

Zimbabwe

Country Focus Report

2025



Credit: Omoniyi David



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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

Zimbabwe is, in principle, a constitutional democracy grounded in a progressive 2013 [Constitution](#) endorsed across the political spectrum. In practice, however, [constitutional non-compliance](#) is widespread, civic space remains [repressed](#), and respect for the rule of law is minimal—reflected in the country’s ranking of 124 out of 143 in the World Justice Project’s [2025 Rule of Law Index](#).

Civic space continued to contract throughout 2025, marked by state securitisation, political intolerance, and systematic restrictions on fundamental freedoms. A restrictive and often punitive legal framework, coupled with an opaque and largely unresponsive State, has rendered the civil society operating environment profoundly disabling. Digital insecurity, intrusive oversight, and an increasingly untenable funding climate have further eroded the ability of civil society organisations (CSOs) to function effectively.

The enactment of the widely criticised [Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Act](#) in April 2025 significantly [expanded government powers](#) to deregister organisations and monitor their activities. Heightened police presence at community meetings deepened mistrust and undermined safe local engagement. The year also saw a series of unsettling incidents—including [arrests](#) of organisers of the [31 March protests](#), [raids on student groups](#), and the [firebombing of civic events](#) ahead of constitutional reform debates—illustrating the volatility and hostility of the operational landscape. These concerns were echoed in ZimRights’ March 2025 report, [Choked by Fear](#).

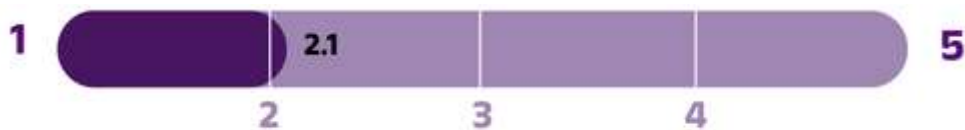
Despite this climate, some CSOs leveraged limited openings for engagement, such as contributing governance inputs to the [African Peer Review Mechanism process](#). Nonetheless, the broader environment was defined by harassment, fear, and shrinking operational space. While civil society demonstrated resilience, their work increasingly resembled survival rather than meaningful participation. Even so, CSOs remain central to advocating for constitutional compliance, accountability, human rights protection, civic education, humanitarian support, and broader community well-being.

B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

PRINCIPLE SCORE

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

Score:¹



Fundamental freedoms in Zimbabwe—freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression—remained severely constrained throughout 2025, despite explicit constitutional guarantees under Sections 58, 61 and 67. Evidence from across the year shows that restrictive legislation, including the PVO Amendment Act, MOPA and provisions of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, was systematically deployed to criminalise civic participation, enabling arbitrary arrests, pre-emptive bans, and the disruption of peaceful gatherings. Patterns of abductions, targeted violence, and smear campaigns against student leaders, journalists and CSOs further revealed a coordinated state strategy to deter dissent and shrink civic space. At the same time, freedom of expression was curtailed through the weaponisation of the Patriotic Act and the Cyber and Data Protection Act, facilitating surveillance, censorship, and prosecution of critical voices. Panel discussions underscored that these were not isolated incidents but indicators of a deliberate and sustained assault on civic freedoms, a trend reflected in Zimbabwe’s CIVICUS Monitor rating of civic space as [repressed](#).

1.1 | Freedom of Association

Freedom of association in Zimbabwe is constitutionally guaranteed yet substantively undermined in practice. Section 58(1) of the [Constitution](#) affirms every person’s right to assemble and associate freely, including the right to form, join, and participate in civil society organisations, trade unions, and other voluntary groupings. This guarantee is further reinforced by Section 67 on political participation and Section 86 governing the justification of

¹This is a rebased score derived from the [CIVICUS Monitor rating](#) published in December 2024.

any rights limitations. In principle, these provisions establish a protective framework that places a high threshold on state interference. However, the legal and political landscape in 2025 revealed a widening gap between constitutional promise and operational reality.

The enabling environment for civil association deteriorated sharply due to the combined effect of restrictive legislation—most notably the [Private Voluntary Organisations \(PVO\) Amendment Act](#), the [Maintenance of Peace and Order Act \(MOPA\)](#), and selective provisions of the [Criminal Law \(Codification and Reform\) Act](#). Rather than regulating specific unlawful acts, these laws increasingly criminalised association itself, enabling punitive interventions against individuals and groups exercising legitimate civic rights. This shift was particularly visible in 2025, when activists and civic actors [continued to face arrest and prosecution](#) for engaging in peaceful collective action.

The conviction in August 2025 of activists Simbarashe Blakistone, Daphine Gutsa, and Phyllis Pikitai exemplifies this trend. Their peaceful demonstration on 27 June 2024, calling for the release of the “Avondale 78,” resulted in charges of “disorderly conduct” [under MOPA](#). The application of Sections 7, 8, 10, and 13 in a cumulative and punitive manner demonstrates how ostensibly administrative provisions are operationalised to suppress dissent, creating a chilling effect on civic mobilisation.

A similarly troubling pattern emerged in academic spaces. On 10 November 2025, Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT) students Lindon Zanga and Marlin Madanda—both candidates representing the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) in student representative council elections—were [abducted](#) and severely assaulted by unidentified assailants using an unregistered grey Isuzu vehicle reportedly distributing campaign materials for the Zimbabwe Congress of Students Union (ZICOSU), an organisation widely perceived as aligned to the ruling ZANU-PF party. Given ZINASU’s long-standing association with opposition politics and its history of producing notable national leaders, the attack appears consistent with a broader strategy to suppress voices seen as oppositional, extending state-linked repression into university environments.

The spill-over effects on civil society organisations were also evident. In [remarks](#) delivered at a Midlands State University ZICOSU meeting, Minister Owen Ncube publicly accused CSOs—including ZimRights, WELEAD Trust, Project Vote 263, and ZIMCODD—of funding ZINASU students. Such unsubstantiated allegations serve to delegitimise CSOs, expose them to heightened administrative scrutiny, and justify constraints on their operations and partnerships. This narrative framing reinforces suspicion toward civic actors and weakens the broader ecosystem of democratic participation and human rights monitoring.

Overall, despite constitutional protections, freedom of association in Zimbabwe remained heavily constricted in 2025. The cumulative effect of restrictive laws, targeted prosecutions, politically linked violence, and delegitimising rhetoric created an environment in which associational life—particularly when connected to dissent, accountability, or rights-based advocacy—was treated as inherently suspect, rather than a normal and protected feature of democratic life.

1.2 | Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Although Section 58 of Zimbabwe’s Constitution guarantees the right to peaceful assembly, the practical enjoyment of this freedom remained severely constrained in 2025. The Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA)—particularly Sections 7, 8, 10 and 13—continued to function as the principal legislative tool through which the State restricted civic

mobilisation. These provisions require prior notification to the police for public gatherings, grant broad discretion to prohibit assemblies on vaguely defined grounds such as the possibility of “public disorder,” and allow security forces to disperse protests using force. In practice, this framework has enabled a pattern in which the regulation of assemblies becomes a mechanism for pre-emptive repression rather than public safety.

The events surrounding the [31 March 2025 protests](#) illustrate the severity of this approach. Reports of beatings, abductions, and threats of sexual violence against activists—including Robson Chere—triggered a shift towards intensified surveillance and disruption of even modest gatherings. Instead of addressing policing excesses, the State deployed a more anticipatory strategy in which peaceful assemblies were monitored, curtailed, or banned altogether. While Section 11 of MOPA technically provides an avenue for appeal against prohibitions, the lack of suspensive effect renders this remedy ineffective: the prohibition stands while the lengthy appeal process unfolds, neutralising the exercise of the constitutional right.

The [disruption](#) of the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ) private sports day in Gweru on 22 November 2025 exemplifies this dynamic. Despite being an internal, non-political event aimed at promoting wellbeing, the Zimbabwe Republic Police anti-riot unit forcibly halted the gathering, arresting provincial chairperson Emmanuel Mauya. This underscores how assemblies involving organised civic actors—even when not expressly political—are treated with suspicion and subjected to disproportionate intervention.

A similar pattern unfolded in late October 2025. On 28 October, police [disrupted](#) a press conference in Bulawayo on constitutional reform, while on 27 October, an event at the Southern African Political Economy Series (SAPES) Trust in Harare was [subjected to a firebombing](#), followed by [arrests and assaults](#) of at least ten attendees. These actions targeted individuals whose only “offence” was participating in public dialogue critical of the ruling party’s [2030 agenda](#) seeking to extend president Mnangagwa’s tenure beyond constitutional limits. Civil society leaders, political representatives and local authorities [condemned](#) these incidents as emblematic of a deepening assault on fundamental freedoms.

