

Lesotho

Country Focus Report

2025



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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 six 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

Lesotho is a mountainous constitutional monarchy entirely landlocked by South Africa, with a population of just 2.39 million people. While the country has maintained a formal multiparty democratic system since independence, its political history has been characterised by recurrent instability, fragile coalitions, and periodic intervention by security forces in civilian affairs. These dynamics continue to shape governance, state–society relations, and the operating environment for civil society.

Politically, Lesotho has experienced frequent changes of government, often driven by shifting coalition alliances rather than electoral cycles alone. The administration that assumed office following the 2022 elections did so amid heightened regional and international pressure, particularly from the Southern African Development Community (SADC), to advance long standing constitutional, governance and security sector reforms. Despite this, state institutions remain weak, accountability mechanisms are inconsistently applied, and security agencies, especially the police and military, continue to exert significant influence in public life. Past episodes of political violence and the absence of accountability for abuses by security forces cast a long shadow, contributing to public mistrust and fostering a climate of caution among civic actors.

Socio-economically, Lesotho faces high levels of unemployment, especially among youth, widespread poverty, and deep inequality between urban and rural areas. The 2024 [Lesotho Labour Force Survey](#) puts the country's unemployment rate at 30%. Among people aged between 15 and 35, it is 39%. The previous survey was done in 2019 and reported unemployment at 22.5%. The country's economic base is narrow, with heavy reliance on remittances, textiles, and large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP). While these projects are central to national development planning, they have also generated contestation around land rights, benefit-sharing, environmental impacts, and local participation. Community mobilisation around water, land, and employment has become a defining feature of civic engagement, often bringing citizens into direct confrontation with state authorities.

Civil society in Lesotho is diverse and active, encompassing human rights organisations, faith-based groups, professional associations, community-based organisations, and informal movements. CSOs have historically played a critical role in governance reform, constitutional litigation, election monitoring, and service delivery, often stepping in where the state's capacity is limited. At the same time, civil society operates in a context of high donor dependence, limited domestic philanthropy, and growing political sensitivity around advocacy work, particularly on corruption, security sector conduct, land governance, and digital rights.

The media and digital landscape has expanded rapidly, with social media platforms increasingly shaping public debate and political mobilisation. However, this expansion has occurred alongside rising concerns about surveillance, harassment, and regulatory responses framed around national security and cybercrime. These trends reflect broader tensions between state control and citizen participation in a context where formal democratic guarantees coexist with informal practices of repression and exclusion.

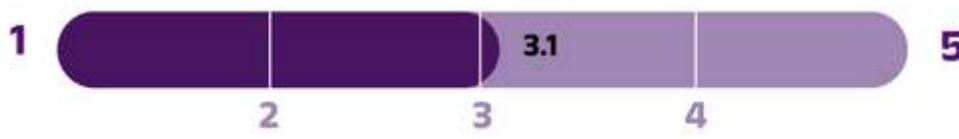
Understanding Lesotho's enabling environment for civil society therefore requires situating legal and institutional developments within this broader context of political volatility, socio-economic pressure, securitised governance, and contested development priorities. These underlying conditions help explain both the resilience of civil society and the structural constraints they face in exercising fundamental freedoms, accessing resources, and engaging the state meaningfully.

B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

PRINCIPLE SCORE

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

Score: ¹



This principle evaluates the respect and protection afforded to the fundamental civic freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, which are crucial for civil society operations. While Lesotho's Constitution formally guarantees these rights, the environment is currently categorised as 'partially enabling'. State overreach, particularly through security institutions, generates fear and encourages self-censorship among activists. Laws like the Public Meetings and Processions Act 2010 grant police broad discretionary powers, leading to routine restrictions and the use of excessive force against protesters.

1.1 Freedom of Association

Freedom of association in Lesotho is guaranteed under [the Constitution](#), yet state overreach, particularly through security institutions, continues to generate an atmosphere of fear that discourages civic engagement. Human rights defenders increasingly face intimidation for publicly criticising government or military conduct. In March 2025, human rights lawyer Advocate Lepeli Moeketsi reported receiving direct threats from the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF) Commander after he [criticised military interference in civilian matters](#). Similarly, social media activist Tjeka-Tjeka was [arrested and had his phone seized](#) following critical posts about high unemployment rates. Such threats contribute to self-censorship among civil society actors, eroding their ability to organise, advocate, and mobilise communities without fear of retaliation. Civic space assessments consistently categorise Lesotho as "obstructed", reflecting a pattern of intimidation, arbitrary restrictions on association, and pressure on organisations working on governance, human rights, and accountability issues.

1.2 Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

¹This is a rebased score derived from the [CIVICUS Monitor rating](#) published in December 2025.

Peaceful assembly remains one of the most heavily restricted civic freedoms in Lesotho. Authorities routinely rely on the 2010 Public Meetings and Processions Act, which grants police broad discretionary powers to approve, deny, or impose onerous conditions on protests. Citizens must apply for a permit before holding a march or demonstration, and police often use procedural technicalities to delay or prohibit assemblies. In February 2025, [police used excessive force](#), including whipping and arrests, to disperse protesting taxi operators in Mokhotlong, citing alleged violations of the Act. Similarly, a planned [nationwide student march](#) to the Lesotho Parliament in early 2024 was effectively obstructed through restrictive police conditions, including unreasonably short time limits and the designation of unsafe routes.

