

# the Gambia

## Country Focus Report

### August 2025



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SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# A) An 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 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

The Republic of The Gambia continues its democratic journey as one of West Africa's most significant political transitions in recent years. The small nation of [2.5 million people](#) is surrounded by Senegal except for its Atlantic coastline. Since the [end](#) of Yahya Jammeh's authoritarian rule in 2017, The Gambia has set up mechanisms to address previous human right violations and establish democratic governance. For instance, the [Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission](#), established in 2017 to address human rights violations under Jammeh's regime, continues its work. It [published its findings](#) in 2022 with ongoing discussions about the Government's response to the Commission's recommendations. Civil society actors have played a crucial [role](#), particularly in advocating for accountability measures and reparations programs.

The current political landscape reflects the consolidation of President Barrow's [National People's Party \(NPP\)](#) government, which has governed since winning re-election in December 2021 with 53.2% of the vote. A key issue facing the Government is the [Constitution reform process](#), which was initiated again by the Government through the Ministry of Justice after the failure of the previous 2020 draft. Unfortunately, the 2024 draft constitution [failed again](#) at its second reading stage. In addition, presidential elections are scheduled for December 2026, providing another key test of democratic consolidation.

International support for The Gambia's democratic development has remained substantial in 2024, with the [European Union](#), [United States](#), and other partners continuing significant financial and technical assistance. The [Gambia Recovery and Development Plan \(2023-2027\)](#) has guided development priorities, though implementation challenges persist.

However, developments over the past year indicate that civic space, while still relatively open, faces new pressures. Government rhetoric toward certain civil society organisations has become increasingly critical, particularly toward those engaged in governance and accountability work. This shift represents a concerning trend that affects the overall enabling environment.

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# B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

## PRINCIPLE SCORE

### 1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

Score: 3/5 (Obstructed) <sup>1</sup>



Section 25 of the [1997 Constitution](#) guarantees freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. Since the 2017 transition, there has been improvements in the respect of these rights as soon by improvements in human rights indices such as [CIVICUS Monitor](#) and [Freedom House](#)'s Freedom in the World. While significant progress has been made, structural challenges and occasional restrictions have created a partially enabling environment for civil society.

#### 1.1 | Freedom of Association

Over the past twelve months, the right to freedom of association has generally been maintained, with civil society organisations (CSOs) able to form and operate without systematic obstacles. The registration process through the [Attorney General's Chambers](#) has remained accessible, though bureaucratic inefficiencies persist. For instance, several organisations in the past 12 months reported extended delays in registration approvals, with some waiting over six months for responses to applications. These delays particularly impact newer organisations seeking to engage in governance work, creating uncertainty that discourages associational formation around sensitive issues. Based on experiences shared by civil society actors, delays are more frequent for organisations working on governance and human rights issues compared to those focusing on service delivery.

<sup>1</sup> 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 51 out of 100, which has been converted to fit our 1–5 scale.

Nevertheless, new advocacy groups continue to emerge, demonstrating that associational life remains active. Organisations focusing on environmental issues, youth empowerment, and human rights have established operations throughout the year. The continued operation of established groups like the [Gambia Press Union](#) and emergence of networks addressing contemporary challenges such as low awareness and low citizens engagement and participation also illustrates the ongoing strength of associational freedom, though within an environment of increasing uncertainty.

## **1.2 | Freedom of Peaceful Assembly**

The [Public Order Act](#) serves as the main law regulating protests, demonstrations, and public gatherings. Under Section 5 of the Act, organisers of public meetings and processions must provide 48 hours' notice to police, specifying the time, place, and purpose of the assembly. While this notification requirement is generally reasonable, some problematic provisions grant police broad discretionary powers to impose conditions or prohibit assemblies based on grounds such as "public order," which has been used without adequate justification in several instances.

The right to peaceful assembly has been generally maintained throughout the past 12 months, but police's handling of assemblies has shown mixed patterns. Public assemblies on issues such as constitutional reform and social issues have proceeded without any issues. For instance, recent assemblies organised by CSOs, activists and pressure groups related to the [Female Genital Mutilation debate](#) and [constitutional discussions](#) have generally proceeded without hindrance. However, there have been instances of heavy-handed crowd control tactics that raise concerns about proportionality. For instance, protests related to economic grievances in the Greater Banjul Area such as the sit-down strike in Banjul against the [inefficiency](#) of the ferry service in April 2024 experienced restrictive police responses which resulted in [arrest of civil society leaders](#).

The inconsistent interpretation and application of the notification requirements under section 5 of the [Public Order Act](#) have been indicated as creating confusion for civil society actors. While the Act may specify that certain activities such as using public address (PA) systems or displaying placards trigger the need for permits, police interpretation in practice extends far beyond these written provisions. Even gatherings such as caravans that lack these specific elements are frequently treated as requiring permits, with police considering any collective assembly a "protest" subject to notification requirements. This inconsistency creates an enabling environment that is partially predictable, as organisations cannot always anticipate official responses to assembly requests.