Freedom of assembly was even more precarious for minority and marginalised groups. Rural communities and women activists reported heightened intimidation, with MOPA’s notification and prohibition provisions being selectively weaponised to label their gatherings unlawful. LGBTQ+ groups, including Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ), were compelled to cancel public activities or resort to private meetings due to fear of harassment or violence. Student groups perceived as aligned with opposition politics, notably ZINASU, faced elevated risks, as evidenced by the [November 2025 abductions and assaults](#) of student leaders. These intersectional vulnerabilities mean that marginalised actors—particularly rural women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and young activists—face layered risks of gender-based violence, political reprisal, and limited access to legal protections.

The widespread police interference in peaceful gatherings, the use of violence, and the exploitation of MOPA’s broad provisions reveal a systemic pattern of repression. Amnesty International’s 2025 findings that the State is engaged in the “systematic use of excessive force and arbitrary arrests to stifle peaceful protest” accurately capture the deteriorating environment. By generating fear and deterring participation, these practices significantly erode the constitutional guarantee of peaceful assembly and weaken the civic infrastructure essential for democratic engagement.

1.3 | Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression, guaranteed under Section 61 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, remained profoundly constrained in 2025 as the State continued to deploy legal, administrative, and coercive tools to suppress dissenting voices. Civil society organisations, journalists, and human rights defenders operated in an environment characterised by surveillance, intimidation, and the strategic weaponisation of legislation ostensibly designed to protect national interests. The case of Faith Zaba, editor of the *Zimbabwe Independent*, offers a stark illustration of how legal instruments are increasingly used to criminalise critical speech. Her 27 June 2025 satirical column, [When We Become a Mafia State](#), prompted a police summons on 1 July and charges under Section 22A of [the Patriotic Act](#) for allegedly “undermining or insulting the authority of the President.” By treating political commentary as a threat to sovereignty, the authorities effectively collapsed the distinction between legitimate critique and criminal conduct, eroding core constitutional guarantees.

Following her release on bail, Ms Zaba’s [application to vary her bail conditions](#) to attend international media conferences in Singapore was denied, with the magistrate accepting the [State’s speculative argument](#) that she posed a flight risk. As [noted](#) by the Committee to Protect Journalists, the episode underscored the administration’s intolerance of scrutiny and willingness to expend public resources to curtail journalistic expression. Crucially, it also reinforced the wider climate of fear that compels many journalists to self-censor.

The repression of media freedom in 2025 extended well beyond individual cases. Independent outlets repeatedly experienced harassment, threats, and arrests, particularly when reporting on governance or corruption. The [Criminal Law \(Codification and Reform\) Act](#) (Patriotic Act) and the [Cyber and Data Protection Act](#) [Chapter 12:07] were central to this escalation. Section 31 of the former criminalises “false statements prejudicial to the State,” a notoriously vague provision historically used to silence critical commentary. Meanwhile, Sections 164 and 6 of the Cyber Act respectively criminalise certain “data messages” and establish a Data Protection Authority with broad monitoring powers. Both instruments grant authorities extensive discretion, enabling the State to conflate online dissent with incitement, and to undertake surveillance with minimal judicial oversight.

These broad powers were visibly exercised during the 17 October 2025 protests, when the police invoked Section 164 to [suppress demonstrations](#) and [issued explicit warnings](#) against online activity believed to “inflame” the situation. The framing of social media discourse as a potential threat further normalised State intrusion into digital spaces. Other high-profile cases, such as the prolonged pre-trial detention of journalist [Blessed Mhlanga](#) for interviewing a war veteran [calling for the President’s resignation](#), reinforced the risks faced by individuals who engage in politically sensitive reporting.

Empirical data from 2025 confirms the systemic nature of this repression. [Reporters Without Borders](#) ranked Zimbabwe 137th of 180 countries, citing legal harassment and violence against journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists recorded at least [eight arrests](#) linked to journalistic work, while a MISA Zimbabwe study found that [73% of journalists surveyed](#) admitted to practising self-censorship due to fear of reprisals under the Patriotic and Cyber Acts. These findings reveal not only widespread coercion but also the cumulative, chilling effects of legal ambiguity and selective enforcement.

Taken together, these incidents reflect a deliberate dismantling of the civic space for free expression. The combined impact of restrictive laws, police intimidation, and punitive prosecutions has created an environment in which journalists and CSOs operate under

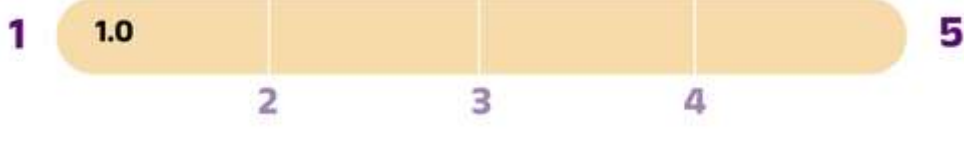
constant threat, and where the constitutional promise of expressive freedom remains largely illusory.



PRINCIPLE SCORE

2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

Score:



The legal framework regulating civil society in Zimbabwe is marked by complexity, inconsistency, and a widening gap between constitutional guarantees and statutory practice. Although the Constitution protects the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, these rights are frequently constrained by restrictive legislation and discretionary administrative practices that curtail meaningful civic participation. Central to this restrictive environment is the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Act, 2025, signed into law by President Mnangagwa on 11 April 2025. While originally designed to regulate charitable and welfare organisations, the Act has expanded into an instrument of extensive state oversight and control, requiring all entities undertaking charitable, legal, social, or welfare-related activities to register with government authorities. Its broad and ambiguous provisions confer wide discretion on the state in determining which organisations may lawfully operate. Particularly affected are CSOs engaged in governance, democracy, human rights, and anti-corruption work. The Act introduces vague prohibitions on “political support or opposition,” terms that can be applied expansively to accountability initiatives, civic education, and other forms of lawful public-interest engagement. As a result, the regulatory framework not only shapes the operational landscape of CSOs but also significantly influences the boundaries of permissible advocacy.

2.1 | Registration

The [Private Voluntary Organisations \(PVO\) Amendment Act](#) [Act No. 1 of 2025], enacted in April 2025, introduces mandatory registration for all entities undertaking “charitable,” “social welfare,” or related activities. Although framed as universally applicable, the expanded definitions under Section 2 and 6 substantially widen the scope of actors required to comply. This now encompasses informal, grassroots, women-led, youth-led, faith-based, and community groups that previously operated lawfully outside the formal PVO system. The shift effectively removes the flexibility that marginalised communities rely upon to organise

autonomously, compelling them into a complex regulatory regime for which many lack the legal, administrative, or financial capacity.

Section 9 sets out the registration requirements but does so in an incomplete and ambiguous manner. While certain documents are listed, the provision expressly empowers the Registrar to demand “any further information in connexion with its application which he may deem necessary” and grant a certificate of registration “subject to such conditions as he or she may impose”, without establishing objective criteria, procedural safeguards, or limits. This ambiguity undermines predictability and affordability, particularly for small and rural organisations dependent on volunteer leadership and lacking access to legal support. Panellists noted that registration fees, repeated document submissions, and transportation to district or national offices cumulatively create financial barriers that disproportionately exclude women- and youth-led initiatives.

A critical gap in the Act is its failure to clarify the legal status of organisations during the registration process. In this interim period, entities are unable to lawfully mobilise resources or receive public funds, yet Section 6(2) criminalises operating without registration. This produces [a punitive catch-22](#): organisations are exposed to criminal liability while awaiting decisions that are vulnerable to open-ended delays. Panellists reported prolonged processing times in 2025, inconsistent requirements across districts, and requests for non-statutory documentation, indicating that these barriers are systemic rather than anecdotal.

The Act further undermines accountability by failing to establish clear timelines, or application-tracking mechanisms, although it stipulates mandatory obligations to provide written reasons for administrative decisions. Although Section 9(6) states that “Where the Registrar rejects an application for registration wholly or in part, the Registrar shall notify the applicant organisation of the rejection, and inform it of the grounds upon which the rejection was based,” this safeguard is only meaningful if implemented consistently, impartially, and without reliance on political considerations or fabricated grounds for refusal. At present, there is no public system through which applicants can monitor the progress of their submissions, nor any clear guidance on appropriate follow-up procedures. While appeal mechanisms formally exist, they remain procedurally opaque and financially prohibitive for most smaller or rural CSOs, severely limiting access to effective remedies when applications are denied or unduly delayed. Collectively, these shortcomings entrench administrative gatekeeping and erode regulatory fairness, leaving organisations vulnerable to arbitrary and discretionary decision-making.

The criminalisation of unregistered operations under Section 6, coupled with vague political neutrality obligations under Section 20A and sweeping ministerial powers under Section 22D, [undermines](#) the rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly, as protected under international and regional human rights frameworks. The burden is not evenly distributed: women-led, youth-led, informal, and rural organisations are disproportionately affected due to limited resources, reliance on advocacy-related work, and heightened exposure to discretionary enforcement. Read together, these provisions transform registration from a neutral administrative process into an instrument of control.