In addition to alleged violations of the Public Meetings and Processions Act to restrict protests, repressive violence is also used against peaceful assembly. CSOs operate in an environment marked by repression and intimidation. [Public protests](#), particularly on land, water, and employment, are often met with excessive force, arrests, and harassment.

As reported via local radio, in February 2025, police whipped and arrested some members of the Mokhotlong taxi operators, contractors, and villagers protesting against government policies related to the awarding of jobs in the Lesotho Highlands Water Project dam construction to contractors from outside the district, highlighting concerns over excessive use of force and restrictions on public assembly. These actions reflect a pattern of securitised responses to public gatherings and an increasing reluctance by authorities to tolerate dissent in public spaces.

Civil society itself is increasingly [polarised](#) with some civil society actors aligned with the government attempting to restrict others' exercise of freedom of assembly. High-profile cases include former CSO leader Sofonea Shale, now a chief of staff in the office of the prime minister and his colleague Teboho Sekata, both of whom reportedly contacted youth protest organisers to dissuade them from demonstrating over rising electricity prices and unemployment. Such actions not only raise concern about the co-optation of former CSO leaders but also constitute subtle ways in which freedom of assembly is diminished and collective advocacy eroded.

1.3 Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression, including media freedom, continues to face significant threats. Journalists, especially those reporting on corruption and state misconduct, have been subjected to intimidation, threats, and direct interference by authorities. In April 2024, Lesotho Tribune journalist Phafane Nkotsi [received threats](#) after publishing corruption-related investigations, prompting calls from Amnesty International for the government to [safeguard his safety](#) and uphold press freedom. Military influence has also crept into media oversight: reporters have been pressured to produce favourable coverage to avoid reprisals, particularly during security-led crime operations such as Operation Hard Fist, which has been associated with [civilian torture and extrajudicial killings](#). Recent incidents, such as the [arrest and seizure](#) of social media activist [Tjeka-Tjeka's phone](#), demonstrate how easily these instruments can be misused to suppress freedom of expression.

According to the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), Lesotho's civic space is 'obstructed', indicating restrictions on civil society's fundamental freedoms. This overreach has been seen clearly, with [police instructing media houses not to report](#) stories about Famo music gangs that are associated with illegal mining turf wars in South Africa and many murders in Lesotho.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

Score:



This principle assesses the effectiveness, clarity, and fairness of the legal and regulatory structures governing civil society. While the legal framework permits registration under various accessible laws (e.g., Societies Act, Companies Act, Trusts Act), the process suffers from systemic bureaucratic delays and is highly centralised in Maseru, limiting access for rural organisations and persons with disabilities. The operational environment is partially enabling, but CSO regulations are scattered under multiple, sometimes outdated, statutes, which exposes them to inconsistent enforcement and arbitrary scrutiny. Crucially, the system lacks adequate protection from interference, as repressive laws like the Official Secrets Act (1967) and the Internal Security Act (1984) remain available for arbitrary deployment against advocacy groups.

2.1 Registration

Lesotho's legal framework is enabling. The procedures for registering Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Lesotho are clearly outlined in relevant laws and policy documents. CSOs can register as a society or a non-profit company under the Societies Act or the [Companies Act and Regulations of 2012](#). They can further register as cooperatives under the [Cooperatives Act](#) and Trusts under the [Deeds Registry Act 1967](#). Registration is generally accessible and affordable, with registration fees ranging from M250 to M520 (approx. 12-25 Euro) depending on whether the CSO registers as a society, cooperative, trust or a company. This makes the process financially accessible to most organisations, and there are no discriminatory provisions in law regarding who may register. If an application is denied, applicants may appeal through normal legal channels, although these processes are typically slow.

Despite the relatively low cost, registration is hampered by inefficiencies at government offices and the fact that the [Registrar General's office](#) is located only in Maseru, limiting accessibility for CSOs based in other districts. Rural organisations face additional challenges, such as transport costs, limited legal literacy, and concentration of support services in urban centres.

The Societies Act itself is [outdated](#) and does not reflect the diversity of modern CSOs. While donor-backed initiatives have helped expand access, systemic barriers, including bureaucratic delays and urban-centric services, continue to affect the process. For persons with disabilities, registration is particularly difficult due to inaccessible service formats and the long distances to registration offices, as many live in remote areas.

NGOs conducting advocacy work, and those dealing with issues like corruption face increased challenges. An example of this was a hurdle experienced by the Democracy Work Foundation, whose registration was delayed, with one expert disclosing that “it was only until the minister, who understood the value of the work of our CSO in elections, made a phone call and called to say that we got an approval to register because it was an international organisation. It was easier for us to approach the minister because we were doing a project with political parties on elections and had been close to them.”

2.2 Operational Environment

Lesotho's [constitution](#) protects freedom of association, allowing CSOs to freely set their governance and objectives. The legal framework generally allows CSOs to determine their governance structures, objectives, and activities, and to access funding from domestic and foreign sources. In practice, however, they must register under frameworks such as the Societies Act or [Deeds registry Act 1967](#). Registration confers legal recognition but also subjects CSOs to state oversight, since constitutions and officer lists are reviewed during the process. While there is no general requirement for government approval of CSO missions, administrative hurdles at registration can delay operations. Therefore, Lesotho's operational environment for CSOs is rated as 'partially enabling' with CSOs generally able to operate within an environment that is open and accessible.

