2024, which prompted the creation of the Lawyers Society Sierra Leone. Despite meeting all legal requirements, the new body faced institutional obstruction, including denial of registration and withdrawal of its launch certificate—actions that suggest a deliberate effort to prevent the emergence of independent legal voices.

Similar tactics have been used against the Centre for Human Rights and Development International (CHRDI), which faced public delegitimisation after legally challenging government decisions and criticising the judiciary. Authorities questioned its registration status despite its longstanding presence, reflecting a broader pattern of administrative harassment aimed at silencing critical actors. The revocation of Truth Media's licence just before its launch further illustrates the state's pre-emptive suppression of platforms perceived as oppositional.

These cases highlight a trend of selective enforcement and politicisation of regulatory processes, revealing gaps in institutional independence and accountability. The enabling environment for civil society is increasingly shaped by this opaque decision-making and discretionary power, undermining trust and legal certainty. However, the persistent emergence of new civic actors, despite these constraints, signals opportunities for coalition-building for legal reform advocacy. Without urgent measures to restore transparency and protect

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[1] This is a rebased score derived from the CIVICUS Monitor rating published in December 2024. The country is rated as *Obstructed* in the Monitor, with a score of 48/100, which has been converted to fit our 1–5 scale.

associational rights, Sierra Leone risks further erosion of democratic space and civic participation.

1.2 | Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The right to peaceful assembly in Sierra Leone remains under significant strain, with state authorities—particularly the Sierra Leone Police—frequently accused of undermining this freedom through selective enforcement and legal overreach. Although section 26 of the Constitution provides for the right to assemble, its practical application reveals a pattern of restriction, especially against groups critical of the government. Legal instruments such as the 1965 Public Order Act and the Cybercrime Act of 2021 are routinely invoked to justify arrests and dispersals, often in ways that distort their original intent. Section 17 of the Public Order Act, which requires protest organisers to notify the Inspector General of Police, is commonly misapplied as a requirement for prior approval. This misinterpretation has effectively transformed a procedural safeguard into a tool for denying assembly rights.

Recent incidents underscore this trend. In December 2024, activists Thomas Babadi and Wadi Williams were arrested and detained for over two weeks after attempting to organise a protest demanding the release of the 2023 election results. Similar actions were taken against Edmond Abu and Thomas Moore Conteh for protests related to economic grievances. These arrests reflect a broader strategy of criminalising dissent and deterring public mobilisation. In contrast, pro-government gatherings—such as the public procession in support of First Lady Fatima Bio—have proceeded without interference, highlighting a clear double standard in the enforcement of assembly laws.

This selective application of the law not only erodes public confidence in law enforcement but also contributes to a deteriorating civic space where opposition voices are systematically marginalised. The absence of consistent legal interpretation and the lack of independent oversight mechanisms leave civil society actors vulnerable to arbitrary restrictions. While the legal framework nominally protects the right to assemble, its politicised implementation reveals deeper structural weaknesses in the enabling environment for civic engagement. Without reforms to ensure impartial enforcement and protect the right to peaceful protest, the space for collective action and democratic participation will continue to narrow.

1.3 | Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression in Sierra Leone is increasingly constrained by a combination of legal repression, political intimidation, and institutional bias. While section 25 of the constitution guarantees this right, its practical exercise is undermined by a climate of fear and retaliation, particularly for those who criticise the government or expose misconduct. Civil society actors, journalists, and ordinary citizens face growing risks for expressing dissenting views. In 2023 and 2024, several individuals—including election observers, activists, and journalists—were arrested, threatened, or forced into hiding for publishing critical content or challenging state narratives. These incidents reflect a broader pattern of state intolerance toward independent scrutiny.

The state's response to dissent is marked by selective enforcement and punitive action. While pro-government voices are protected and even rewarded, critics face harassment, job loss, or exile. The arrest of Henrietta Kargbo and Hawa Hunt for criticising the President and First Lady, and the banning of journalist Melvin Tejan Mansaray from parliamentary coverage, illustrate the extent to which state institutions are used to silence dissenting voices in civil society. Foreign and local journalists investigating sensitive issues—such as alleged links between the First Family and organised crime—have also been subjected to interrogation and

intimidation, further chilling investigative reporting. The arrest, detention and intimidation of Dutch journalist Sophie Van Leeuwen illustrates this trend.

The passage of the Counter Terrorism Act in March 2025 has deepened concerns. With vague provisions criminalising actions that "create fear in a section of the public", the law grants sweeping powers that risk conflating legitimate dissent with terrorism. Sections 12, 13, 18, 19, 21, and 22 impose severe penalties—ranging from 25 to 30 years in prison—without adequate safeguards to prevent abuse. This legal ambiguity threatens to institutionalise repression and undermines Sierra Leone's obligations under both domestic and international human rights frameworks.