International human rights actors have raised similar concerns. Prior to enactment, [UN Special Rapporteurs](#) on freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and freedom of expression, alongside organisations such as [Human Rights Watch](#), warned that the law would suppress dissenting and minority voices. Following the passage of the Act, the European Union

[suspended funding](#) for governance initiatives in Zimbabwe in 2025, citing the deteriorating civic space.

In summary, although the PVO Amendment Act formally provides for registration of all entities, its expansive scope, discretionary powers, and punitive enforcement mechanisms create significant procedural and substantive barriers. These measures erode the enabling environment for civil society, with the harshest impact on grassroots and marginalised groups that depend on open civic space to exercise rights, secure representation, and deliver essential services.

2.2 | Operational Environment

The legal framework governing CSOs significantly [restricts](#) their ability to determine their internal governance, objectives, and programme activities without state interference. Although CSOs are formally entitled to self-govern, the [PVO Amendment Act](#) substantially erodes this autonomy through broad executive powers. Section 22D authorises the Minister to issue binding directives to the Registrar, allowing political influence over decisions affecting organisational governance, internal restructuring, and programme direction. In addition, Section 9 empowers the Registrar to reject applications if an organisation's constitution, management, or "any other information" does not comply with the Act, without objective criteria. This discretion is neither procedurally bounded nor subject to independent review, creating an environment in which CSOs cannot reliably exercise autonomy over their strategic choices. Similarly, Section 13A requires organisations to seek prior approval for "material changes" to their objectives, leadership, or geographical reach. This effectively converts internal organisational decisions—such as expanding to a new district, amending strategic priorities, or changing governance structures—into activities requiring state consent.

Administrative oversight mechanisms under the Act further weaken organisational independence and create operational obstacles. Sections 21–27 enable authorities to suspend executive committees, appoint interim administrators, and impose penalties—often without prior judicial involvement—shifting oversight away from the courts and into the hands of the executive. These provisions create significant potential for politically motivated interventions, especially for organisations engaged in governance, accountability, or rights-based work. Reporting obligations meanwhile impose disproportionately heavy compliance burdens. Expanded disclosure requirements relating to "controllers" and "beneficial owners" compel CSOs to supply detailed information about board members, senior staff, and funders. For smaller, rural, youth-led, or women-led organisations, these obligations exceed administrative capacity and redirect scarce resources towards compliance rather than service delivery or advocacy. Evidence from practitioners indicates that routine "compliance audits" have, in several cases, paralysed operational activity for extended periods, reinforcing perceptions that administrative oversight is used to control rather than regulate.

Provisions under the [Maintenance of Peace and Order Act \(MOPA\)](#) further restrict CSOs' operational environment by converting ordinary civic activities into potential criminal offences and granting excessive discretion to law enforcement. Section 7 imposes an onerous advance-notification regime for public meetings and demonstrations, functioning in practice as a de facto authorisation system that enables police to block gatherings on technical grounds, as evidenced by the disruption of ZimRights meetings in Beitbridge and Gwanda (MOPA, s.7, s.7(5)). Section 8's broad power to prohibit gatherings on vaguely defined grounds of "public disorder," combined with the lack of suspensive effect for appeals under Section 11, allows authorities to halt civic meetings before judicial scrutiny is possible. Section

10 introduces geographic bans on gatherings near courts, Parliament, and other protected areas unless special permission is granted, a measure routinely used to prevent symbolic protests and solidarity actions. These restrictions are reinforced by Section 12, which imposes civil liability on conveners for harm caused even by third parties, and Section 13, which empowers police to disperse gatherings using force.

Parallel constraints under the [Criminal Law \(Codification and Reform\) Act](#) limit the advocacy role of civil society actors. Section 37, which criminalises participation in a gathering on the mere “risk” or “possibility” of disorder—without requiring evidence of actual violence—enables law enforcement to target peaceful civic activity on speculative grounds. Similarly, Section 41, which penalises undefined “threatening, abusive or insulting” conduct in public spaces, grants police wide latitude to arrest activists and CSO members based on subjective assessments. The amendments to Section 22A compound these risks by criminalising the act of “wilfully injuring the sovereignty and national interest of Zimbabwe” within or outside Zimbabwe, a formulation likely to be invoked against activists, journalists, and civil society actors engaged in legitimate public-interest work. Moreover, subsection (4) introduces aggravating circumstances to such charges, broadening the potential for punitive application. Taken together, these provisions have produced a pronounced chilling effect: CSOs increasingly avoid public mobilisation to reduce exposure to arbitrary arrest, and rights-based organisations constrain their activities to minimise legal risk. The cumulative impact is to entrench executive discretion at the expense of constitutional freedoms under Section 58, transforming the law into a statutory deterrent to advocacy, collective action, and public engagement. Rather than safeguarding public order, the framework reinforces a climate of legal uncertainty that inhibits meaningful civic participation.

Evidence from panellists indicates that governance watchdogs, women’s rights organisations, and LGBTI-focused CSOs increasingly self-censor reports and public statements to avoid arrest or prosecution. While enforcement is uneven, the law’s broad phrasing enables selective and extrajudicial application, particularly against organisations critical of state policy, thereby shrinking civic space and constraining lawful CSO activity. Evidence from panellists further confirmed and attested that women-led and rural CSOs reported greater vulnerability due to limited legal resources to challenge unjust legislation, directives and heightened pressure from District Development Coordinators (DDCs). It also emerged that LGBTI-focused organisations and governance watchdogs were already self-censoring and operating informally, citing fear of deregistration and exposure of their members. This was well predicted by the [New York City Bar Association](#), ICNL, and [Human Rights Watch](#) in 2025, who warned that the amendments disproportionately affect women, youth, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised groups by criminalising independent organising.

Access to funding—both domestic and international—is heavily regulated under the PVO Amendment Act, restricting the ability of CSOs to sustain operations or expand programmes. Section 6(2)–(6) criminalises the receipt of foreign or public funds by unregistered organisations, imposing fines and imprisonment. Given widespread administrative delays in registration, this provision disproportionately affects emerging, informal, rural, women-led, and youth-led groups that rely on donor support. Donor vetting and mandatory disclosure requirements under Section 20A increase compliance costs and expose sensitive organisational information to state scrutiny, heightening fears of surveillance and reprisals—particularly among governance watchdogs, LGBTI organisations, and groups working with marginalised communities. Requirements to utilise formal banking channels for all funding flows further disadvantage organisations operating in areas with limited financial infrastructure. Additional constraints arise under data protection laws, which require authorisation before transferring donor or beneficiary data across borders, impeding

international collaboration and access to external funding partnerships. These cumulative restrictions compel some organisations to self-censor proposals, scale down advocacy work, or operate informally in order to avoid exposure to regulatory sanctions.

In summary, the operational environment established by the PVO Amendment Act, supplemented by MOPA and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, significantly constrains CSO autonomy, imposes disproportionate administrative burdens, and restricts access to essential funding. These constraints fall most heavily on marginalised, rural, women-led, youth-led, and advocacy-oriented organisations, thereby narrowing the civic space required for meaningful civil society participation.

2.3 | Protection from Interference

The Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Act, 2025 does not protect CSOs from arbitrary interference; rather, [it institutionalises it](#). Sections 9 and 20A are central: the former [empowers the Registrar](#) to cancel or refuse registration on broad, indeterminate grounds—including failure to meet “any prescribed condition”—while the latter imposes mandatory “political neutrality” and “cultural sensitivity” without clearly defining “political support,” “political opposition,” or “political activity.” In practice, these open-textured standards enable accountability work, governance monitoring, voter education, anti-corruption initiatives, and human rights documentation to be re-characterised as prohibited conduct, disproportionately affecting organisations engaged in democracy, governance, and rights-based programming. Although there was no mass deregistration by year-end, legal panellists reported 12 CSOs in 2025 receiving notices of intent to suspend or deregister for alleged breaches of Section 20A—illustrating the concrete risks created by vague statutory thresholds.

Executive control is further entrenched through Section 22D, which authorises the Minister to issue binding policy directives to the Registrar “in the public interest.” These directives take effect immediately and are not subject to prior judicial approval, enabling suspensions or deregistrations without independent scrutiny. Complementing this, Sections 22A–22C create civil penalties, inspection, and enforcement powers that allow fines, compliance orders, and other sanctions without first obtaining a court order. In tandem, Sections 21–27 empower authorities to suspend executive committees, appoint interim administrators, dissolve organisations, and impose criminal and financial penalties. While appeal rights exist, notably to the Administrative Court under Section 14, enforcement actions are not automatically suspended pending review, exposing organisations to irreversible harm before courts can intervene. Constitutional protections under Section 68 (right to administrative justice) thus become largely illusory in practice, because judicial review is reactive rather than preventative.