While legal autonomy and donor support exist, [regulatory ambiguity](#) constrain sustainability of CSO operations, which are particularly hampered by the lack of a comprehensive CSO law that consolidates operational standards, funding rules, and accountability mechanisms. As a result, CSOs face considerable administrative obligations, including financial reporting, registration renewals, and disclosure of officer changes. The [African Philanthropy legal study \(2023\)](#) found that registration, compliance, taxation, and the movement of money are among the main regulatory pressure points for NGOs in Lesotho. These requirements often strain smaller CSOs with limited resources and create space for authorities to delay or penalise non-compliant organisations. International civic-space monitors such as the [CIVICUS Monitor show](#) that across the region, reporting burdens are frequently used to restrict NGO activity indirectly, even where laws appear enabling on paper.

Lesotho does not impose a sweeping ban on foreign funding. However, access to funds is regulated by banking, anti-money-laundering, taxation, and foreign-exchange rules. The African Philanthropy legal framework report highlights that movement of money and tax compliance remain obstacles. Local umbrella bodies such as LCN stress that compliance and administrative controls affect donor support and project execution.

Proposed laws like the [Computer Crime and Cybersecurity Bill](#) (2024) could additionally restrict [digital activism](#) and impose burdensome compliance requirements on strategic operations and CSOs operating online.

The score of three reflects a landscape where CSOs can function but must navigate significant risks and limitations.

2.3 Protection from Interference

Lesotho's legal framework does not adequately protect CSOs from interference, thereby constituting part of a disabling environment. Lesotho has no comprehensive CSO law that guarantees protection from arbitrary deregistration, asset seizure, or political interference.

This leaves organisations exposed to the risk of discretionary state action. Some constitutional reforms and judicial [decisions offer hope](#) as they strengthen the protective framework. The [Tenth Amendment](#) to the Constitution (2024) affirms public interest litigation and expands standing for associations acting on behalf of their members. This could strengthen legal recourse for CSOs facing interference. Similarly, a [2023 Constitutional Court ruling](#) overturned a law permitting warrantless data seizures, improving digital rights protections. At the same time, the [persistence of repressive laws](#) like the [Internal Security \(General\) Act, 1984](#), surveillance threats, and weak institutional safeguards continue to undermine civil society autonomy. [Outdated laws](#) such as the Official Secrets Act (1967) and Internal Security Act (1984) remain in force and are occasionally invoked to suppress dissent, especially around land rights and corruption.

In May 2024, the government [banned](#) certain Famo groups, accusing them of subversion. The ban was imposed without a court process to prove the alleged subversive activities. This action demonstrates that the government can arbitrarily ban associations without due process and undermines the legal protections for civil society.

According to one expert panel discussion member, there is rule of law and freedom of association to “a certain extent because only if you agree or do any activity that is relevant to what the state wants then you will be in good books, but if they feel that you are against the state, [they will regard] you as an opposition.”

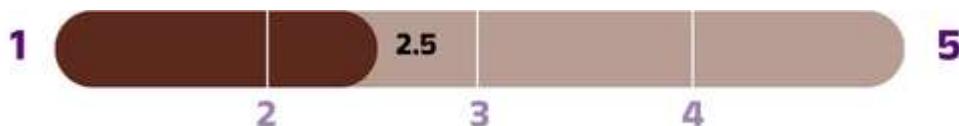
Examples:

1. Although the legal framework provides formal protections against undue interference, several repressive statutes, including the Internal Security Act and the Official Secrets Act, [can be deployed arbitrarily](#). As long as these laws remain in force, the protection of CSOs will be precarious.
2. Regulatory processes are being used to restrict civil society activity. For instance, police in Mafeteng required organisers to obtain a permit for a Youth [Dialogue](#) on Economic Independence, despite it being a standard workshop event. Similarly, Famo groups were banned in May 2024 on allegations of subversive activity without being afforded a hearing—reflecting a broader pattern of limiting freedom of association and assembly.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

Score:



This principle examines the financial health and resource accessibility for civil society organisations, which is rated as disabling. The sector suffers from significant fragility and high reliance on externally sourced funds, with domestic philanthropy streams largely absent. This dependence leaves CSOs vulnerable to shifts in donor priorities and geopolitical shocks, such as U.S. aid cuts. Funding modalities are restrictive; they are typically short-term and project-based, often lacking support for essential core operational costs, crippling strategic capacity. Furthermore, CSOs face administrative hurdles, including stringent Central Bank requirements for international transfers and complex application systems that disadvantage smaller, rural-based organisations.

3.1 Accessibility

Lesotho's civil society sector remains financially fragile and structurally under-resourced. While international initiatives provide some short-term relief, the lack of domestic support, flexible funding, and systemic capacity-building continues to undermine CSOs' access to reliable and sustainable funding. While new frameworks such as the [UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework](#) (2024–2028), the EU [Call for Proposals](#) (2024) worth €2.3 million, and the Global Environment Facility Small Grants [Programme](#) show promise, CSOs in Lesotho continue to [face significant challenges](#) due to the decline in donor funding.