The cumulative effect of these developments is a shrinking space for free expression, where fear of reprisal fosters self-censorship and weakens public discourse. Without urgent legal reform and stronger protections for journalists and civic actors, the right to speak freely risks becoming a constitutional formality rather than a lived reality.

Principle 2: Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

Score: 2.33

2.1 | Registration

While Sierra Leone's legal framework formally permits the registration of CSOs, including those representing marginalised groups, the practical environment remains fraught with legal and administrative barriers that restrict access and discourage participation. The 2023–2028 National NGO Policy Framework has introduced a more structured approach to registration, but in doing so, it has also entrenched a system that is complex, costly, and exclusionary—particularly for grassroots organisations and those operating outside urban centres. The process is marked by bureaucratic opacity, high compliance costs, and overlapping institutional mandates, which collectively create a fragmented and inconsistent regulatory landscape.

CSOs seeking formal recognition must register with the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED), but this is contingent upon prior registration with the Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (SLANGO)—a requirement that many argue undermines the voluntary and independent nature of civic organising. This mandatory affiliation, especially with a body originally intended to be a neutral civic platform, creates an additional gatekeeping layer that can discourage independent or critical voices. Organisations not registered with MoPED must instead register as companies limited by guarantee with the Corporate Affairs Commission and separately with local councils in each district of operation. Each institution applies its own criteria, resulting in procedural duplication and legal uncertainty, especially for multi-sectoral or cross-regional organisations.

The requirement to sign multiple Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with various line ministries based on thematic focus further compounds the administrative burden. Although MoPED has introduced a harmonised SLA to streamline the process, the need for multiple agreements per project remains a significant hurdle. While an online portal has been launched to improve accessibility, many CSOs—particularly in rural areas—continue to face technical and logistical challenges, often requiring travel to Freetown to complete registration.

Importantly, the National NGO Policy Framework (2023–2028) introduces a formal appeal mechanism for organisations whose registration is denied. Sections 13.6–13.9 of the policy establish an Independent Appeal Panel, chaired by the Ombudsman and composed of representatives from government ministries, the Human Rights Commission, and civil society. While this structure offers a time-bound process for redress—requiring appeals to be submitted within 15 working days and acted upon within another 15—it raises concerns

about genuine independence and impartiality. The panel's composition is heavily weighted toward government officials, including representatives from ministries that may have been directly involved in the decisions being contested. This composition—dominated by government representatives—raises concerns about impartiality, particularly when appeals involve decisions made by the same ministries represented on the panel. Moreover, the panel is not a judicial body, and the policy does not provide a clear pathway for further legal redress if a CSO remains dissatisfied with the panel's decision. This lack of recourse beyond the appeal panel limits the robustness of the mechanism and may undermine confidence in its fairness.

As a result, the registration environment, while legally permissive on paper, remains structurally exclusionary in practice, reinforcing power imbalances and limiting the participation of smaller, independent, or critical civil society actors.

2.2 | Operational Environment

The operational environment for CSOs in Sierra Leone has evolved with the introduction of the National NGO Policy Framework (2023–2028), which provides a more structured legal and administrative foundation. While the framework affirms CSOs' autonomy to define their internal governance and pursue lawful objectives, it also introduces a set of regulatory expectations that, while not overtly restrictive, create operational difficulties—particularly for smaller or less-resourced organisations. Requirements such as directing 70% of donor funds to beneficiaries, aligning with government priorities, and signing Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with line ministries reflect a shift toward increased oversight and performance accountability. However, these measures also impose administrative and capacity burdens that can disproportionately affect grassroots actors.

A notable trend is the policy's implicit encouragement for CSOs to align with the government's "Big Five" development priorities. While not mandatory, this alignment is embedded in the policy's guiding principles and can influence access to cooperation, visibility, and state-facilitated benefits. This creates a subtle but significant pressure on CSOs to tailor their programming to state-defined agendas, potentially narrowing the diversity of civic initiatives and discouraging critical or alternative approaches to development.

The SLA system, though intended to improve coordination, remains a source of bureaucratic strain. Organisations working across multiple sectors must engage with several ministries simultaneously, navigating overlapping mandates and timelines. The introduction of a harmonised SLA has improved predictability and reduced delays, but the requirement to negotiate multiple agreements for each project continues to complicate operations. Similarly, expectations for CSOs to harmonise internal systems with government planning and reporting frameworks, while not enforced punitively, place additional demands on organisational capacity—particularly for rural or volunteer-led groups.