The Act also widens intrusive oversight and weakens due-process safeguards around investigations and inspections. Enforcement powers linked to Sections 22A–22C grant broad access to records and premises without clear thresholds, warrant requirements, or proportionality tests—facilitating repetitive, burdensome inspections, particularly against advocacy-oriented CSOs. Heightened compliance obligations under Section 15 (books and accounts) and Sections 22A–22D (offences, penalties, and ministerial directives) compel organisations to divert staff and financial resources from programming to risk management. The [gazetted PVO registration fees](#)—approximately US\$250 for national and US\$150 for local organisations—operate as financial barriers when combined with audit and reporting costs, functioning as indirect interference mechanisms that price out small, rural, women-led, and youth-led CSOs. Evidence from panellists indicates that many minority organisations and

CBOs lack the capacity to pay these fees, leading to anticipatory compliance and self-censorship: boards are restructured, mandates narrowed, advocacy suspended, or operations shifted informally to avoid deregistration or inspection. LGBTQ+ groups, women's rights organisations, and governance watchdogs report heightened scrutiny due to politicised application of Section 20A, while rural and women-led organisations face greater exposure to intimidation and compliance costs.

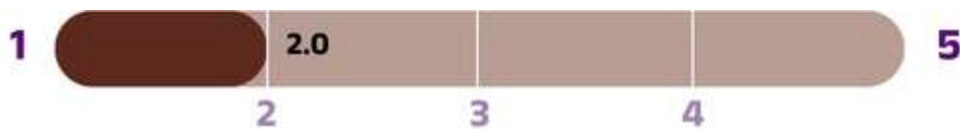
These statutory constraints are compounded by informal and extra-legal practices. Local authorities—particularly District Development Coordinators (DDCs)—have imposed arbitrary approval requirements without a clear legal mandate under the PVO Act or the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act [Chapter 11:23], such as demands for financial statements, board resolutions, budgets, personnel photographs, or political vetting. Panellists reported that in Insiza District (including a [17 January 2024 circular by the DDC](#)), as well as Gwanda, Beitbridge, and Mbire Districts, CSOs compliant with national law were nonetheless blocked from operating absent DDC endorsement—amounting to de facto restrictions through bureaucratic obstruction. Governance confusion within the statutory scheme compounds the problem: the PVO Board appears subordinate to the Registrar (who can issue provisional approvals), with overlapping functions and decision-making power—particularly regarding registration on “material change”—concentrated in the Registrar, despite concerns raised at Committee Stage. As Veritas Zimbabwe's [legal analyses observe](#), Sections 21–27 and 22D facilitate politically driven deregistration cycles by centralising authority in the executive, contrary to principles of legality, proportionality, and due process. Internationally, the implementation of the Act has already strained partner confidence; the European Union's [suspension](#) of planned good-governance funding following enactment signalled growing concern and risks further constraining resource flows and re-engagement prospects.

In sum, rather than shielding civil society from interference, the PVO Amendment Act—particularly Sections 9, 15, 20A, 21–27, 22A–22D—creates a framework that concentrates executive discretion, dilutes judicial safeguards, normalises intrusive oversight, and imposes prohibitive costs. Marginalised groups' CSOs bear the brunt of these measures.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

Score:



The 2025 assessment reveals a sharp deterioration in the resource environment for civil society in Zimbabwe. Access to funding has become increasingly restricted by the PVO Amendment Act, risk-averse donor behaviour, and burdensome fiscal and banking regulations. CSOs—especially small, rural, women-led, minority and advocacy-oriented organisations—face significant barriers to obtaining international or domestic resources. Those that do access funding struggle to use it effectively, constrained by stringent donor conditions, inflexible project designs, heavy compliance demands, and recurring state interference. Macroeconomic instability further erodes the real value of resources and limits the ability to adapt programmes to emerging community needs. Donor responsiveness to security and operational risks remains limited, leaving organisations exposed and often unable to reallocate funds when circumstances change. Funding cycles are increasingly short, unpredictable, and project-based, undermining programme continuity, staff retention, and long-term planning.

Opportunities for self-reliance—through domestic philanthropy, income-generating activities, or volunteer support—remain extremely constrained by tax law, regulatory controls, and political sensitivities. Overall, the resource environment favours larger, well-resourced CSOs while marginalising grassroots and rights-based actors. These dynamics significantly weaken civil society’s autonomy, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability.

3.1 | Accessibility of Resources

Access to financial and material resources for civil society organisations in Zimbabwe deteriorated sharply in 2025, driven by the interaction of restrictive domestic regulation, heightened donor risk assessments, international funding realignments, and acute macroeconomic instability. Although international support has not disappeared, it has become more conditional, unevenly distributed, and—in practice—exclusionary, particularly for CSOs working on governance, human rights, democracy and minority rights.

The Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Act, 2025 has reconfigured the funding landscape by tying lawful access to resources to compliance with an onerous registration regime. Section 9 effectively mandates registration for organisations undertaking “charitable” or “social welfare” work, while Section 6(2)–(6) criminalises the solicitation or receipt of public or foreign funds by unregistered entities, with penalties including fines and imprisonment. The result is a structural barrier: organisations unable to complete registration are simultaneously rendered ineligible for funding and exposed to criminal liability for pursuing it.

Although Section 14 provides a 90-day transitional window, this safeguard has proved weak in practice. Donors increasingly require proof of registration—or demonstrable progress towards compliance—before releasing funds, irrespective of ongoing legal challenges. Regulatory risk is thereby shifted from the state to CSOs. Smaller, rural and community-based organisations are compelled either to attempt complex compliance processes beyond their administrative capacity or to forfeit support altogether. In parallel, Section 20A introduces governance and “political neutrality” obligations that amplify perceived exposure to deregistration or sanction for advocacy-oriented organisations. Donors have consequently deprioritised work on elections, anti-corruption, gender equality and minority rights, judging these portfolios as higher risk.

Fiscal and banking frameworks further compress resource access. Under the [Income Tax Act \[Chapter 23:06\]](#), tax exemption is not automatic; Section 14(2)(f) makes it discretionary, opaque and often slow, creating uncertainty where grants may be treated as taxable income. Value Added Tax (VAT) rules under the [VAT Act \[Chapter 23:12\]](#) impose additional indirect costs: many CSOs fall below the registration threshold under Section 23, cannot reclaim input VAT, and must absorb VAT as a project cost—disproportionately burdening grassroots and service-delivery actors. Meanwhile, banks have intensified anti-money laundering checks, frequently demanding proof of PVO registration and detailed transaction justifications, delaying transfers and, in some cases, freezing accounts pending “compliance reviews”. Even where not expressly mandated, such practices are reinforced by the criminal liability risk embedded in [Section 6 of the PVO Act](#).

External shocks compounded these constraints. The [U.S. Executive Order 14169](#) (20 January 2025) triggered a reassessment and reduction of U.S. foreign assistance, contributing to the suspension or downsizing of some CSO programmes. Domestic regulatory barriers limited CSOs’ ability to absorb these shocks or diversify funding, while wider donor behaviour shifted towards lower-risk humanitarian programming. At the same time, [hyperinflation and currency volatility](#) undermined local philanthropy, with businesses reluctant to support civic initiatives—especially rights-based work perceived as politically sensitive.

Overall, resources remain available but access is increasingly mediated by law, policy and practice in ways that favour well-resourced, non-advocacy organisations and marginalise women-led, youth, rural, minority (including San and Doma) and LGBTQI+ groups. This narrowing of resource accessibility undermines civil society sustainability and pluralism.

3.2 | Effectiveness of Resources

In 2025, the ability of civil society organisations in Zimbabwe to use resources effectively was curtailed by a combination of restrictive legislation, increasingly stringent donor conditions, economic instability and recurrent state interference. Although funding remained available

from some international partners, the conditions attached to its use—both by government and donors—limited CSOs' autonomy, flexibility and responsiveness to community needs.

Donor conditions and government restrictions became mutually reinforcing. The PVO Amendment Act, 2025 imposed substantive controls over how CSOs manage resources. Section 20A requires political neutrality, detailed disclosure of donors, and adherence to prescribed governance standards. In response, donors tightened conditions on funding, requiring extensive financial reporting, proof of compliance with the new law, and strict adherence to pre-approved workplans. This shift meant that resource use was increasingly governed by regulatory and donor risk mitigation priorities rather than organisational strategy.

The Act also restricts how funds may be used in practice. Under Sections 22A–22C, deviations from approved budgets—regardless of whether driven by inflation, security threats, or operational realities—may trigger investigations or penalties. As a result, CSOs avoided reallocating funds to urgent community needs for fear of appearing non-compliant. Tax obligations under [Section 14](#) of the [Income Tax Act \[Chapter 23:06\]](#) and unrecoverable VAT under [Section 23](#) of the [VAT Act \[Chapter 23:12\]](#) further reduce the real value of resources available for programmatic use. Additionally, public order enforcement under [Section 8](#) of the [Maintenance of Peace and Order Act \(MOPA\) \[Chapter 11:23\]](#) has also affected resource effectiveness. CSOs reported that police and local authorities frequently disrupted or delayed activities, citing public order concerns without issuing written decisions. These interruptions increase transaction costs, necessitate last-minute changes to venues or dates, and lead to the inefficient use of already scarce resources.