Several structural impediments affect access to resources:

- Misalignment between funding application systems and CSO capacity: Funding application processes are characterised by high levels of administrative and technical complexity, which function as structural impediments to resource access for CSOs. The prevailing funding environment is designed around compliance, reporting, and institutional capacity requirements that exceed the operational realities of many local CSOs. As a result, these structural conditions systematically constrain CSOs' ability to apply for and secure funding, particularly for smaller, rural-based, and community-led organisations.
- Government apprenticeship programmes: While initiatives such as the Youth Apprenticeship Programme provide support staff to CSOs, placements are often mismatched, with apprentices lacking qualifications relevant to the organisations' work.

- Donor withdrawal: The withdrawal of USAID has already negatively affected several CSOs, with no compensatory action from the government.

Additional regulatory and administrative barriers further complicate accessibility of funds. The Central Bank of Lesotho now requires personal identification documents from CSO executives, board members, and even donor representatives before releasing foreign funds. This has led to delays and risks of fund returns. For example, MNN Centre for Investigative Journalism had to return Google News Initiative funds until it opened an account in South Africa, as Google could not provide the requested documents.

Accessing international funding mechanisms also remains problematic. For instance, the EU Pador application system, intended to strengthen CSO capacity, has become an exclusionary tool for many organisations. Rural-based CSOs and marginalised groups are particularly disadvantaged, as they face technological, administrative, and logistical barriers in meeting its requirements. Most of the community-based organisations lack office space, internet access, and skilled personnel. Adding to these difficulties, government and CSOs frequently compete for the same pool of external funding rather than complementing each other.

3.2 Effectiveness

Lesotho's CSOs operate under restrictive funding conditions and unequal donor dynamics. While emerging frameworks signal a shift toward more inclusive and strategic partnerships, entrenched funding modalities and limited core support opportunities make funding effectiveness disabling.

Restrictive funding modalities remain a key barrier. Funding is typically short-term, project-based, and issue-specific, with a high administrative burden and little to no provision for core or administrative costs. This strains organisational capacity, particularly for smaller CSOs. As a result, many organisations are unable to cover essential operational needs and, in some cases, CSOs remain silent on critical issues of public interest simply because they lack funding outside their project mandates. While projects under implementation are aligned to some of the CSOs priorities, the restrictive requirements on funding usage make it hard for CSOs to also be able to address emerging issues that are within their priorities but outside the scope of the projects under implementation, leaving CSOs unable to respond to such issues in an adequate manner and limiting the effective use of their funds.

Donor-CSO relationships are often characterised by unequal power dynamics. Donors tend to view CSOs as implementers rather than strategic partners, imposing conditions that organisations have little choice but to accept. Funding comes with stringent requirements that can exclude organisations from accessing opportunities, particularly those without strong institutional capacity. Donor conditions sometimes extend to staffing arrangements, limiting CSOs' autonomy and independence.

Illustrative examples highlight these challenges:

- According to a panellist, the EU ceased funding MISA Lesotho after claiming the chairperson of the organisation, Kananelo Boloetse, was obstructing constitutional reforms. Boloetse was challenging the reforms in court.
- Another panellist shared that in some cases, the EU in Maseru has selectively chosen journalists for training programmes without open applications, raising questions about transparency and fairness.
- For embassies' discretionary funds, funding priorities in Lesotho often shift depending on the ambassador or representative in charge, creating uncertainty and inconsistency.

The absence of protective policies or coordinated strategies that guard against arbitrary decisions by some funders further undermine CSO sustainability and independence.

3.3 Sustainability

Lesotho's civil society sector remains financially fragile and exposed to funding volatility. The lack of domestic support systems and limited long-term and core support mechanisms continue to undermine sustainability.

Almost all CSO funding is externally sourced, with domestic philanthropy and institutional funding streams largely [absent](#). This [dependence](#) leaves CSOs vulnerable to donor priority shifts, currency fluctuations, and geopolitical developments. The USAID cuts in 2025 are a recent example, where several CSOs were forced to suspend programmes or [shut down](#) entirely.

Funding is largely short-term, project-based, and highly restricted, limiting flexibility and making long-term strategic planning nearly impossible, often excluding support for administrative or institutional costs. This weakens organisational capacity, disrupts continuity, and prevents CSOs from pursuing broader public interest issues outside donor mandates. Once projects end, many organisations cease operations until new opportunities arise.

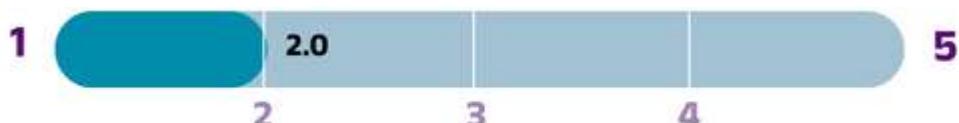
The lack of predictable, long-term funding also undermines staff retention, as organisations cannot sustain salaries between projects. Skilled personnel are frequently lost to more stable government positions, further weakening institutional memory.

Overall therefore, Lesotho's resource environment for CSOs remains weak, unpredictable, and structurally unsupportive. Despite pockets of emerging opportunities, the sector continues to operate under restrictive funding modalities, heavy administrative barriers, and an absence of domestic resource mobilisation. The imbalance of power in donor-CSO relationships and the lack of long-term, flexible support further erode sustainability and effectiveness. Without deliberate reforms to improve access, reduce regulatory hurdles, and expand domestic financing pathways, CSOs will remain vulnerable and unable to fully perform their democratic, developmental, and accountability roles.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

4. Open and Responsive State

Score:



This principle evaluates the openness, transparency, and responsiveness of the state towards civil society engagement. The governance environment is considered disabling, marked by systemic barriers and weak institutional frameworks. Crucially, Lesotho lacks a legal framework guaranteeing public access to information, severely inhibiting CSOs' ability to conduct effective monitoring and oversight. Public participation is largely tokenistic; CSOs are often excluded from policy formulation and, where they are consulted, their input is frequently disregarded, reflecting a lack of genuine collaboration. Accountability mechanisms are opaque, as ministries seldom provide public feedback on how CSO input has influenced final decisions, undermining democratic oversight.