Overall, the operational environment reflects a balancing act between enabling structured engagement and exerting soft control. While CSOs are not explicitly barred from independent action, the cumulative effect of alignment pressures, administrative complexity, and capacity demands may gradually constrain the sector's diversity and autonomy. The implications for the enabling environment are nuanced: formal space exists, but its accessibility and openness are increasingly shaped by the state's development agenda and regulatory reach.

2.3 | Protection from Interference

The legal framework governing civil society operations in Sierra Leone offers limited and ambiguous protections against state interference. While the National NGO Policy Framework (2023–2028) outlines procedures for oversight and sanctions, its provisions are broadly worded and grant significant discretionary authority to government actors—particularly the

Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED). Section 14 of the policy empowers MoPED to impose a wide range of sanctions, including temporary or permanent suspension, refusal of re-registration, and cancellation of registration certificates. The grounds for these actions are often vague, relying on subjective criteria such as whether an organisation is "promoting the capacity of Sierra Leoneans" or "seeking the development interest of the community." These formulations lack clear legal thresholds and are open to interpretation, creating space for arbitrary enforcement.

The policy further expands executive discretion by allowing the Minister to impose "any other sanctions" based on advice from the Director of NGO Affairs, without specifying limits or procedural safeguards. Although the framework provides for a 30-day appeal period, the process remains internal and administrative, with no provision for independent judicial review. This absence of external oversight undermines the credibility of the appeal mechanism and leaves CSOs vulnerable to politically motivated sanctions, especially in contexts where their work challenges state narratives or interests.

Oversight through inspections and monitoring is similarly underregulated. MoPED, local councils, and sector ministries are authorised to conduct joint or separate monitoring of CSO activities, but the policy does not define the scope, frequency, or procedural standards for these inspections. This regulatory ambiguity allows for intrusive and potentially selective oversight, which can be used as a tool of control or harassment—particularly against organisations engaged in governance, human rights, or other politically sensitive areas.

The cumulative effect of these provisions is a regulatory environment that permits formal operation but lacks robust safeguards against state overreach. While oversight is necessary for accountability, the current framework risks undermining civil society autonomy and enabling discretionary interference, with serious implications for the integrity and independence of the sector.

Principle 3: Accessible and Sustainable Resources
Score: 2.25

3.1 | Accessibility of Resources

Despite the absence of formal legal prohibitions on funding, access to financial and material resources for civil society in Sierra Leone remains structurally constrained. The funding landscape is marked by scarcity, donor dependency, and systemic inequities that disproportionately affect local and grassroots organisations. While international donors remain the primary source of support, funding is largely funnelled through international NGOs (INGOs), which dominate the ecosystem due to their technical capacity and established donor relationships. This intermediary model sidelines local CSOs, particularly those working in politically sensitive or underfunded sectors, and undermines efforts toward localisation and sustainability.

Recent shifts in global aid—such as the withdrawal of USAID and cuts to UK Aid—have further tightened the resource environment, forcing some local organisations to scale down or shut operations. INGOs increasingly implement projects directly, bypassing local partners and reinforcing a top-down model of aid delivery. Government funding mechanisms, though referenced in Article 9.1.2 of the NGO Policy Framework, are opaque and often politicised, with access skewed toward organisations aligned with state interests. The requirement for MoPED registration as a condition for financial benefits and banking access effectively excludes informal or deregistered CSOs, creating a compliance-based gatekeeping system that limits operational viability.

Tax and banking policies provided for in the [Tax and Duty Exemptions Act (2023)](#) offer little relief. While some import waivers exist, there are no meaningful incentives for private or corporate donors, and CSOs often face administrative delays or double taxation. The absence of a supportive fiscal framework discourages domestic philanthropy and reinforces donor dependency. Attempts at income diversification—through social enterprises or crowdfunding—remain rare and underdeveloped, hindered by limited capacity and public misconceptions about CSO funding. Information asymmetries and complex funding application processes further marginalise smaller or rural-based organisations, entrenching a two-tiered system where access to resources is shaped less by need or impact than by institutional proximity, technical fluency, and political alignment.

3.2 | Effectiveness of Resources

The effectiveness of resources available to civil society in Sierra Leone is significantly constrained by donor-imposed conditions and limited flexibility, which often restrict CSOs' autonomy and responsiveness to local needs. While funding is available through [international donors](#), the terms attached to this support frequently reflect donor priorities rather than local realities, limiting the ability of CSOs to shape and adapt their programmes. Most funding in Sierra Leone is channelled through large INGOs, which act as intermediaries for bilateral and multilateral donors. These INGOs often come with predefined programmatic frameworks, leaving limited room for local CSOs to influence project design or implementation strategies. As a result, many local organisations are relegated to sub-contractual roles, with little input into strategic decisions and minimal flexibility to adjust activities in response to emerging community needs.