## **1.3 | Freedom of Expression**

Freedom of expression in the past 12 months has experienced both positive developments and concerning restrictions. The media landscape remains relatively open compared to regional peers, as shown by The Gambia's performance on the [Press Freedom Index](#), with independent outlets continuing operations without systematic closure threats.

However, several developments over the past 12 months have created new constraints on the enabling environment. The enforcement of existing laws restricting online expression has intensified, with multiple arrests of individuals for social media posts critical of government policies. For instance, Section 181A of the [Information and Communications Act](#) regarding spreading false information was invoked against several social media users in 2024 for posts deemed to contain "false news," creating a chilling effect on online expression. An example

include the arrest of [Mbemba Drammeh](#) for claiming that the 2021 presidential elections were rigged.

Investigative journalism by outlets such as [The Point](#), [Foroyaa](#), and [The Republic](#) have continued, though journalists report increased pressure through informal channels. The persistence of some problematic legal provisions and their selective enforcement creates a climate where expression rights exist but within boundaries that are not always clearly defined.

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## PRINCIPLE SCORE

## 2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

Score: 3/5



Civil society organisations are mandated to register with the Government to operate legally, under the [Non-Governmental Organisations \(NGO\) Act](#) of 1996. This Act outlines the procedures for registration and establishes the regulatory framework within which CSOs must function. However, The Gambia's legal and regulatory framework for civil society demonstrates progressive elements alongside persistent operational challenges, creating a partially enabling environment.

### 2.1 | Registration

The registration system is managed through a dual structure involving the [Ministry of Justice](#) and the [NGO Affairs Agency](#). The Ministry of Justice handles the legal registration process and maintains oversight authority, while the NGO Affairs Agency processes and grants clearance certificates to prospective non-governmental organisations prior to their incorporation under the Companies Act, as established by the 1996 NGO Act. This dual administrative structure creates complementary but sometimes overlapping responsibilities regarding documentation requirements and approval processes that can lead to confusion. For example, some organisations engaged in this research reported being told by the NGO Affairs Agency that certain documentation was sufficient, only to have the Ministry of Justice request additional materials, leading to processing delays.

Practical implementation reveals significant limitations that affect the enabling environment. Rural organisations continue to face substantial barriers, with travel requirements to Banjul creating prohibitive costs for grassroots groups. Throughout 2024, several community-based organisations in rural areas reported abandoning registration attempts due to geographic and financial constraints, effectively excluding them from legal recognition. Civil society is

advocating for the development of a digital registration platform which theoretically enables rapid approval within 24 to 48 hours of submission, representing a significant advancement in administrative efficiency. However, this request has still not materialised. Registration fees of GMD 5,000-10,000 (approximately USD 70-140) remain prohibitive for volunteer-led groups, particularly given current economic conditions.

Appeal mechanisms for denial of registration, as provided under Section 8 of the NGO Act requiring written appeals to the Minister within 30 days, exist through the Ministry of Justice, but these have shown inconsistent effectiveness. While formal processes exist, rural organisations particularly struggle with accessing appeals due to centralisation in Banjul, creating a two-tiered system where urban organisations have better recourse options.

## **2.2 | Operational Environment**

While the NGO Act does not explicitly require CSOs to obtain pre-approval for their activities, it grants the Government authority to oversee and monitor CSO operations, ensuring compliance with stated objectives and adherence to national laws. All registered NGOs (local and international) are required to sign a Protocol of Accord with the Government, which outlines the terms under which they operate. If an organisation violates the terms of this accord such as engaging in activities contrary to public order or national security the Ministry of Justice, through the NGO Affairs Agency, has the power to revoke registration, effectively halting the organisation's legal operations in the country.

According to experiences shared by civil society actors, the requirement for ministerial approval for certain activities based on their focus and intended scope has been applied more strictly in some cases throughout 2024, though enforcement remains inconsistent. This selective application creates an unpredictable environment where organisations cannot be certain about operational boundaries, limiting their willingness to engage in advocacy work.

The dual administrative oversight between the Ministry of Justice and NGO Affairs Agency continues creating operational complications. For instance, annual reporting requirements have remained burdensome, with some organisations required to submit duplicate documentation to different agencies, draining resources and creating administrative inefficiency.

Based on experiences shared for this research, "soft" constraints through administrative oversight have also become more apparent in the past 12 months, with organisations engaged in sensitive advocacy reporting informal pressure to modify or cease certain activities. While not systematic, these instances create uncertainty about operational boundaries and may discourage organisations from pursuing legitimate advocacy work.