Alignment between donor conditions and CSO priorities remained weak. Funding in 2025 was overwhelmingly project-based and thematically pre-set by donors. Panellists noted that proposals had to conform to donor agendas rather than community-identified priorities. Reporting requirements demanded granular financial detail aligned more closely with donor oversight than with assessing impact. Consequently, resources were often deployed in ways that served donor compliance rather than advancing long-term organisational missions.

Flexibility in adapting funding to changing operational environments was limited. Although some donors permitted modest budget realignments in response to inflation or currency volatility, these were usually capped, slow to approve, or restricted to non-core budget lines. Few donors permitted shifts in programme focus even where emerging community needs or security risks required it. Hard earmarking of funds made it difficult to adjust activities disrupted by police interference, threats, or logistical challenges. This rigidity disproportionately affected grassroots and rural CSOs reliant on small, fixed-value grants.

Donor responsiveness to CSO security concerns remained inadequate. While donors required extensive risk assessments, very few provided dedicated resources to address or mitigate those risks. Flexible funds for legal defence, security measures, safe transportation, digital security, or relocating activities following intimidation were rare. As a result, many organisations absorbed security-related costs internally, diverting limited programme funding and exacerbating operational strain.

The broader economic environment further eroded the effectiveness of resources. [Hyperinflation and currency instability](#) rendered pre-approved budgets obsolete within months, particularly affecting transport, fuel, staffing, and venue costs. Larger, urban-based organisations with diversified funding streams and compliance capacity managed these pressures more effectively. In contrast, small, women-led, rural, Indigenous and

minority-focused CSOs—already strained by compliance burdens—faced severe operational disruption. Some reduced activities, shortened outreach engagements, or suspended advocacy components entirely to preserve organisational survival.

Overall, while funding existed in 2025, its effective use was substantially constrained. Donor conditions were increasingly restrictive and misaligned with CSOs' missions; government regulations imposed further limitations on how resources could be used; adaptability to emerging needs was minimal; and donor responsiveness to security risks was weak. These combined dynamics significantly reduced programme impact and deepened inequalities within the sector.

3.3 | Sustainability

In 2025, the sustainability of civil society organisations in Zimbabwe [declined precipitously](#) as shrinking international support intersected with restrictive regulation, adverse tax and banking environments, and extremely limited domestic philanthropy. As a result, CSOs' ability to access diverse, reliable, and long-term funding sources was severely curtailed, leaving many dependent on single or unpredictable funding streams. This made organisations—particularly those working on governance, human rights, and marginalised communities—highly vulnerable to external shocks.

The contraction of international funding accelerated following United States Executive Order 14169 (20 January 2025), which reprioritised U.S. foreign assistance and resulted in the suspension or termination of several USAID-funded programmes. Because Zimbabwean CSOs already operated within a restrictive regulatory environment, they had limited capacity to diversify or replace lost funding. Organisations dependent on a single U.S. funder experienced acute operational disruption: community-based groups lost entire sub-grant streams, governance-focused CSOs retrenched staff, and multi-year programmes were abruptly halted. European donors also redirected resources to jurisdictions with less regulatory uncertainty, further narrowing the funding pool and contributing to shortened funding cycles, increased reliance on one-year grants, and the abandonment of multi-year planning.

The PVO Amendment Act, 2025 entrenched this instability. Section 6, which criminalises receiving funds before registration, discouraged donors from engaging in long-term arrangements with organisations whose legal status could be delayed or challenged. Sections 9 and 15 impose burdensome governance and record-keeping obligations, diverting resources away from institutional development and making core or flexible funding models difficult to manage. Moreover, Sections 22A–22D grant the Minister wide discretionary powers to issue directives, suspend operations, or deregister organisations without judicial oversight. The absence of suspensive remedies during an appeal process undermines donor confidence, reinforcing the shift towards short-term, project-based funding rather than sustained institutional support.

These dynamics directly affected programme continuity, staff conditions, and long-term sustainability. Organisations reported difficulty retaining skilled staff due to unpredictable funding cycles and an inability to guarantee contracts beyond short grant periods. Programme interruptions weakened community trust, eroded institutional memory, and prevented CSOs from achieving long-term impact or pursuing ambitious strategic goals. The dominance of highly earmarked, project-based funding limited organisations' ability to invest in governance systems, monitoring capacity, digital security, or organisational resilience.

The regulatory environment also restricts self-reliance and diversification of income. The PVO Act contains no provisions enabling social enterprise models, endowment development, or unrestricted fundraising. Section 20A, which imposes political neutrality obligations, further

constrains advocacy organisations from forming cross-sector partnerships that might generate alternative income. Tax law offers [minimal support](#): under Section 14(2)(f) of the [Income Tax Act](#), exemptions remain discretionary and often delayed, meaning grants may be treated as taxable income. Under the VAT Act, most CSOs cannot register as VAT operators and thus cannot reclaim input VAT, inflating costs and discouraging domestic giving. The absence of tax incentives for philanthropy significantly limits the feasibility of domestic fundraising, volunteer mobilisation, or sustained donations.

Banking constraints further weaken sustainability. Anti-money laundering regulations and the criminal liability risk under Section 6 of the PVO Act lead banks to apply enhanced due diligence to CSOs, particularly those working on governance, elections, LGBTQ+ rights, or minority advocacy. Organisations reported lengthy delays in opening accounts, repeated document requests, or temporary freezing of funds. Some established foreign accounts—often in Botswana—to bypass domestic risk, which increased transaction costs and undermined local financial integration. Grassroots and minority-focused CSOs faced near-complete exclusion from formal banking, making long-term planning nearly impossible.

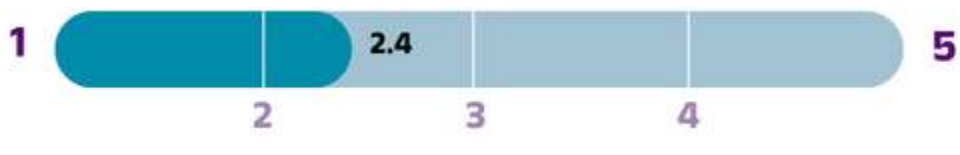
The sustainability crisis affected organisations unevenly. Larger, urban-based groups with diversified funding and compliance capacity managed to remain operational, albeit with reduced programming. In contrast, small, rural, women-led, Indigenous (including San and Doma), and LGBTQ+-focused organisations were disproportionately harmed: legal recognition barriers undermined their eligibility for grants, while donor and banking risk classifications curtailed access to remaining funding opportunities.

Overall, the combined effect of diminishing international support, restrictive regulatory controls, unfavourable tax and banking environments, and negligible domestic philanthropy rendered long-term resource sustainability largely unattainable for much of Zimbabwean civil society in 2025.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

4. Open and Responsive State

Score:



While the constitutional and statutory framework formally recognises rights to information, public involvement, and administrative justice, implementation remained uneven and often discretionary in 2025. Transparency was weakened by limited proactive disclosure, broad exemptions, and weak enforcement. Participation opportunities were inconsistently offered, frequently late, and unevenly accessible—particularly for rural and marginalised CSOs. Accountability mechanisms, though present in law, lacked effective follow-up, feedback loops, and enforcement, constraining CSOs’ ability to influence decisions or monitor government compliance. Collectively, these deficits indicate a governance environment where formal rights exist but are not systematically operationalised.

4.1 | Transparency

Zimbabwe’s legal framework formally [recognises a right of access to information](#), but implementation in 2025 remained inconsistent, weakly enforced, and highly discretionary. Section 62 of the Constitution guarantees access to information held by the State and—importantly—by any person or entity insofar as the information is required in the interests of public accountability, thereby extending the right beyond government to private bodies performing public functions. This constitutional guarantee is operationalised through the [Freedom of Information Act](#) [Chapter 10:33] (FIA). On paper, the framework provides a rights-based entitlement applicable across national and sub-national public institutions; in practice, however, the limited proactive publication of information, broad exemptions, and ineffective enforcement mechanisms meant that transparency was experienced unevenly and often depended on institutional goodwill rather than legal obligation.

With respect to proactive publication and digital accessibility, the FIA contains enabling provisions but lacks effective implementation levers. Section 4 establishes a positive duty to create, keep, organise and maintain information in the interests of public accountability or the exercise or protection of a right—an essential foundation for transparency because access is

meaningless where records are incomplete or poorly managed. Section 5 requires every public entity, public commercial entity and holder of a statutory office to adopt a written information disclosure policy and to disclose information in the public interest or where required for rights protection. In principle, this should translate into routine publication—ideally via online platforms—of organisational structures, budgets, procurement information and policy implementation reports. Civil society evidence from 2025, however, indicates that many ministries, local authorities and parastatals failed to publish such information proactively, including budget documents, expenditure statements and procurement data. The central weakness is not the absence of legal language but the absence of practical enforcement: without clear sanctions, oversight and compliance monitoring, the duty to publish remains largely aspirational.