4.1 Transparency

Lesotho's state–civil society relationship is characterised by limited transparency, tokenistic participation, and occasional repression. While judicial reforms and donor-supported initiatives signal some hope, weak institutional responsiveness and systemic barriers continue to undermine democratic engagement.

Despite constitutional commitments to democratic governance, Lesotho lacks a legal and institutional framework that guarantees public access to information. The absence of an Access to Information law severely limits civil society's ability to monitor and engage with state actions. The Constitution only provides for Freedom of Expression but not for Access to Information. A [draft law](#) dating as far back as 2000, the Receipt and Access to Information Bill 2000, has never been passed into law. Even though public procurement laws provide for rights to information, access is discretionary, dependent on the willingness of individual public officials.

Advocacy efforts - such as [MISA](#) Lesotho's push for the adoption of the Access to Information Bill and the Seinoli Legal Centre's [case against](#) the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority for refusing to disclose essential information about the Lesotho Highlands Water Project - highlight attempts to advance transparency. However, government prioritisation of restrictive measures, such as cybersecurity legislation, over access to information continues to obstruct meaningful oversight. The Computer Crime and Cyber Security Bill 2024 threatens access to

information by criminalising the access, receipt, and sharing of digital information using broad and vague provisions such as “unauthorised access” and “unlawful data communication.” In the absence of a dedicated Access to Information law, these provisions risk discouraging journalists, whistleblowers, and civil society organisations from seeking, receiving, or publishing information in the public interest.

In practice, information is thus difficult to obtain and often relies on informal channels such as whistleblowers or personal networks within government. There is no centralised information hub to facilitate public access, and official publications are routinely delayed or incomplete. For example, government agencies’ audited consolidated financial statements are only available up to [March 2022](#). Reports legally required to be published, such as those on the October 2022 national assembly elections, remain unavailable, in violation of statutory obligations. Public officers are frequently uncooperative, further restricting access. While legal redress mechanisms exist, the judicial system is slow, making it an ineffective avenue for timely resolution.

Weak oversight and reporting practices further erode accountability. Financial statements and legally mandated reports are frequently delayed or withheld. For instance, the government-owned Lesotho Electricity Company’s most recent publicly available audited accounts date back to March 2022, yet electricity tariffs were increased again in April 2025 [without any updated financial disclosures](#) to justify the decision. Such practices undermine public trust and make it impossible for CSOs to monitor state actions effectively.

4.2 Participation

Civil society participation in governance processes in Lesotho is limited, symbolic, and often ineffective. Although the Constitution guarantees the right to participate in public affairs, in practice, engagement is superficial and rarely shapes final decisions. Government ministries often operate in silos, and CSOs are typically excluded from major initiatives despite Prime Minister Samuel Matekane’s [commitments](#).

A proposed [Civil Society Organisations Policy](#) and [Public Participation Bill](#) that proves that there are possibilities of government being legally bound to engage CSOs in public dialogues is yet to be passed. In the absence of such legislation, it is difficult to judge the government’s intentionality in facilitating public participation as CSOs are typically engaged at the discretion of public officers or the government without a clear policy or law guiding their participation. This happens only at the consultation stage, with little chance of inputs from CSOs being reflected in the policies, decision-making and laws. In Parliament, the public can provide input at the committee stage of bills, but CSO recommendations are often disregarded.

In the current legal framework, participation, when it occurs, is frequently tokenistic, with CSOs invited merely to endorse or observe government actions rather than contribute meaningfully. Policymakers rarely approach consultations with open positions but instead present predetermined outcomes. More often than not, CSOs are treated as adversaries or opposition to government policies rather than partners. At the district level, however, some progress is noted where certain CSOs participate in joint forums with government departments chaired by District Administrators, offering a modest degree of state-civil society engagement.

In instances where CSOs are engaged and their inputs are taken into consideration, it is when donors sponsor legal reforms and/or the government stands to gain favourable standing to access international financing. The Administration of Estates and Inheritance Act (2024), was [enacted specifically to meet requirements](#) for the Millennium Challenge Compact II, serving as a key legislative condition for unlocking its funding focusing on gender equality and modernising inheritance laws. This was when the [Federation](#) of Women Lawyers Lesotho (FIDA Lesotho) contributed significantly towards the enactment of this inheritance law, according to one of the panellists. Similarly, in October 2025, EU and UNICEF [brought together](#) representatives from government ministries, development partners, and civil society

in a dialogue to take stock of ongoing efforts and explore strategies for building a more integrated and effective social protection system in Lesotho. While such donor-supported platforms have created opportunities for CSOs to engage in policy dialogue and reform processes, participation remains uneven and unsustainable. Most laws and policies are still [developed and passed without meaningful consultation](#) with relevant organisations.