## **2.3 | Protection from Interference**

Section 25 of the 1997 Constitution provides legal protections for civil society organisations by guaranteeing freedom of association. Additionally, Section 7 of the NGO Act establishes procedural safeguards, such as requiring written notice and opportunity for the organisation to respond before it can be deregistered. The NGO Affairs Agency's oversight role includes protection functions, as it serves as an intermediary between CSOs and other government agencies, potentially shielding organisations from arbitrary interference.

However, informal pressures have increased during the year, with organisations reporting requests from various government officials at different levels to cease activities related to governance and accountability issues. While these pressures do not constitute formal

interference, they create a chilling effect that limits organisational willingness to engage in legitimate advocacy work. Documentation requests, while not widespread, have occurred more frequently in 2024 than in previous years, particularly affecting organisations engaged in sensitive political work. These interactions, while not necessarily violating legal rights, contribute to an atmosphere of uncertainty about organisational security.

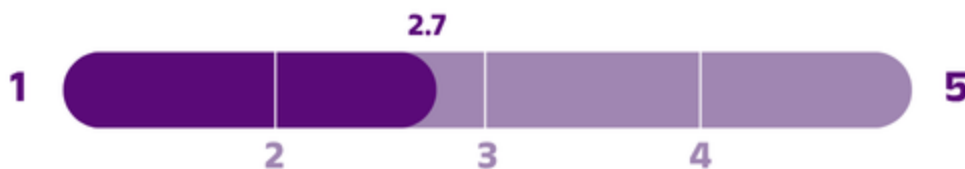
Access to legal recourse also remains limited for under-resourced organisations. The legal aid system provides insufficient support for civil society organisations facing state pressure. This creates disparities where well-resourced organisations can defend their rights while smaller groups remain vulnerable to informal pressure.

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## PRINCIPLE SCORE

### 3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

Score: 2.7/5



Resource accessibility and sustainability are major constraints for civil society, with heavy donor dependency creating vulnerabilities and limiting organisational autonomy. While no legal restrictions exist on funding sources, practical challenges in accessing flexible, sustainable funding severely limit civil society effectiveness and create systemic dependencies that undermine long-term organisational viability and programmatic independence.

#### 3.1 | Accessibility of Resources

Resource accessibility is characterised by continued donor dependency alongside emerging challenges in traditional funding streams. CSOs maintain moderate access to funding information through donor websites, networks like [TANGO \(The Association of NGOs\)](#), and informal networks. However, information distribution remains uneven between urban and rural organisations with the former being well connected and informed compared to the latter.

International donor funding from the European, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and bilateral partners has continued throughout the assessment period. While such funding is crucial to CSOs, it often comes with stringent conditions. Donors typically require detailed project guidelines, extensive reporting requirements, and rigorous accountability measures. Although these requirements are important for ensuring transparency and accountability, they significantly restrict access especially by smaller or volunteer-led organisations. These organisations usually lack the capacity to meet these conditions, which creates barriers to accessing international funds.

Government funding remains limited and typically restricted to sectors aligned with government priorities such as health and education. Organisations working on governance, human rights, or accountability issues have found government funding largely inaccessible. This selective allocation introduces a political dimension to resource access, as it effectively discourages or excludes critical voices within civil society.

In addition to limited funding opportunities, most CSOs lack financial capacity to handle donor-required audit obligations. International funders increasingly demand annual independent audits and certified financial statements costing GMD 50,000-150,000 (USD 700-2,100) annually representing substantial portions of smaller organisations' budgets. Organisations like [National Youth Parliament](#), [Think Young Women](#), and [Beakanyang](#) face impossible choices: allocate scarce funds to meet audit requirements, potentially reducing program implementation by 10-20%, or risk losing access to larger grants requiring audited accounts. This creates a two-tiered funding environment where only organisations with professional financial management can access substantial donor funding, while grassroots organisations remain confined to smaller, less sustainable grants.

### **3.2 | Effectiveness of Resources**

Donor conditions have become increasingly restrictive, with most international funders requiring adherence to predetermined frameworks that may not align with local priorities. These requirements limit organisational flexibility to adapt programming based on community feedback or emerging needs, reducing program effectiveness and community relevance.

The relationship between donors and CSOs has remained predominantly hierarchical rather than collaborative. Donors typically set funding priorities, timelines, and evaluation criteria with limited meaningful input from recipient organisations. Donor flexibility to local contexts varies significantly, with emergency funding demonstrating greater adaptability while larger institutional funding maintains rigid requirements that can undermine program effectiveness by prioritising compliance over innovation.

Heavy reliance on international donors has led many organisations to align programs with donor-driven priorities rather than community-identified needs, particularly affecting rural programming. This dependency creates disconnects between CSO activities and grassroots priorities, limiting program effectiveness and community ownership of interventions.