Donor conditions are often rigid and administratively demanding, with complex reporting requirements that strain the limited capacity of local CSOs. These requirements are not always proportionate to the size or scope of the funding received, and they can divert significant time and resources away from programme delivery. Moreover, donors are not consistently responsive to the security concerns of CSOs, particularly those working in politically sensitive areas or with marginalised populations. There is limited evidence of proactive risk mitigation or adaptation of reporting procedures to reduce exposure to harm.

Government influence over funding effectiveness is also a concern. While the National NGO Policy Framework allows for government support to national NGOs, in practice, funding is often awarded through opaque and politicised processes, favouring organisations that align with government narratives. This undermines the independence of CSOs and discourages critical engagement or advocacy.

3.3 | Sustainability of Resources

The sustainability of civil society in Sierra Leone is fundamentally undermined by a funding model that is short-term, externally driven, and structurally fragile. Most CSOs rely on project-based funding from a narrow pool of international donors, with little access to core or flexible funding. This model creates chronic instability, limiting organisations' ability to retain staff, preserve institutional memory, or engage in long-term strategic planning. The abrupt [suspension of USAID funding](#), which forced local organisations like CGG to halt operations mid-project, illustrates the volatility of donor-dependent financing and its disruptive impact on civil society continuity.

This dependency also distorts organisational priorities. With limited autonomy to define their own agendas, many CSOs are locked into donor-defined frameworks that may not align with local needs or long-term development goals. The lack of diversified funding constrains innovation, responsiveness, and the ability to scale successful initiatives. A few

organisations—such as the 50/50 Group, SEND Sierra Leone, and MADAM—have experimented with income-generating activities like hall rentals, agriculture, and small-scale enterprises. Others, like the Sick Pikin Project, rely on crowdfunding and public fundraising. However, these efforts remain isolated and unsustainable due to limited technical capacity, weak infrastructure, and low public trust in civil society's financial independence.

The broader environment offers little support for sustainability. Economic hardship, public misconceptions about donor funding, and the absence of tax incentives for private giving all contribute to a weak culture of local philanthropy. Cost recovery is rare, as many CSOs view free service provision as central to their mission, further entrenching financial precarity. The result is a civil society sector that is operationally active but structurally vulnerable—highly responsive in the short term, yet lacking the financial resilience to sustain long-term impact or independence.

Principle 4: Open and Responsive State
Score: 3

4.1 | Transparency

While Sierra Leone's legal framework—anchored in the Right to Access Information Act (2013)—formally guarantees access to public information, its implementation is inconsistent, politically mediated, and often symbolic rather than substantive. The selective application of transparency norms reveals a pattern where access is granted when it aligns with government interests but withheld when it threatens political control or exposes institutional weaknesses. CSOs that support government narratives are welcomed into policy spaces, while those demanding accountability are frequently stigmatised, delegitimised, or excluded—undermining the principle of open governance.

Although mechanisms such as budget hearings and legislative consultations on the Safe Motherhood Bill suggest a degree of openness, these are not uniformly applied. High-profile processes like the Constitutional Review and infrastructure contract renegotiations like the renegotiation of the Toll Gate agreement have proceeded with minimal disclosure, highlighting a dual-track approach to transparency. The state's communication channels—such as weekly press briefings—prioritise narrative control over citizen accountability, and digital engagement remains limited by both infrastructural barriers and fear of reprisal under restrictive laws like the Cybercrime Act.

The anticipated implementation of the Counter Terrorism Act further threatens the space for civic inquiry, as its vague provisions may deter legitimate demands for transparency. Platforms like the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI) and Open Government Partnership (OGP) offer symbolic commitments to openness, but weak enforcement and the absence of effective appeal mechanisms for denied information requests limit their practical impact. These dynamics point to a transparency environment that is procedurally present but substantively constrained—where legal rights exist but are undermined by political discretion, institutional opacity, and a lack of accountability. For civil society, this creates a precarious environment in which access to information is neither reliable nor equitably applied, weakening their ability to monitor governance and advocate effectively.

4.2 | Participation

Civil society participation in policymaking in Sierra Leone remains ad hoc, conditional, and unevenly applied, reflecting a broader pattern of instrumental engagement rather than institutionalised inclusion. While CSOs are occasionally consulted—such as during budget

hearings, legislative advocacy on the Safe Motherhood Bill, or international platforms like CSW69—these instances are often driven by donor expectations or political expediency rather than a consistent commitment to participatory governance. Engagement is typically extended to organisations perceived as cooperative or non-confrontational, while critical or independent CSOs are sidelined, stigmatised, or labelled as opposition. This selective inclusion undermines the legitimacy of consultation processes and narrows the diversity of voices in public decision-making.