The framework also speaks—though imperfectly—to the requirement that public institutions publish decision-making information (such as draft laws, policies, budgets and audit reports) in a timely and accessible format. While the spirit of Sections 4 and 5 supports disclosure of core governance documents, practice in 2025 did not reflect a systematic culture of timely publication. Information central to public accountability—particularly around procurement, public spending, and implementation performance—was frequently unavailable, incomplete, or released too late to meaningfully enable public participation or scrutiny. This gap was most pronounced at the provincial and local level, notwithstanding the fact that the FIA applies to local authorities and provincial administrations as “public bodies”. CSOs reported that councils and district offices often lacked designated information officers, maintained weak record systems, and provided limited public-facing access points—especially online—creating a disconnect between national legal standards and local implementation capacity.

On procedures for access requests, the FIA provides relatively clear formal pathways but these were not reliably honoured. Section 7 permits any person to submit a written request, and Section 8 requires a response within 21 days, with Section 9 allowing limited extensions. In 2025, CSOs reported routine breaches of these timelines: requests were left unanswered or met with generic acknowledgements that did not constitute substantive decisions. Where extensions were invoked, they were often insufficiently justified, reducing predictability and weakening the practical value of the time-bound rights the law purports to guarantee. Moreover, while the procedure is “clear” in a legal sense, it is not always accessible in practice—particularly for rural and grassroots groups facing connectivity constraints, limited awareness of the Act’s mechanisms, and the administrative costs associated with repeated follow-ups.

The scope and application of restrictions and exemptions further undermine transparency. While Section 6 excludes specified categories of information (including Cabinet deliberations and information protected in victim-friendly courts), the FIA also contains refusal grounds that are framed broadly (notably within Sections 20–31), including where disclosure is said to prejudice national security, defence, or the economic interests of the State. Because such terms are not tightly defined, they permit expansive interpretation. CSOs reported that requests linked to procurement, climate and drought financing, debt-related negotiations, and security-sector governance were commonly refused without detailed, case-specific harm assessments or adequate engagement with the public interest considerations contemplated in the Act. In effect, exemptions that should be narrowly construed risk operating as default grounds for non-disclosure.

Finally, while the FIA provides for protections against unjustified denial, the accountability architecture remained weak in 2025. The Act provides an appeal route to the Zimbabwe Media Commission (Section 35). However, these remedies were often of limited practical utility due

to delays, procedural burden and the resource constraints faced by many CSOs. Critically, there is little evidence that the penalty provisions for obstruction and non-compliance were applied against public officials in 2025. The absence of credible sanctions reduces incentives for compliance and entrenches a culture in which access to information is treated as optional rather than mandatory.

These transparency deficits affected civil society unevenly. Larger, urban-based organisations with legal expertise and institutional relationships were better positioned to navigate request procedures, persist with follow-ups and pursue appeals. By contrast, rural, women-led, grassroots and minority-focused organisations experienced the right largely as a formal promise rather than a routinely enforceable entitlement. Notwithstanding these systemic constraints, there were isolated instances of constructive engagement—for example, structured collaboration between certain CSOs and independent commissions, and periodic engagement with parliamentary portfolio committees—demonstrating that transparency is possible where institutional incentives align. Nonetheless, such examples remained exceptions rather than evidence of a consistently functioning access-to-information system.

Overall, Zimbabwe's legal framework recognises the right to information and establishes duties of record-keeping, proactive disclosure and time-bound responses. Yet in 2025, weak proactive publication (including on digital platforms), limited release of core decision-making information, routine breaches of response timelines, broad and inconsistently justified exemptions, and ineffective sanctions combined to render transparency fragmented and uneven.

4.2 | Participation

Zimbabwe's constitutional framework formally recognises public participation as an essential element of democratic governance. Section 13(2) of the Constitution obliges the State to involve people in the formulation and implementation of development plans, while Section 141 requires Parliament to facilitate public involvement in its legislative and oversight functions. However, despite these commitments, civil society participation in policymaking during 2025 remained largely discretionary, inconsistently applied, and insufficiently institutionalised across national, provincial, and local levels of government.

Extent and quality of CSO consultation. In practice, consultation with civil society actors in 2025 was neither systematic nor guaranteed at the stages where it would meaningfully influence policy. While certain parliamentary committees and constitutional commissions engaged CSOs on specific matters—such as ZimRights' [Memoranda of Understanding](#) with the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission and collaborative work with the Zimbabwe Gender Commission—these engagements were relationship-dependent rather than founded on enforceable participatory rights. Crucially, the majority of ministries lacked structured procedures requiring consultation during agenda-setting, drafting, or initial decision-making stages. As a result, CS actors were often consulted, if at all, after key policy positions had already been formed, reducing participation to a formality rather than a substantive influence on outcomes.

The legislative process surrounding the PVO Amendment Act, 2025 [illustrates this pattern](#). Although government reported conducting stakeholder consultations, CSOs noted that their submissions—particularly regarding ministerial discretion, registration standards, and criminal sanctions—had little impact on the final text. There were no published consultation reports, response matrices, or explanations of how input was considered. This absence of

transparency suggested that participation was largely procedural, reinforcing perceptions of tokenism and limiting trust in consultative processes.

Non-discrimination and equality of participation. Evidence from the 2025 assessment indicated that participation opportunities were not uniformly accessible. Organisations perceived as government-critical, particularly those working on governance, anti-corruption, or human rights, faced higher barriers to participation than service-delivery or government-aligned entities. Informal gatekeeping practices, reliance on outdated contact lists, and selective invitation processes disproportionately affected grassroots, women-led, rural, Indigenous, and minority-focused organisations, undermining equality of participation. Such practices effectively created a two-tier participatory environment in which access was mediated by institutional proximity, perceived loyalty, or resource capacity rather than expertise or constituency relevance.

Timing and adequacy of consultation opportunities. CSOs consistently reported insufficient notice periods and compressed timelines for providing input. The [African Peer Review Mechanism](#) (APRM) consultations in November 2025, though commendable in their intention, exemplified these constraints: invitations were issued on short notice, several were sent to inactive email addresses, and no transparent criteria guided participant selection. With consultations largely conducted in person and with limited hybrid options, many rural and under-resourced groups were unable to attend. Where digital options existed, connectivity challenges and inadequate facilitation further limited meaningful engagement. As a result, civil society contributions were often provided reactively rather than proactively, undermining their ability to shape policy trajectories at formative stages.

Modalities and accessibility of participation. Participation formats in 2025 consisted predominantly of in-person meetings convened in urban centres, with limited accessible online mechanisms for wider participation. Parliament and some commissions offered hybrid platforms, but such opportunities were inconsistent and poorly publicised. For many actors—particularly youth, disability-focused groups, or those in remote districts—participation remained constrained by financial, logistical, and technological barriers. Where online engagements were possible, CSOs cited concerns regarding poor internet connectivity, digital exclusion, and limited support for marginalised participants.

Despite these systemic gaps, isolated examples of constructive engagement demonstrated the potential for meaningful participation. ZimRights’ successful [petition to Parliament](#) advocating the repeal of [the Vagrancy Act](#), and subsequent engagements with the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Defence, Home Affairs and Security Services, revealed that sustained, organised civil society advocacy could yield policy influence. However, such examples reflected long-term advocacy efforts rather than evidence of a predictable, institutionalised participatory framework.

Overall, Zimbabwe’s participatory landscape remained formally recognised but weakly operationalised. Consultation processes lacked binding standards, predictable timelines, clear selection criteria, and mechanisms ensuring equality of access. Participation was often selective and episodic, more symbolic than substantive, and heavily skewed toward well-resourced, urban CSOs with existing institutional relationships. Consequently, civil society actors had limited opportunities to influence decision-making meaningfully, particularly at early, agenda-setting stages.

4.3 | Accountability

In 2025, Zimbabwe's accountability framework remained constitutionally recognised but substantively weak, with limited mechanisms for civil society actors to track how their input was incorporated into decision-making or to hold state institutions to account when it was ignored. Although the Constitution guarantees the right to lawful, reasonable, and procedurally fair administrative conduct under [Section 68](#), including written reasons and access to judicial review, the practical value of these safeguards was significantly undermined by expansive executive discretion, inadequate feedback mechanisms, and weak enforcement by oversight institutions.

Government feedback on CSO input remained minimal and inconsistent. Across key policy processes, including the development and passage of the PVO Amendment Act, 2025, CSOs reported that although consultations were undertaken, no public documentation was provided explaining how submissions had been evaluated or why recommendations—particularly those challenging ministerial discretion and sanctioning powers—were ultimately rejected. There were no response matrices, consultation reports, or ministerial statements detailing the rationale for disregarding civil society concerns. This absence of formal feedback undermined the transparency of the decision-making process and impeded CSOs' ability to assess or contest policy shifts.