### **3.3 | Sustainability of Resources**

Resource sustainability represents perhaps the most critical challenge facing civil society organisations in The Gambia. The overwhelming dependence on foreign funding creates profound sustainability challenges, with domestic funding sources remaining negligible or highly erratic, leaving organisations vulnerable to sudden funding cuts. For instance, the USAID cuts dealt a significant [blow](#) to Gambian civil society work such as on transitional justice. USAID was a major funder supporting numerous local organisations through direct grants and partnership programs, though exact numbers of affected organisations remain undocumented. This dependency has led to concerning mission drift, where organisations redirect their programming to access available funds, regardless of their comparative advantage or community needs.

Donor funding patterns exacerbate sustainability challenges through limited thematic concentration and short-term project cycles. Most funders maintain single-agenda focuses or support only short-term initiatives, providing no follow-up support once projects conclude. Operational challenges further undermine sustainability through delayed disbursements and

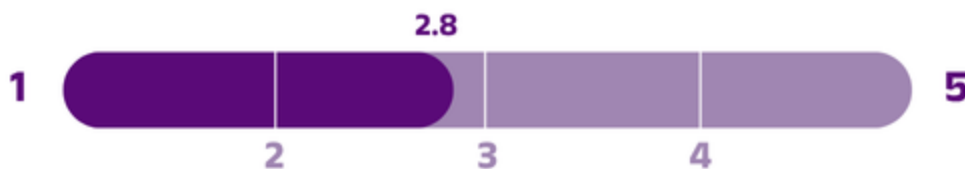
conditional funding arrangements that create severe cash flow challenges, forcing organisations to spend significant resources on fundraising rather than program implementation. Staff employment remains predominantly project-based, with personnel hired for specific initiatives until funding completion, creating precarious employment conditions that make it difficult to retain talent and build institutional capacity.

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# PRINCIPLE SCORE

## 4. Open and Responsive State

Score: 2.8/5



The moderate openness through transparency frameworks and formal consultation mechanisms, combined with implementation gaps and limited accountability, create a partially enabling environment. While participatory processes exist and have expanded in some areas, meaningful follow-up remains inconsistent, and government responsiveness varies significantly based on external monitoring and political considerations rather than systematic institutional commitment to civic engagement.

### 4.1 | Transparency

The transparency landscape in the assessment period has been characterised by persistent implementation challenges, despite progressive legislation. The [Access to Information Act \(2021\)](#) remains a significant achievement during The Gambia's transition period. Section 14 requires information officers to respond within 21 days of receiving a request to access to information (or 48 hours for urgent requests related to safeguarding life or liberty). The Act outlines specific exemptions where information may be refused, including personal information of third parties (Section 24), commercial and confidential information (Section 25), national security and defence (Section 27), international relations (Section 28), economic interests of the State (Section 29), law enforcement (Section 30), and privileged communications (Section 31). Section 35 establishes that exemptions can only be applied if "the harm to the interest protected under the relevant exemption that would result from the release of the information demonstrably out-weighs the public interest in the release of the information."

However, several of these refusal grounds are broadly defined, creating potential for arbitrary application. For instance, Section 27's national security exemption includes vague categories like "methods of collecting intelligence" and "subversive or hostile activities," while Section

29's economic interests provision could potentially encompass any financial information affecting the State. The practical impact continues being limited by institutional resistance and capacity constraints.

Public institutions consistently delay or reject access to information requests by the public, demonstrating systematic non-compliance with legal requirements. The [Civil Society Coalition on Access to Information](#) has documented numerous cases where government agencies have failed to respond to legitimate requests within statutory timeframes, undermining the law's effectiveness. Critical information requests related to government expenditures, policy development processes, and institutional performance have frequently experienced delays or outright rejection throughout the assessment period. This pattern suggests that while legal frameworks exist, institutional culture and capacity remain significant barriers to meaningful transparency.

An underlying factor is also limited public awareness of right to information, with both citizens and CSOs lacking sufficient knowledge about available mechanisms. Government officials have shown inconsistent understanding of their obligations under the Act, with many departments lacking clear procedures for processing requests or designated information officers as required by law. The Government has made limited progress on proactive transparency measures, with few online portals providing accessible information on budgets, audit reports, or public notices.

## **4.2 | Participation**

Civil society participation in governance processes throughout the assessment period has demonstrated mixed patterns that reflect both democratic progress and systematic limitations. There are government consultation mechanisms including public hearings, stakeholder meetings, and policy dialogues, focusing primarily on national-level issues such as constitutional review, budget proposals, and major policy initiatives. At the local level, consultation varies significantly between different local government areas, with urban councils generally providing more systematic engagement opportunities than rural councils, often due to capacity and resource constraints.