The timing and quality of engagement further weaken its impact. CSOs are frequently invited into policy processes at late stages, limiting their ability to influence outcomes meaningfully. The passage of the Criminal Procedures Act in 2024, despite public criticism and minimal space for dissenting input, exemplifies this pattern of tokenistic consultation. While some ministries have made efforts to engage CSOs more constructively—such as MoPED's collaboration during NGO Week or planning for International Women's Day—these remain isolated practices rather than systemic norms.

The cumulative effect is a participatory environment that is procedurally open but substantively constrained. Without institutional safeguards to ensure inclusive, timely, and meaningful engagement, civil society's role in governance remains vulnerable to political discretion. This weakens accountability, limits policy responsiveness, and erodes trust between state and non-state actors—ultimately constraining the broader enabling environment for civic participation.

4.3 | Accountability

Accountability mechanisms between the state and civil society in Sierra Leone remain weak, fragmented, and largely discretionary. While there are instances of government acknowledgment of CSO contributions—such as the citation of CGG's research in the National NGO Policy Framework (2023–2028)—these acknowledgments are sporadic and often lack substantive follow-through. Feedback loops are inconsistent, and CSOs are rarely provided with clear explanations of how their input influences final decisions. While some ministries, such as the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, have created spaces for ongoing dialogue, these are not standard across government institutions. The passage of the Criminal Procedures Act in 2024, despite public criticism and CSO engagement, exemplifies a broader pattern where dissenting views are sidelined without justification, eroding trust in participatory processes.

Public documentation of consultation outcomes is irregular, and platforms like the Open Government Partnership and EITI, while symbolically important, are underutilised as tools for transparent reporting. Government communications tend to prioritise narrative control over accountability, offering limited insight into how civil society engagement shapes policy. Opportunities for CSOs to follow up or challenge decisions are not institutionalised, and while some ministries have created ad hoc spaces for dialogue, these are not replicated across government, resulting in a patchwork of accountability practices.

The absence of a standardised, transparent mechanism for tracking and responding to CSO input weakens the enabling environment by reducing the predictability and credibility of engagement. Without clear avenues for redress or monitoring, civil society actors remain uncertain about the value and impact of their participation, which risks fostering disengagement and reinforcing perceptions of tokenism in state–civil society relations.

Principle 5: Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society
Score: 2.67

5.1 | Public Discourse and Constructive Dialogue on Civil Society

Public discourse surrounding civil society in Sierra Leone is increasingly polarised, with advocacy and accountability-focused CSOs facing growing hostility from political actors and segments of the public. High-profile incidents include the intimidation of a CSO director Abdul Fatoma by members of the judiciary in October 2024 and the banning of a journalist from Parliament for criticising the removal of the Auditor General in January 2025. While service-oriented organisations are generally recognised for their development contributions, those engaged in governance, transparency, or rights-based work are often mischaracterised as politically antagonistic. This framing—evident in incidents of intimidation, public shaming, and exclusion of civil society figures like Abdul Fatoma, Marcella Samba Sesay, and Thomas Dixon—signals a deteriorating climate for constructive engagement and reflects a broader trend of delegitimising dissent.

Media platforms offer mixed opportunities for dialogue. Traditional outlets such AYV, Epic Radio, and Radio Democracy provide space for CSO voices, but prohibitive costs and limited reach constrain access for many organisations. Meanwhile, social media has become a site of reputational attacks and harassment, further discouraging open civic debate. Government engagement with CSOs is increasingly shaped by political convenience, with organisations invited to participate in thematic areas outside their expertise or co-opted into defending official positions—undermining the credibility and independence of civil society representation.

The passage of restrictive legislation, such as the Counter-Terrorism Law, despite vocal opposition from CSOs and media associations, exemplifies the shrinking space for dissent and the erosion of public dialogue. While citizens continue to value CSOs, the prevailing culture of defensiveness, selective engagement and intimidation fosters self-censorship and weakens the enabling environment for meaningful civic discourse. The result is a public sphere where critical voices are marginalised, and civil society's role in shaping governance is increasingly constrained by political polarisation and institutional mistrust.