Where government did not adopt CSO input, there were no clear explanations or accessible avenues for follow-up. While Section 14 of the PVO Amendment Act provides for appeals against administrative decisions, the lack of automatic suspensive effect meant that adverse decisions could take effect before appeals were concluded, limiting the utility of the mechanism. Judicial review, though constitutionally protected, remained prohibitively expensive and slow, making it largely inaccessible to smaller or rural CSOs. Parliamentary petition processes likewise suffered from weak follow-up: CSOs frequently received no formal communication on how their submissions were considered, while some petitions were [rejected over format impropriety](#). This lack of structured feedback loops diminished trust and rendered accountability processes symbolic rather than corrective.

Opportunities for CSOs to follow up on the use of their input were limited. Ministries seldom created formal spaces for post-consultation engagement, and there were no statutory duties requiring public bodies to report on how CSO input influenced policies or regulations. Parliament's constitutional obligation under Section 141 to involve the public in legislative processes was inconsistently operationalised: although petitions and committee submissions were accepted, there were no mandated timelines or reporting duties requiring Parliament to explain how input was integrated. The absence of institutionalised follow-up mechanisms left CSOs without meaningful channels to hold decision makers accountable for disregarding recommendations.

Spaces for monitoring government adherence to commitments were similarly weak. Constitutional commissions—most notably the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC)—possessed investigative mandates, but their findings were non-binding and lacked enforcement guarantees. For example, following the [March 2025 protest-related violations](#) and the SAPES Trust bombing, the ZHRC issued reports and [public statements](#) condemning abuses; however, there was no evidence of government action on these recommendations, nor did authorities publish formal responses explaining their position. While CSOs continued to produce shadow reports, scorecards, and monitoring briefs, these often did not result in official acknowledgement or policy adjustment due to the absence of statutory obligations requiring state bodies to respond.

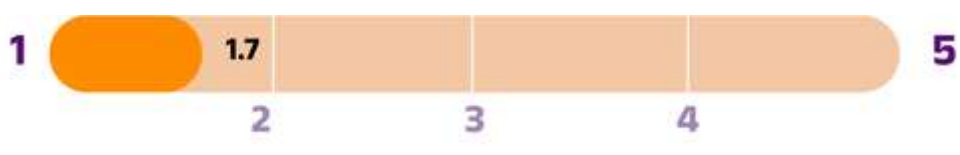
The accountability deficits disproportionately affected marginalised and under-resourced CSOs, including rural, women-led, LGBTQ+ and disability-focused organisations. These groups faced structural barriers to pursuing remedies, including fear of retaliation, lack of legal representation, and limited awareness of complaint mechanisms. Even where statutory bodies were formally accessible, panellists reported that marginalised groups found these institutions distant, slow to act, and lacking in protective measures for complainants.

Overall, while Zimbabwe's legal framework contains provisions for administrative fairness and accountability, their practical implementation in 2025 remained fragmented and largely ineffective. The absence of systematic feedback on civil society input, limited transparency around governmental decision-making, weak follow-up mechanisms, and a lack of meaningful remedies for wrongdoing resulted in accountability that was selective, uneven, and insufficiently responsive.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society

Score:



In 2025, CSOs in Zimbabwe endured a civic landscape in which legal rights exist but are undermined by political rhetoric, structural inequalities, and limited public understanding of civic processes. Public officials and state-controlled media frequently portrayed civil society—particularly rights-based and governance actors—as partisan or foreign-aligned, shaping societal mistrust and constraining constructive, evidence-based dialogue. While citizens continued to value humanitarian and service-delivery organisations, fear of surveillance, selective enforcement of public order laws, and weak feedback mechanisms eroded confidence in their ability to influence political decisions. Persistent deficits in civic education further limited awareness of constitutional rights and reinforced misinformation, especially in rural communities. Marginalised groups—including women, LGBTQI+ persons, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and rural populations—faced compounded social, economic, and legal barriers to participation. Collectively, these dynamics produced a civic environment that remained formally open yet substantively exclusionary, with limited space for diverse civic voices to engage meaningfully in public life.

5.1 | Public Discourse and Constructive Dialogue on Civil Society

Public discourse on civil society in Zimbabwe during 2025 was shaped by a persistent pattern of official hostility, securitised narratives, and selective engagement, resulting in an environment in which civil society actors—particularly those engaged in rights-based, governance, and accountability work—were framed as adversarial rather than as legitimate democratic stakeholders. Senior political leaders have frequently characterised CSOs as destabilising forces or [extensions of foreign interests](#), signalling to the public that civil society's role was peripheral at best and threatening at worst. This framing profoundly influenced the tone and substance of political dialogue, narrowing the scope for evidence-based engagement.

Throughout 2025, high-level government rhetoric reinforced this delegitimising narrative. The 2024 [statements by the Minister of Information](#) portraying CSOs as “evil-minded” and intent on disorder were repeatedly amplified by state-owned media in 2025, entrenching suspicion and positioning civic actors as security risks rather than contributors to national development. Similar sentiments from the Minister of Justice in 2025 depicted governance-oriented organisations as [agents of disinformation](#). This escalated on 18 August 2025, when the Justice Minister [publicly warned](#) administrators of WhatsApp groups against allowing the circulation of corruption allegations involving public officials and warning that group administrators could face arrest and detention for permitting the sharing of “unverified” content. These public framings directly shaped societal perceptions, making constructive engagement politically costly and socially stigmatised.

Media coverage played a pivotal role in reinforcing these narratives. State-controlled outlets routinely portrayed CSOs as partisan, externally funded, or intent on regime change, providing limited space for contextualised reporting or CSO rebuttal. Independent media outlets attempting to challenge these narratives faced intimidation or administrative pressure, constraining pluralism. Meanwhile, on social media platforms, disinformation campaigns—including doctored videos and fabricated allegations targeting groups such as ZimRights—circulated widely, contributing to public distrust and exposing CSO staff to harassment. The absence of proactive state measures to counter disinformation targeting civil society signalled tacit institutional acceptance of hostile narratives.

The quality of dialogue between state actors and civil society was consequently diminished. Respectful, inclusive, and evidence-informed engagement was rare; CSO research, monitoring data, or policy proposals seldom found space within national debates. Rights-based and accountability-focused organisations were particularly excluded, with their work framed as political dissent. In contrast, humanitarian and service-delivery organisations occasionally received positive acknowledgment, but such recognition did not extend to their policy analysis or advocacy contributions, revealing a hierarchised approach to civil society engagement.

Opportunities for meaningful dialogue were further constrained by the absence of structured, institutionalised forums for government–civil society engagement. No senior officials publicly affirmed the democratic value of civil society oversight or advocacy, and there were no formal platforms where CSOs could consistently present evidence-based solutions or track government uptake of their input. Engagement that did occur—primarily with Parliament or independent commissions—was relationship-driven, selective, and often technocratic rather than public-facing. While isolated interactions, such as ZimRights’ advocacy on the repeal of the Vagrancy Act, demonstrated that impact was possible, these were exceptions grounded in long-term persistence rather than reflective of a supportive public discourse environment.

Hostile discourses disproportionately affected marginalised groups, including women’s rights advocates, LGBTQI+ organisations, minority-focused CSOs, and rural actors. These groups faced heightened stigma, limited access to independent media, and greater exposure to harassment, undermining their ability to participate safely in public debate or counter negative narratives.

In sum, public discourse in 2025 was broadly disabling for civil society. Government framing depicted CS actors as threats; media narratives amplified distrust; social media facilitated harassment and disinformation; and structured platforms for constructive, evidence-based dialogue were largely absent. While isolated instances of engagement existed, they were

overshadowed by an overarching environment that discouraged pluralistic debate and marginalised civic voices.

5.2 | Perception of Civil Society and Civic Engagement

Public perceptions of civil society in Zimbabwe during 2025 were deeply uneven and shaped by a combination of political narratives, community experience, and disparities in civic education. While citizens generally expressed confidence in civil society actors engaged in humanitarian and service-delivery roles, trust in advocacy-oriented, governance, and rights-based organisations continued to decline. This divergence reflected broader questions about whether civil society is viewed as a positive contributor to national development or as a politically contentious actor.

Citizen trust in civil society remained stratified. Community members consistently expressed strong appreciation for organisations addressing tangible socio-economic needs—particularly in areas of health care, livelihoods, and social support. Findings from the SIVIO Institute’s [“Citizens’ Perceptions and Expectations in Zimbabwe” \(October 2024\)](#), trends that continued into 2025, showed that while most respondents acknowledged CSOs’ value in service delivery, significantly fewer trusted those focused on human rights or governance. This trust deficit was more pronounced in rural districts, where state-controlled media narratives portraying advocacy CSOs as politically aligned or externally driven remained influential.

Citizens’ belief in their ability to influence political decisions or participate meaningfully in civic processes was limited. Urban citizens—particularly youth—demonstrated higher levels of engagement in digital activism, community campaigns, and episodic protests. However, participation was constrained by police surveillance, selective enforcement of public order laws, and the risk of reprisals, leading to cautious and intermittent involvement rather than sustained engagement. In rural communities, fear of surveillance and stigmatisation discouraged participation in meetings convened by advocacy CSOs, with many residents concerned that attendance could be interpreted as political affiliation. As a result, civic participation increasingly occurred informally and at low visibility, especially among women, LGBTQI+ persons, ethnic minorities, and disability-focused groups already facing heightened stigma.