However, government consultations frequently occur after key decisions have already been made, limiting potential for meaningful input and creating frustration among CSO leaders. The [constitutional review process](#) provides a clear example, where extensive consultations occurred and civil society organisations submitted detailed position papers. However, civil society input seemed not to have influenced final text, with limited feedback on which specific proposals were incorporated or rejected.

Nevertheless, some areas have shown more successful participation, particularly around social issues like the [Female Genital Mutilation \(FGM\) debate](#), where civil society organisations played crucial roles in providing research and advocacy that influenced National Assembly deliberations. CSOs brought forward evidence-based arguments about health consequences, human rights violations, and legal inconsistencies, which directly influenced National Assembly deliberations. The outcome upholding the FGM ban demonstrated the potential impact of sustained civil society advocacy when effectively coordinated. These successes remain thematic rather than systematic across all policy areas.

Selective consultation patterns have become more apparent, with organisations aligned with government positions receiving preferential treatment in policy dialogue invitations and access

to officials. This selectivity undermines the diversity of civil society input and excludes critical perspectives necessary for comprehensive policy development.

### **4.3 | Accountability**

Accountability mechanisms between the State and civil society remain weak, with clear gaps between formal consultation processes and meaningful government responsiveness to civil society input. Although government agencies regularly engage with civil society organisations and formally document their contributions during consultations, these inputs seldom translate into tangible policy changes or implementation adjustments. As a result, many CSOs view engagement as symbolic rather than substantive, reinforcing scepticism about the Government's commitment to inclusive policymaking. As aforementioned regarding CSO's input in the [constitutional review process](#), the Government has not provided systematic responses explaining which recommendations were incorporated, modified, or rejected, leaving CSOs uncertain about the impact of their engagement.

The absence of formal feedback mechanisms represents a critical constraint on the enabling environment. Following consultation exercises, government agencies rarely provide systematic responses regarding how civil society inputs were utilised or why certain recommendations were not adopted. This creates asymmetric engagement where CSOs invest resources with minimal return from the agencies.

By contrast, government responsiveness appears enhanced when international partners monitor or fund consultations, suggesting that accountability is often externally driven rather than institutionally embedded. This pattern creates dependencies on external forces for meaningful government-CSO engagement, limiting the sustainability of accountability mechanisms.

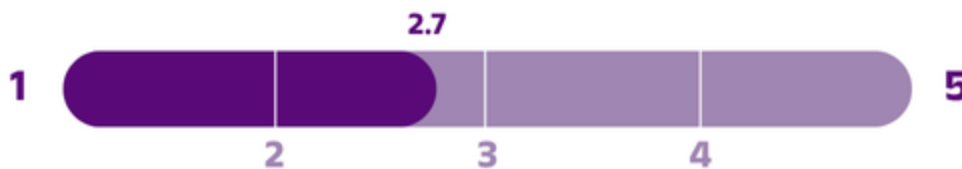
These dynamics also highlight a structural accountability gap. Consultation mechanisms function more as procedural checkboxes than as genuine avenues for policy influence. Without institutionalised feedback loops, civil society participation risks becoming a ritualised process that legitimises government decisions rather than shaping them. Strengthening accountability would therefore require embedding systematic feedback mechanisms, ensuring transparency in decision-making, and fostering a culture of mutual respect and partnership between state institutions and civil society actors.

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## PRINCIPLE SCORE

### 5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society

Score: 2.7/5



While public perception remains generally supportive and civic engagement has expanded, political polarisation and increasingly confrontational government discourse towards certain civil society actors create tensions that undermine the enabling environment.

#### 5.1 | Public Discourse and Constructive Dialogue on Civil Society

The public discourse surrounding civil society reflects tensions in the country's ongoing democratic transition. Government officials increasingly view CSOs as political adversaries, particularly when they engage in accountability initiatives or governance reforms rather than service delivery. For instance, public statements by President Adama Barrow have identified and threatened specific organisations, [characterising them](#) negatively as critics of the Government. Such rhetoric serves to intimidate civil society actors and delegitimise their essential roles in democratic governance, creating a chilling effect that discourages critical engagement.

Media coverage of civil society has remained generally balanced, with state media providing neutral reporting on [most CSO activities](#) and private outlets like [The Point](#) and Alkamba Times highlighting CSO contributions. They cover press briefings of civil society as well as activist groups, with a typical example being a press conference on the refusal for Diaspora voting by the National Assembly citing incompatibility with the law which [CSOs debunked](#). However, during politically sensitive periods, civil society actors shared that some public media mainly have echoed government criticism of specific organisations such as the repetition of the President's various speeches where he had called out individuals and CSOs as a group, amplifying negative narratives about governance-focused work.