5.2 | Perception of Civil Society and Civic Engagement

Public perception of civil society in Sierra Leone is increasingly shaped by a mix of respect, scepticism, and political polarisation. While many citizens continue to value CSOs for their role in service delivery, rights advocacy and accountability, trust has been eroded by perceptions of political co-optation. The alignment of some CSO leaders with government narratives has blurred the line between civic independence and political patronage, prompting citizens to distinguish between credible actors and those seen as compromised. This fragmentation of trust weakens the collective legitimacy of the sector and complicates efforts to mobilise public support.

Civic engagement remains strongest during electoral cycles, but participation in issue-based or local initiatives is inconsistent and often constrained by fear of reprisal, or disillusionment with political processes. The increasingly hostile environment—marked by intimidation, online harassment, and shrinking civic space—has led to self-censorship among activists and a cautious public posture, particularly around governance and human rights issues.

The absence of a comprehensive civic education strategy further limits meaningful engagement. While some schools and community programmes promote civic awareness, access is uneven, especially in rural areas. This knowledge gap restricts citizens' ability to engage beyond voting and reinforces passive political participation. Nonetheless, grassroots mobilisation persists around localised issues such as gender, disability, and community development, reflecting a latent civic energy that remains underutilised.

Overall, civic engagement in Sierra Leone is present but fragile—undermined by political interference, weak civic literacy, and a constrained public sphere. Without deliberate efforts to rebuild trust, depoliticise civil society, and expand civic education, the enabling environment will remain only partially supportive of inclusive and sustained citizen participation.

5.3 | Civic Equality and Inclusion

Sierra Leone has made important legal and institutional advances in promoting civic equality and inclusion, particularly through progressive legislation such as the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act (2022), the Disability Act, and the Customary Land Rights Law. Civil society has been instrumental in driving these reforms and in building inclusive networks that amplify marginalised voices across thematic areas—from gender and disability to extractives, elections, and public finance. However, the translation of legal commitments into meaningful participation remains uneven and structurally constrained.

Despite formal recognition, marginalised groups—especially women, persons with disabilities, and rural populations—continue to face systemic barriers to full civic engagement. Representation is often symbolic, with limited influence over decision-making processes. Economic inequality, geographic exclusion, and social stigma further restrict access to civic platforms, reinforcing patterns of exclusion. While CSO coalitions have improved visibility and advocacy, their reach is still limited by resource disparities and the politicisation of civic space.

Social attitudes toward inclusion are mixed, with tolerance coexisting alongside resistance to gender equity, political dissent, and religious or identity-based diversity. The broader political environment—marked by hostility toward critical voices—disproportionately affects marginalised communities and their advocates, discouraging open participation and reinforcing civic hierarchies. Although inclusive legal frameworks exist, the enabling environment remains only partially supportive, constrained by weak implementation, limited civic literacy, and persistent socio-political barriers. The challenge now lies in bridging the gap between legal recognition and equitable, sustained civic participation.

Principle 6: Access to a Secure Digital Environment
Score: 3

6.1 | Digital Rights and Freedoms

Digital rights in Sierra Leone are increasingly shaped by a tension between formal access and informal repression. While internet and social media platforms remain generally accessible, the state has demonstrated a willingness to disrupt connectivity during politically sensitive periods, such as the 2018 elections and the August 2022 protests. These shutdowns, though infrequent, have had outsized impacts on civil society's ability to mobilise, monitor, and communicate in real time, revealing the fragility of digital freedoms under pressure.

The Cybercrime Act (2021), while ostensibly aimed at addressing cyber threats, has become a tool for suppressing dissent. Its vague provisions have enabled selective enforcement, disproportionately targeting activists and journalists critical of the government. Arrests such as that of Hawa Hunt in 2024 and the online harassment of journalists like Umu Thoronka in 2024 illustrate how digital expression is increasingly policed through both legal and informal means. Censorship and surveillance are selectively applied, with political content occasionally monitored or suppressed. The absence of transparency in enforcement and the lack of accountability mechanisms have fostered a climate of fear and self-censorship among CSOs and media actors.

Digital infrastructure and capacity gaps further constrain civic engagement. Many CSOs rely on mobile internet and lack secure platforms or cybersecurity tools, leaving them vulnerable to surveillance and digital threats. While social media remains a key tool for outreach, it has also become a space for coordinated harassment, often fuelled by politically affiliated bloggers. The state's tacit endorsement of pro-government influencers—some of whom have been rewarded with official appointments—reinforces a digital environment where critical voices are marginalised and civic dialogue is distorted.

Therefore, the digital space in Sierra Leone is only partially enabling. While access exists, the combination of legal ambiguity, selective enforcement, and infrastructural limitations undermines the potential of digital platforms to serve as safe and open spaces for civic engagement and accountability.