Recent developments illustrate this exclusion. In 2024, the government passed three pieces of legislation [under pressure](#) from the U.S. to unlock Millennium Challenge Corporation funding, yet key stakeholders such as the Lesotho National Federation of Organisations of the Disabled (LNFOD) were not consulted. Similarly, in February 2025, the Lesotho Communications Authority [invited](#) public submissions on the Starlink licence application. Organisations such as SECTION 2 formally [opposed](#) the licence, but their views were ignored, and the licence was [granted without explanation](#). These examples demonstrate that participation exists in form but lacks substance and accountability.

Overall, Lesotho's CSOs are frequently brought in to witness rather than participate meaningfully. True participation requires involvement from the inception of policy design to the finalisation of decisions, yet this remains largely absent. As a result, participation in Lesotho is a disabling factor, undermining the potential of civil society to contribute to inclusive governance and democratic accountability.

4.3 Accountability

Accountability in Lesotho's governance environment is weak, opaque, and non-responsive, making it a fully disabling factor for civil society engagement. The government rarely provides clear feedback to CSOs on how their input influences policy, leaving participation superficial and unaccountable. The Starlink licence case illustrates this: despite formal submissions opposing the licence, the regulator [approved](#) without explanation, [disregarding civil society concerns](#).

Formal accountability mechanisms remain ad hoc, donor-driven, and largely non-functional:

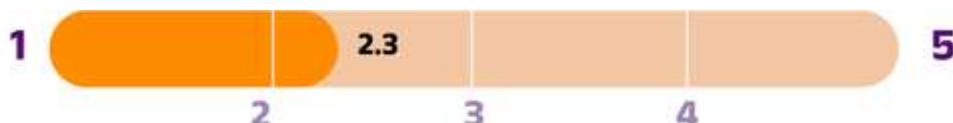
- No institutional feedback channels: Ministries and agencies seldom issue public or written responses to CSO submissions, and there is no legal obligation to show how input has shaped policy.
- [Opaque decision-making](#): Key government decisions, particularly on land, [extractives](#), and budget allocations, are made without justification or reference to stakeholder engagement.
- Tokenistic consultations: Civil society recommendations are often acknowledged in forums but rarely tracked or acted upon.
- [Limited oversight capacity](#): Bodies such as the Ombudsman and the Directorate on Corruption and Economic Offences (DCEO) are under-resourced, and their findings are not systematically shared with the public or CSOs.

This culture of non-responsiveness reflects a state stance of "not being questioned and not providing answers". Government actors do not perceive themselves as accountable to CSOs, reducing engagement to symbolic exercises and weakening democratic oversight.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society

Score:



This principle explores the values, norms, and attitudes of state and non-state actors toward civil society and the degree of civic engagement. The public discourse in Lesotho is largely hostile and disabling, characterised by deep political polarisation. Governing parties often deploy hostile rhetoric, framing CSOs as "opposition" or foreign-influenced when they engage in accountability work, which severely restricts space for constructive dialogue. While CSOs are generally seen as the voice of the voiceless, this perception is undercut by historical distrust and the inconsistency of public attitudes. Weak civic education further contributes to uneven participation and a lack of public awareness regarding opportunities to engage with CSOs, resulting in political subjectivity that discourages consistent involvement.

5.1 Public Discourse and Constructive Dialogue on Civil Society

Public discourse in Lesotho presents a hostile and disabling environment for civil society organisations (CSOs). The perception of CSOs by political leaders is inconsistent and opportunistic, often shaped by their position at a given time: opposition parties tend to view CSOs positively, while governing parties frequently see them as threats. However, in instances where government is in the presence of the international community, it often formally acknowledges the crucial role civil society is playing, albeit without putting in place mechanisms for the enabling environment to improve.

Government officials also frequently deploy hostile rhetoric, framing CSOs as foreign-influenced or oppositional when they challenge corruption, resource extraction projects, or unfulfilled policy promises. This narrative reduces space for constructive dialogue, leaving CSOs marginalised in political debates and treated as adversaries rather than partners in governance.

This challenge particularly affects CSOs working on democracy and human rights, which are often seen to be anti-government. These CSOs are often labelled as political parties, which leads to reputational harm. Digital harassment and covert surveillance further constrain the ability of activists and journalists to shape discourse freely. In June 2025, for instance, activist

[Tšolo Thakeli was arrested](#) after posting a video criticising the Prime Minister's unfulfilled employment promises.

The media landscape is [deeply polarised](#), with editorial independence regularly [undermined by dependence on government](#) funding, leading to some outlets aligning with the government and others with opposition parties. This environment results in distorted narratives about CSO work, framed to fit political agendas. Coverage of civil society is typically event-driven and superficial, lacking sustained engagement with systemic issues or the long-term impact of CSO initiatives. Organisations with limited advertising budgets are especially marginalised in media visibility.

While independent media outlets exist, they lack consistent engagement with civil society voices. The absence of institutionalised platforms for dialogue between CSOs, political leaders, and the media further entrenches mistrust and undermines opportunities for collaborative problem-solving.

5.2 Perception of Civil Society and Civic Engagement

Public perception of civil society in Lesotho reflects growing awareness of CSOs' role in governance and reform, but citizen engagement remains uneven, shaped by historical distrust, limited civic education, and structural barriers to participation.