The politicisation of civil society engagement has also intensified, with both government and opposition actors approaching CSOs primarily for immediate political advantage rather than recognising their independent roles in democratic governance. Government actors typically seek CSO endorsement during election periods and support for development initiatives, while opposition parties approach civil society for legitimacy in challenging government policies. According to experiences shared by civil society actors, government messaging shows concerning inconsistency, with positive development partnership messages contradicted by confrontational rhetoric when organisations pursue accountability activities, such as mixed responses to CSO critiques of budget transparency in 2024.

## **5.2 | Perception of Civil Society and Civic Engagement**

Public perception of civil society has remained generally positive, with citizens increasingly recognising CSOs as credible development and advocacy agents. According to the latest [Afrobarometer survey \(Round 10\)](#), 67% of respondents expressed trust in non-governmental organisations or civil society organisations, while only 23% perceived CSOs as involved in corruption. Community trust in civil society organisations has grown, with many communities expressing greater confidence in NGOs than in government institutions, particularly in rural areas where CSOs provide essential services.

Political awareness and civic engagement have continued expanding since the democratic transition. Grassroots movements and citizen interest in electoral processes demonstrate sustained civic ownership and democratic participation. Beyond elections, citizens have become more involved in local governance meetings, community development planning, and public hearings on policy issues, creating supportive environments for civil society work.

The mainstreaming of marginalised populations in civic processes has shown progress, with women, youth, and rural communities increasingly incorporated into governance discussions. This expanded participation reflects evolving democratic culture that recognises diverse voices, though implementation remains uneven across different regions and sectors. Rural areas still face greater barriers to participation due to geographic isolation and resource constraints, while urban centres show more consistent and inclusive engagement.

Citizen participation in civic processes demonstrates both depth and breadth, rooted in community confidence in the possibility of positive change and trust in civil society organisations as credible vehicles for transformation. Active participation has expanded beyond traditional elite domains to include regular citizens who view civic engagement as essential for development.

## **5.3 | Civic Equality and Inclusion**

Representation of marginalised groups within formal governance structures has remained inadequately low, with women and youth particularly underrepresented in government and political institutions. According to [Afrobarometer data](#), women hold only 9% of parliamentary seats and occupy few senior government positions. Youth representation remains limited despite comprising over 60% of the population, as noted in the [UNESCAP inequality report](#). The underrepresentation of these groups has far-reaching implications. It limits the diversity of perspectives within governance institutions, weakens the responsiveness of policies to community needs, and undermines the legitimacy of decision-making processes. Moreover, the exclusion of women, youth, and other marginalised actors perpetuates cycles of inequality, as policies and institutions continue to reflect the interests of dominant groups.

Structural barriers to meaningful inclusion persist, reflecting deeper societal and institutional challenges that extend beyond civil society advocacy. Traditional power structures favour male leadership and age-based hierarchy, cultural norms discourage women's public participation in many communities, and institutional practices such as meeting times and locations often exclude marginalised groups from decision-making processes. Government has made recent commitments to strengthen inclusion through the [National Gender Policy \(2025-2034\)](#).

It is worth noting that civil society organisations have continued working to address inclusion gaps through targeted advocacy and capacity-building. For instance, [ActionAid](#) has maintained efforts to enhance gender representation in local governance, with their "Women in Local Governance" campaign across all 43 districts demonstrating sustained commitment to inclusive participation. Women's rights organisations have remained particularly active, with the 2024 debates around Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) representing a significant test of civic space. The National Assembly's decision to [uphold the FGM ban](#) following intense civil society advocacy demonstrated both the influence of women's rights groups and the ongoing contestation over social issues. The transformation of The Gambia's civil society landscape has continued, with organisations adapting to evolving political and economic realities. Established organisations like the [Gambia Press Union](#), [Female Lawyers Association of Gambia \(FLAG\)](#), and [Think Young Women](#) have maintained their advocacy work while navigating changing government attitudes.

While awareness has increased through civil society advocacy and targeted interventions by organisations focusing on marginalized groups, meaningful inclusion requires systematic reforms and sustained government commitment moving beyond symbolic representation toward genuine participatory governance. The gap between policy commitments and implementation remains significant, particularly in rural areas where traditional structures remain influential.

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## PRINCIPLE SCORE

### 6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Score: 2/5



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The Gambia's digital environment faces significant challenges that constrain digital civic engagement and online participation, with concerning restrictions on digital rights and limited infrastructure accessibility. The combination of surveillance, content monitoring, and arrests for online activities creates a disabling environment for digital civic space.

#### 6.1 | Digital Rights and Freedoms

The digital rights landscape reflects a disabling environment based on the extent of surveillance, content monitoring, and arrests for online activities. While the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and the Government has not resorted to internet shutdowns, several legislative frameworks create significant restrictions on online expression and digital rights.