6.2 | Digital Security and Privacy

Digital security and privacy for civil society actors in Sierra Leone remain underdeveloped and increasingly precarious. While there is no evidence of widespread or systematic cyberattacks, CSOs report growing concerns about surveillance, hacking, and the vulnerability of their digital communications. The lack of cybersecurity infrastructure and technical capacity—particularly among smaller or rural-based organisations—exposes them to digital threats and undermines their ability to operate safely in online spaces.

The Cyber Security and Crimes Act (2021), though designed to address cybercrime, has raised concerns about overreach and misuse. Its vague provisions have been used to intimidate activists and journalists, contributing to a climate of fear and digital self-censorship. Redress mechanisms for violations of digital privacy exist in theory but are not widely trusted or accessible, limiting their effectiveness as protective tools for civil society.

Beyond legal threats, the digital environment is shaped by coordinated disinformation and harassment campaigns, often led by politically affiliated bloggers and influencers. These actors, while not officially sanctioned, are tolerated and sometimes rewarded, reinforcing a culture of impunity. The targeting of civil society leaders like Marcella Samba Sesay following election-related advocacy illustrates how online intimidation can silence critical voices and deter public engagement. The manipulation of digital discourse not only erodes trust in online platforms but also weakens the credibility and safety of civil society actors.

In this context, digital security is not merely a technical issue but a structural vulnerability that constrains civic space. Without stronger protections, capacity-building, and accountability for digital abuses, the online environment will remain only partially enabling—accessible, yet fraught with risks that disproportionately affect those holding power to account.

6.3 | Digital Accessibility

Digital accessibility in Sierra Leone remains limited and uneven, with significant implications for civil society's ability to engage, mobilise, and inform. As of early 2025, internet penetration stands at just 20.7%, with social media usage at 13.2%—figures that reflect slow growth and persistent digital exclusion, particularly in rural and underserved areas. While mobile connectivity is widespread, the high number of SIM connections masks the reality of shared or multi-use devices and does not translate into meaningful internet access for all.

For CSOs, digital engagement is constrained by affordability, infrastructure gaps, and limited technical capacity. Many rely on personal mobile data and lack the resources to maintain secure websites or digital platforms. This restricts their online visibility and weakens their ability to reach broader audiences. Basic ICT skills within the sector are improving through

informal learning, but the absence of structured digital literacy programmes limits both organisational capacity and public engagement. The digital divide is particularly stark for marginalised communities, where low literacy and limited exposure to digital tools further reduce access to civic information and participation.

Emerging technologies such as AI remain largely out of reach for most CSOs due to a lack of expertise, infrastructure, and policy support. Without targeted investment in digital inclusion, the gap between connected and disconnected actors will continue to widen. As a result, while digital access is expanding, it remains insufficiently inclusive or empowering—constraining the full potential of digital tools to enhance civic space, accountability, and participation.

Recommendations

Improving the enabling environment for civil society in Sierra Leone requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach that addresses legal, operational, financial, digital, and participatory constraints. The following targeted interventions are grounded in the systemic gaps and advocacy opportunities identified throughout this assessment. Therefore, the following recommendations are directed at the Government of Sierra Leone, Civil Society Organisations, and Development Partners and the International Community.

Government of Sierra Leone

The Government of Sierra Leone must take decisive steps to safeguard civic freedoms, depoliticise regulatory frameworks, and institutionalise inclusive governance. The following specific interventions are necessary:

- Office of the President and Parliament should suspend the enactment of the Counter-Terrorism Act (2025) until it is reviewed and aligned with international human rights standards, including Recommendation 8 of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. This review must involve civil society and legal experts to ensure the law does not criminalise legitimate dissent.

- Ministry of Justice should amend vague provisions in the Public Order Act (1965), Cybercrime Act (2021), and Counter-Terrorism Act (2025) to prevent misuse against dissenting voices. It should also prioritise the domestication of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders to provide legal protections for activists, journalists, and CSO leaders. These reforms must include judicial oversight for CSO sanctions and registration appeals.

- Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED) should revise the NGO Policy Framework to remove mandatory affiliation with SLANGO, streamline SLA requirements, and institutionalise a transparent, independent, and judicially reviewable appeal mechanism. MoPED should also revive and formalise a Government–Civil Society Dialogue Platform to facilitate regular, inclusive engagement on governance and development priorities.

- Ministry of Internal Affairs and Sierra Leone Police must reform protest management practices by clarifying that protest notifications are not permission requests, develop operational guidelines and training programmes to ensure peaceful assembly rights are respected. Notification procedures for protests must be clearly distinguished from authorisation requirements to prevent arbitrary arrests.