CSOs are generally viewed as the voice of the voiceless, yet this perception has weakened in recent years. Misalignments between public expectations and CSO outcomes, alongside the political deployment of CSO leaders, have contributed to declining trust. Citizens sometimes perceive CSOs as being aligned with political interests or as conducting donor-driven projects that have limited visible impact on communities.

Public attitudes are inconsistent and event-driven. At times, [citizens support CSOs and acknowledge their advocacy role](#); at other times, they view them with scepticism or indifference. A culture of political apathy where citizens feel they have little influence over decisions further discourages consistent civic participation. Nonetheless, examples such as [lawsuits against government decisions](#) by private individuals and demonstrations by organised groups show that pockets of active civic engagement exist.

[Civic education](#), though legally mandated and intended to be continuous through bodies like the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), remains [weak in practice](#) and is primarily focused on voter education. This gap leaves many citizens unaware of their rights or of opportunities to engage meaningfully with civil society initiatives.

Overall, while there is a growing recognition of the importance of CSOs, this recognition is often superficial. Citizen engagement with CSOs is inconsistent: some individuals and groups participate actively, while many remain apathetic or disengaged due to lack of information, trust deficits, and perceptions of ineffectiveness. These dynamics make public perception and civic engagement a partially enabling factor, offering opportunities for CSOs to build on but also highlighting the urgent need to strengthen trust and civic education.

5.3 Civic Equality and Inclusion

Lesotho has legal frameworks and constitutional provisions that promote the inclusion of marginalised groups in civic processes. These frameworks guarantee equal rights and opportunities for all individuals, providing a foundation for civil society to advance inclusive participation. Laws like the [Persons with Disability Equity Act of 2021](#) and the [Harmonization of the Rights of Customary Widows with the Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act, 2022](#), provide equal rights and opportunities.

In practice, however, implementation is uneven, and social inequalities, sometimes compounded by corruption, limit access to rights and opportunities for certain groups,

particularly marginalised communities such as the LGBTQI+ community, women and girls, and people living with disabilities. Social tolerance exists but remains incomplete; some sectors, such as the LGBTQI+ community, are still [viewed negatively](#) in certain quarters while accepted in others. The [National Assembly Electoral Act](#) and the [Local Government Elections Act](#) both provide for proportional seats allocation to both men and women and special seats for women in local government councils to increase participation of women in decision making bodies.

CSOs have made significant strides in promoting inclusion and equality, often exceeding progress in other sectors. Many organisations are led by minorities or specifically serve marginalised groups, such as [LNFOD](#) for persons with disabilities and [People's Matrix](#) for LGBTQI+ communities. CSOs increasingly integrate inclusion into programming, though mainstreaming equality across all initiatives remains a work in progress.

Lesotho's civil society landscape reflects growing efforts to ensure participation for youth, women, and persons with disabilities. Nonetheless, structural inequalities, geographic exclusion, and limited institutional safeguards continue to hinder full civic equality, making civic equality and inclusion a partially enabling factor for CSOs.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Score:



This principle assesses the safety, freedom, and accessibility of digital spaces for civil society actors. While CSOs generally operate without widespread internet shutdowns, the environment is only partially enabling due to emerging legislative threats and gaps in security frameworks. The proposed 2024 Computer Crime and Cyber Security Bill is a major concern, as it threatens to criminalise online dissent and restrict digital freedoms under the guise of combating cybercrime. Furthermore, CSOs and journalists report threats of covert surveillance and online harassment from state security agencies. Digital accessibility is also constrained by an underdeveloped ICT infrastructure, high data costs, and low digital literacy, especially in rural areas, limiting CSOs' ability to leverage these tools effectively.

6.1 Digital Rights and Freedoms

CSOs in Lesotho generally enjoy online freedom, with no instances of widespread internet shutdowns or overt government censorship. This environment provides a degree of digital space for advocacy and communication, allowing CSOs to operate relatively freely in online spaces.

There have been isolated instances of government threats to restrict digital platforms in response to public criticism. In November 2025, local radio stations reported that social media-based news outlets will no longer be allowed to cover parliamentary committee sessions as they do not have physical offices to receive complaints about their reporting. This exclusion of social media-based news outlets indirectly restricts the type of information that can be shared online.

Additionally, emerging legislation raises concerns about the protection of digital rights and freedoms. The [Computer Crime and Cyber Security Bill](#) has sparked fears that it could be used to suppress dissent and restrict freedom of expression under the pretext of combating cybercrime. For instance, in Section 21 on illegal access to a computer system, computer data or network, the Computer Crime and Cyber Security Bill gives an unclear description of illegal access and may give law enforcement agencies a basis for infringing on freedom of expression. The Bill also raises concerns about expanded surveillance powers without strong judicial safeguards, creating a chilling effect on investigative journalism and civic participation,

and ultimately weakening transparency, accountability, and the public's right to know. Similarly, the [2021 SIM and Mobile Device Registration Regulations](#) have raised [privacy concerns](#) among CSOs.

The absence of comprehensive digital regulations has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, CSOs benefit from fewer formal barriers to using digital platforms. On the other hand, the lack of clear laws enables state security agencies to misuse their powers, targeting [digital activists](#) perceived as opposing the government, often charging them with offences such as disturbing public peace.