The [Information and Communications Act](#) contains provisions under Section 181A that criminalise the publication of "false news" online with penalties of up to three years imprisonment, and Section 181B that criminalises "seditious" online content, creating uncertainty about the boundaries of acceptable digital expression. The [Cybercrime Bill 2023](#) also introduces additional restrictions by criminalising online content deemed to constitute security threats, with broad and vague such as "false information likely to cause public disorder" and "content prejudicial to national security". These broad and vague terms create opportunities for arbitrary enforcement against activists and journalists. Existing provisions in the [Criminal Offences Act](#) under section (Section 52), false news (Section 181), and presidential insult (Section 53), combined with digital-specific laws, create complex legal frameworks that criminalise legitimate online political discourse.

High-profile arrests over the past few years have demonstrated practical application of these restrictive frameworks. Cases include the [prosecution of journalists](#) Musa Sheriff and Momodu

Darboe for allegedly publishing fake news. Mbemba Drammeh was also [arrested](#) in February 2024 for Facebook posts criticizing government economic policies. Previously, there were also arrests of comedian [Alh. Bora Sisawo's](#) in 2023 for satirical TikTok videos mocking government officials, and [Bakary Mankajang's](#) for WhatsApp messages critical of presidential statements. These cases illustrate the risks faced by individuals engaging in digital civic participation, creating chilling effects on online expression

## **6.2 | Digital Security and Privacy**

Digital security and privacy are characterised by insufficient protective legislation and concerning surveillance practices affecting civil society organisations. The absence of comprehensive data protection legislation represents a fundamental gap, with only a [draft Data Protection and Privacy Bill](#) under consideration, leaving digital communications vulnerable to misuse.

Section 25 of the Information and Communications Act empowers police surveillance without adequate oversight mechanisms. While open cyberattacks are not documented, activists report suspicious disruptions to online platforms and social media accounts that they associate with government interference, creating atmospheres of digital insecurity, though [reports](#) from digital rights organisations remain unverified.

Coordinated online harassment through incumbent government supporters' social media accounts has intensified during the year. Multiple accounts regularly attack critical voices, creating systematic intimidation campaigns that undermine digital civic space and discourage online advocacy work. This harassment creates psychological pressure and deters civic engagement online.

## **6.3 | Digital Accessibility**

According to [2025 digital statistics](#), internet penetration in The Gambia stands at 35.6% of the population, with social media usage at 28.4%. Mobile connections account for 97.8% of the population, but quality and reliability remain problematic.

These challenges to digital accessibility have limited potential for meaningful digital civic engagement. Internet connectivity remains inconsistent and expensive, with significant urban-rural disparities that mirror broader development inequalities and limit rural civil society organisations' ability to engage communities online. Limited accessibility has affected how civil society information reaches citizens, with connectivity issues forcing organisations to rely on traditional media alongside digital strategies. The prevalence of misinformation complicates efforts to share accurate information and engage in meaningful online dialogue, limiting the effectiveness of digital advocacy.

Digital literacy challenges, including in information verification and critical evaluation of online content, compound accessibility problems. High incidence of fake news circulation reflects these challenges and creates risks for civic engagement and social cohesion by undermining trust in legitimate civil society voices.

However, positive developments exist through emerging fact-checking initiatives. Organisations like [Fact-Check Gambia](#), [Malagen](#), and [Askanwi](#) represent promising responses to information challenges. Youth organisations including [Activista](#) and [Think Young Women](#) have demonstrated effective digital engagement despite accessibility constraints, utilizing platforms for advocacy and awareness-raising.

# C) Recommendations

## 1. Government of The Gambia

### Legal and Regulatory Reforms:

- **The Ministry of Justice and Attorney General's Office** should amend the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) Act within 12 months to improve fragmented regulatory framework, establishing streamlined registration processes with clear 30-day approval timelines and eliminating dual administrative structures that create bureaucratic confusion.
- **The Ministry of Justice** should review and amend restrictive provisions in the Public Order Act within 6 months to provide clearer guidelines on permit requirements for assemblies, reducing discretionary powers that enable arbitrary restrictions on peaceful demonstrations and advocacy activities.
- **The Information Commissioner's Office** should have the independent Information Commissioner's Office functioning within 6 months to strengthen implementation of the 2021 Access to Information Act through capacity building programs for government officials, enforcement mechanisms for non-compliance, and public awareness campaigns targeting both citizens and CSOs.
- **The National Assembly** should complete constitutional review process with meaningful civil society participation (i.e. a thorough consultation with CSOs) within 8 months, ensuring stronger protections for civic freedoms, clear safeguards against arbitrary interference, and explicit recognition of civil society's role in democratic governance.
- **The Ministry of Information and Communication Infrastructure** should review and amend within 6 months restrictive provisions in Information and Communications Act and Cybercrime Bill that criminalise legitimate online expression, establishing clear definitions of prohibited content and judicial oversight requirements for surveillance activities.