- Ministry of Information and Civic Education should lead the development of a national civic education strategy targeting schools, communities, and marginalised groups. It

should also restructure weekly press briefings to include civil society voices and provide transparent feedback on policy consultations.

- Ministry of Communication, Technology and Innovation should establish an independent regulatory mechanism to monitor internet quality, affordability, and reach. It should also collaborate with civil society to develop a Digital Rights Charter that protects online expression and privacy.

- National Telecommunications Commission (NATCOM) must commit to non-disruption of internet services during elections and protests and ensure transparency in any future restrictions.

- Ministry of Finance and National Revenue Authority (NRA) should introduce tax incentives for private and corporate donations to CSOs, ensure consistent application of duty waivers, and establish transparent government funding mechanisms with publicly advertised calls and independent selection panels.

Civil Society Organisations

CSOs must strengthen their internal governance, diversify funding, and build collective resilience to navigate a politically constrained and digitally evolving landscape. To achieve this, there is need to:

- Establish a Civil Society Consultative Forum to coordinate unified positions on governance, human rights, and security, and to engage strategically with government and international actors. This platform should also track civic space violations and coordinate rapid response mechanisms.

- Invest in internal capacity-building, including financial management, digital security, and strategic communications. CSOs should publish annual reports and engage in regular stakeholder consultations to enhance transparency and public trust.

- Develop income-generating models such as social enterprises, crowdfunding, and cost-recovery mechanisms, while advocating for legal reforms that support domestic philanthropy and financial inclusion.

- Build digital resilience by training staff in cybersecurity, adopting secure communication tools, and developing low-cost digital platforms. Partnerships with tech hubs and universities can support innovation and infrastructure development.

- Pursue strategic litigation and legal empowerment to challenge restrictive laws and protect civic freedoms. CSOs should collaborate with legal aid organisations to expand access to justice for marginalised groups.

- Promote civic education and public engagement through community outreach, media partnerships, and digital campaigns that clarify the role of civil society and counter misinformation.

Development Partners and the International Community

Development partners must recalibrate their support to prioritise sustainability, local ownership, and systemic reform. To achieve this, there is need to:

- Scale up core and long-term funding to CSOs, focusing on institutional strengthening, digital infrastructure, and protection mechanisms for human rights defenders.

- Provide technical assistance for legal reform, strategic litigation, and civic education initiatives. Support should also target the development of inclusive policy frameworks and participatory governance mechanisms.

- Invest in digital inclusion by funding cybersecurity tools, digital literacy programmes, and rural connectivity initiatives. Support should extend to both CSO staff and grassroots communities, and be directed toward digital literacy and cybersecurity training for both CSO staff and grassroots communities.

- Promote equitable funding practices by simplifying application processes, ensuring open calls for proposals, and providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants. Special attention should be given to marginalised and emerging organisations.

- Facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms that bring together government, civil society, media, and private sector actors to address civic space challenges and promote mutual accountability.

- Support CSOs' legal empowerment and capacity for strategic litigation to defend civic freedoms and challenge restrictive laws.

Research Process

Each principle encompasses various dimensions which are assessed and aggregated to provide quantitative scores per principle. These scores reflect the degree to which the environment within the country enables or disables the work of civil society. Scores are on a five-category scale defined as: fully disabling (1), disabling (2), partially enabling (3), enabling (4), and fully enabling (5). To complement the scores, this report provides a narrative analysis of the enabling or disabling environment for civil society, identifying strengths and weaknesses as well as offering recommendations. The process of drafting the analysis is led by Network Members, the Consortium providing quality control and editorial oversight before publication.

For Principle 1 - which evaluates respect for and protection of freedom of association and peaceful assembly - the score integrates data from the CIVICUS Monitor. However, for Principles 2–6, the availability of yearly updated external quantitative indicators for the 86 countries part of the EUSEE programme are either limited or non-existent. To address this, Network Members convene a panel of representatives of civil society and experts once a year. This panel uses a set of guiding questions to assess the status of each principle and its dimensions within the country. The discussions are supported by secondary sources, such as V-Dem, the Bertelsmann Stiftung Governance Index, the RTI Rating from the Centre for Law and Democracy, and other trusted resources. These sources provide benchmarks for measuring similar dimensions and are complemented by primary data collection and other secondary sources of information available for the country. Guided by these deliberations, the panel assigns scores for each dimension, which the Network Members submit to the Consortium, accompanied by detailed justifications that reflect the country's specific context. To determine a single score per principle, the scores assigned to each dimension are aggregated using a weighted average, reflecting the relative importance of each dimension within the principle. This approach balances diverse perspectives while maintaining a structured and objective evaluation framework.