6.2 *Digital Security and Privacy*

Lesotho lacks an official National Cybersecurity Strategy, leaving the country vulnerable to cyber threats without a comprehensive framework to mitigate risks. While the right to privacy is recognised under the Constitution, the [Data Protection Act](#) is not fully implemented as the Data Protection Commission it establishes has not yet been formed, raising concerns about the effectiveness of data protection measures. Government practices, such as posting confidential information on social media, have further eroded trust in official data handling.

Currently, the Constitution and the [Penal Code](#) provide the primary legal protections for privacy and freedom of expression, offering only minimal safeguards for CSOs against cyberattacks. The proposed Computer Crime and Cyber Security Bill remains under review, leaving gaps in formal cybersecurity protections.

[CSOs and journalists](#) report experiencing cyber-threats such as covert surveillance, online harassment, and intimidation, particularly when engaging on governance, land, or human rights issues. Kananelo Boloetse, an activist and journalist, says his social media accounts with a high number of followers had been [hacked](#) in mid 2024.

Government actors use radio and social media to spread misinformation, specifically the ruling party's propaganda. They often criticise CSOs and civic actors and portray the state of affairs as though they are normal. On the question of high youth unemployment, many government actors took to [social media](#) and radio stations to contradict unemployment claims as false without providing tangible data indicating how many new jobs had been created.

While CSOs can operate online and generally enjoy some freedom of expression, the absence of a robust cybersecurity framework, weak implementation of data protection laws, and occasional government interference make [digital security and privacy a partially enabling](#) factor, offering some operational space but exposing organisations to significant risks.

6.3 *Digital Accessibility*

Civil society actors and the public in Lesotho are gaining greater access to digital technologies; however, significant disparities in infrastructure, affordability, and [digital literacy](#) continue to limit inclusive and effective online engagement.

Lesotho's ICT infrastructure remains underdeveloped, particularly in rural areas. While there have been efforts to expand access, challenges such as [high data costs](#), limited network coverage, and low digital literacy persist. Structural limitations further constrain digital participation. As of early 2024, only [47% of Lesotho's population had internet access](#), with rural areas disproportionately excluded. The recent arrival of Starlink represents a positive step toward bridging connectivity gaps, while also [raising concerns](#) about it being operated from abroad without a data centre in Lesotho, thereby not creating local employment and evading local ownership. Despite the increased connectivity, [access remains uneven](#) across the country.

These constraints impede CSOs' ability to fully leverage digital tools for communication, advocacy, and service delivery. While digital technologies offer potential, limited accessibility continues to partially enable the operational environment for civil society.

C) Recommendations

The Government of Lesotho (Executive and Legislative)

- **Protect Civic Space:** Cease all practices that foster fear, intimidation, or self-censorship among human rights defenders and civil society actors.
- **Ensure Accountability:** Investigate all threats against those who criticise the government or military, ensuring perpetrators are held accountable.
- **Legislative Reform:**
 - Reform the Public Meetings and Processions Act 2010 to restrict the broad discretionary powers currently held by the police.
 - Enact Access to Information legislation, specifically prioritising the Receipt and Access to Information Bill 2000.
 - Repeal or fundamentally reform repressive statutes, such as the Official Secrets Act (1967) and the Internal Security Act (1984), to prevent their use against advocacy groups.
 - Halt or revise the 2024 Computer Crime and Cyber Security Bill to ensure it does not criminalise dissent or enable state surveillance.
- **Establish Formal Engagement:** Pursue the Public Participation Bill 2024 to create legally binding channels for CSO input in policy formulation.
- **Standardise CSO Regulation:** Enact a comprehensive Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Law to consolidate fragmented regulations (like the Societies and Companies Acts) and protect organisations from arbitrary state scrutiny.
- **Digital and Data Rights:** Fully implement the Data Protection Act, develop a National Cybersecurity Strategy, and intensify ICT infrastructure expansion in rural areas to bridge the digital divide.
- **Transparency:** Ensure the timely and accessible publication of legally mandated reports, including election reports and audited financial statements.

Security Institutions (Police and Military)

- **End Interference:** Immediately stop the use of excessive force and the arrest of protesters, ensuring that personnel responsible for interfering with peaceful demonstrations are held accountable.
- **Cease Digital Harassment:** Stop all forms of covert surveillance, online harassment, and the misuse of power directed at digital activists and CSOs.

Regulatory and Administrative Bodies

- **Decentralise the Registrar's Office:** Move services beyond Maseru and introduce accessible, affordable registration formats tailored for persons with disabilities and rural organisations.
- **Remove Financial Barriers:** The Central Bank of Lesotho and other regulatory bodies should review identification requirements for CSO executives and funding agencies that currently cause delays in the return and receipt of international funds.

International Partners and Donors

- **Shift Funding Models:** Move away from short-term, project-based grants and increase long-term core funding to help CSOs cover administrative costs and retain skilled staff.
- **Simplify Access:** Simplify complex application systems (such as Pador) or provide dedicated capacity support to ensure smaller, rural-based organisations are not excluded from funding opportunities.

Political Actors and State Officials

- **Refrain from Hostile Rhetoric:** Stop using misinformation or propaganda to label CSOs as "opposition" or political parties.
- **Build Trust:** Establish institutionalised platforms for consistent and constructive engagement with civil society and the media.

Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and Mandated Bodies

- **Strengthen Civic Education:** Implement initiatives to increase public awareness of rights and the importance of engaging with CSOs to address current trust deficits.

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 panel for this report took place in November 2025. 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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