### Institutional Strengthening:

- **The Office of the President** should establish systematic consultation mechanisms across all ministries for civil society participation in policy development, with mandatory 30-day consultation periods, clear timelines for feedback, and published responses explaining how civil society input influenced policy decisions.
- **The Cabinet** should moderate negative rhetoric toward civil society organisations through an official communications strategy that publicly recognizes legitimate roles in democratic governance rather than characterising CSOs as political adversaries, issuing quarterly statements acknowledging civil society contributions to national development.
- **The Government** should implement national civic education strategy within 12 months to strengthen citizen engagement and democratic participation, with

specific focus on marginalised communities including women, youth, and rural populations.

#### **Digital Rights and Infrastructure:**

- **The Ministry of Interior** should cease the monitoring of civil society digital communications without judicial oversight, establishing clear protocols requiring court orders for surveillance activities and training programs on digital rights for law enforcement personnel.
- **The Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs** should develop tax incentives for domestic philanthropy and corporate social responsibility within 6 months to expand funding sources for civil society organisations, including tax deductions for charitable contributions and reduced corporate tax rates for companies supporting CSOs.
- **The Public Utilities Regulatory Authority** should invest in digital infrastructure development to reduce geographic barriers to internet access, prioritizing rural connectivity improvements and cost reduction measures to enable civil society organisations to reach remote communities effectively.

## **2. Civil Society Actors**

#### **Institutional Capacity Building:**

- **Individual civil society actors** should develop comprehensive sustainability strategies within 6 months through funding diversification including systematic exploration of domestic philanthropy opportunities, fee-for-service model development, and resource mobilization training for staff and board members.
- **The Association of Non-Governmental Organisations and other networks** should strengthen coordination mechanisms to reduce resource competition, avoid program duplication, and present unified positions on key advocacy issues, establishing quarterly coordination meetings and shared advocacy platforms for maximum impact.
- **All civil society actors** should invest in financial management systems meeting international standards within 12 months, including staff training on financial accountability, governance systems ensuring transparency, and strategic planning processes incorporating long-term sustainability considerations.

#### **Digital Security and Advocacy:**

- **All civil society actors** should build digital security capacity through the adoption of secure communication tools, cybersecurity training for staff, and protocols protecting against online harassment and surveillance, partnering with international digital security organisations for technical support.
- **CSO advocacy coalitions** should coordinate legal and policy reform advocacy efforts to strengthen enabling environment, developing joint position papers, shared lobbying strategies, and unified messaging on priority issues including access to information implementation and digital rights protection.
- **Community-based organisations** should develop digital literacy programs within organisations and target communities to improve information verification skills, combat misinformation circulation, and enhance online civic engagement capabilities.

## **3. Development Partners**

#### **Funding and Support Mechanisms:**

- **The EU, US, and other bilateral donors** should increase direct funding to local civil society organisations with simplified application processes accessible to grassroots organisations, providing long-term flexible core funding supporting institutional development rather than restricting support to project implementation only.
- **All development partners** should support the establishment of local funding mechanisms including community foundations, diaspora giving programs, and private sector engagement initiatives to reduce donor dependency over time and build sustainable domestic funding sources.
- **Technical assistance providers** should focus support on government efforts to reform legal and regulatory frameworks governing civil society, strengthen transparency and accountability mechanism implementation, and develop digital infrastructure and digital rights protection frameworks.

#### **Monitoring and Protection:**

- **Diplomatic missions** should conduct regular monitoring and reporting on civic space developments, reinforce government commitments to civic freedoms through diplomatic engagement, and counter negative rhetoric toward civil society organisations through public statements and private advocacy.
- **Infrastructure development partners** should invest in digital infrastructure development to improve connectivity and reduce costs, particularly in rural areas where civil society organisations struggle to reach communities, supporting both technical infrastructure and digital literacy programs.

#### **Capacity Building and Learning:**

- **All development partners** should facilitate peer-to-peer learning opportunities with civil society organisations and governments in comparable post-transition contexts to share lessons learned, best practices, and adaptation strategies for democratic consolidation challenges.

The implementation of these recommendations requires sustained political will, adequate resources, and coordinated action across all stakeholders. Success depends on government commitment to democratic consolidation, civil society unity while pursuing reform, and international community willingness to provide patient, flexible support for long-term democratic development. Regular monitoring and evaluation of progress should be institutionalised to ensure accountability and adaptive implementation during this critical period of The Gambia's democratic consolidation.

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## D) 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 provides 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.

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