Civic education remained a major structural barrier to positive perceptions of civil society. Although Zimbabwe’s curriculum formally incorporates civic concepts through the [Heritage-Based Competence Curriculum](#), implementation in 2025 was hindered by shortages of trained teachers, limited teaching resources, and political sensitivities surrounding governance-related topics. Stakeholder reports indicated that students in many districts received only minimal instruction on constitutional rights, democratic participation, or the role of civil society. Outside formal schooling, community-based civic education was similarly uneven, with rural and marginalised communities having little access to platforms offering accurate and independent information. As a result, many citizens lacked a clear understanding of civil society’s constitutional and democratic functions, making them more susceptible to state-driven narratives that portrayed advocacy organisations as subversive.

The combined effect of limited civic education, political messaging, and enforcement practices contributed to a widespread perception that civic engagement—particularly in connection with governance or rights-based issues—was both risky and unlikely to influence decision-making. Citizens frequently expressed scepticism about whether participation in consultations or community initiatives would lead to tangible outcomes, citing the absence of feedback from

authorities, weak participatory mechanisms, and a pattern of policy decisions that did not reflect public input.

In summary, public perceptions of civil society and civic engagement in 2025 were shaped less by constitutional guarantees and more by political narratives, uneven access to information, and widespread fear of reprisals. While pockets of active engagement persisted—especially among urban youth and community organisers—the broader environment discouraged open participation and contributed to mistrust of advocacy-oriented CSOs. As a result, civic engagement remained legally protected in theory but socially constrained in practice, limiting citizens' confidence in both the legitimacy of civil society and their own ability to participate meaningfully in public life.

5.3 | Civic Equality and Inclusion

Although Zimbabwe's Constitution formally guarantees equality and non-discrimination under Section 56, and protects freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and political participation under Sections 58–60 and 67, these rights did not translate into equal opportunities for civic engagement in 2025. Legal protections existed in principle, but weak enforcement, political interference, and socio-economic inequalities significantly undermined the ability of citizens—especially marginalised groups—to participate meaningfully in civic processes.

Legal and regulatory systems did not ensure equal civic participation. The [enactment of the PVO Amendment Act](#) on 11 April 2025 further concentrated executive power, enabling deregistration, restrictive oversight, and criminal sanctions against CSOs. These measures disproportionately affected advocacy groups and deepened civic inequalities. Legal challenges mounted by networks such as the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition argued that the Act conflicted with constitutional guarantees of association (Sections 58, 67), equality (Section 56), and fair hearing (Section 69(3)). However, the mere existence of judicial avenues did not offset the inhibiting effects of executive discretion and the risk of punitive enforcement. The legal landscape therefore provided formal rights but insufficient practical safeguards for marginalised civic actors.

Social and economic barriers for under-represented groups remained significant. Marginalised communities—including LGBTQI+ persons, rural women, persons with disabilities, and minority ethnic groups—[faced compounded exclusion](#). LGBTQI+ organisations, in particular, [encountered both legal vulnerability](#) (due to the absence of sexual orientation and gender identity protections under Section 56 of the Constitution) and pervasive stigma, discouraging open civic engagement. Women's rights organisations reported intimidation by local political actors during civic education initiatives, while [persons with disabilities in rural districts](#) faced logistical, communication, and infrastructural barriers that limited participation. These experiences reflected broader patterns of social intolerance, where diversity was not fully respected and minority advocacy was often stigmatised or perceived as politically subversive.

Economic inequalities further constrained participation. Urban-based CSOs, with better access to digital infrastructure, information, and policy engagement platforms, were better positioned to participate in civic processes. Rural CSOs struggled with limited connectivity, poverty-related constraints, weaker access to independent media, and stronger influence of state-aligned narratives, making it more difficult to mobilise communities or counter misinformation. Intersectional vulnerabilities—such as being a rural woman with a disability—resulted in profound exclusion, as overlapping disadvantages reduced access to education, mobility, civic information, and legal remedies.

Restrictive enforcement practices deepened inequality. [Surveillance, harassment](#), and selective enforcement of public order laws, particularly the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA), created a climate of fear. Monitoring by organisations such as the Zimbabwe Peace Project [documented widespread violations](#), including disruptions of meetings, arbitrary arrests, and threats against organisers. A clear example occurred in Hwange in August 2025, when police disrupted a ZimRights community meeting, reinforcing community suspicion and deterring future participation. Such incidents demonstrated how the weak enforcement of equality and participation guarantees translated into exclusion in practice.

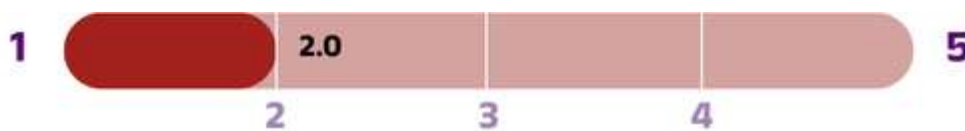
Institutional mechanisms intended to promote inclusion remained underpowered. Bodies such as the Zimbabwe Gender Commission and the National Disability Board lacked sufficient authority, resources, or political backing to address violations effectively. While these institutions engaged in advocacy and issued recommendations, their influence was limited in the face of an increasingly restrictive civic environment. Civil society efforts to promote inclusion, though persistent, were constrained by legal uncertainty and security risks.

In sum, Zimbabwe's civic environment in 2025 provided formal equality in law but weak equality in practice. Legal restrictions, socio-economic disparities, entrenched stigma, and selective enforcement combined to create uneven opportunities for participation, disproportionately affecting marginalised and minority-serving groups. Social tolerance remained limited, and respect for diversity was undermined by political rhetoric and structural inequities. Civic inclusion therefore remained constrained.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Score:



The state of digital civic space in Zimbabwe during 2025, was characterised an environment that is formally connected yet substantively restrictive for civil society. While the country avoided nationwide internet shutdowns, digital participation was curtailed by pervasive surveillance, selective enforcement of cyber-laws, and targeted online intimidation. CSOs faced recurrent cyberattacks, weak data-protection safeguards, and limited avenues for redress, leaving digital security and privacy highly vulnerable. Disinformation campaigns—often linked to politically aligned actors—further distorted online discourse and undermined trust in civic actors. Digital accessibility remained structurally uneven: internet penetration, affordability, and service quality were significantly lower in rural areas, compounded by unreliable electricity and high data costs. ICT and AI-related skills remained limited across both the general population and CSO workforce, restricting effective engagement with emerging technologies. Collectively, these constraints produced a digital environment where rights were recognised in law but difficult to exercise in practice, reinforcing broader inequalities in civic space.

6.1 | Digital Rights and Freedoms

Zimbabwe's digital environment in 2025 remained formally open but substantively restrictive, shaped by pervasive surveillance, targeted repression, and uneven enforcement of cyber-laws. While no nationwide internet shutdowns were imposed during the period—a departure from past electoral cycles when connectivity disruptions were used during politically sensitive moments—restrictions instead manifested through targeted monitoring, intimidation, arrests, and digital disinformation. This shift from blunt shutdowns to more sophisticated forms of “law-and-surveillance-based repression” mirrored regional trends and proved equally effective in curbing civil society's online participation.

Although the absence of nationwide shutdowns reduced the economic and informational harm associated with blanket disconnections, CSOs reported that online mobilisation remained highly constrained. Rather than disabling the internet outright, authorities [intensified real-time monitoring](#) of WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and X (formerly Twitter), especially during

periods of political contestation—most notably in the aftermath of [the 31 March 2025 protests](#). The timing of digital repression closely tracked politically sensitive events, replacing shutdowns with more targeted forms of interference that had a chilling effect on activism and information sharing.

The legal framework governing internet freedoms and digital rights in Zimbabwe consists principally of the [Cyber and Data Protection Act \[Chapter 12:07\]](#), [Postal and Telecommunications Act \[Chapter 12:05\]](#), the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act [Chapter 9:23], and the [Interception of Communications Act](#), which together regulate data protection, telecommunications oversight, criminal liability, and state surveillance. Section 5 of the Cyber and Data Protection Act designates the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority established under Section 5 as the Data Protection Authority appointed by the President, enabling broad surveillance without explicit judicial oversight.

Sections 3, 4, 4A, and 4B of the Interception of Communications Act collectively narrow the digital freedoms of civil society actors by enabling extensive state control over communication surveillance. Section 3, while requiring consent or a warrant for interception, grants wide latitude for state-authorised monitoring and criminalises any independent or unauthorised interception, limiting the ability of civil society to investigate digital interference. Section 4 centralises interception powers within a monitoring centre located in the Office of the President, raising concerns about executive dominance and reduced independence in oversight. Section 4A further broadens the centre's role by making it the sole facility for authorised interceptions and mandating that it advise and implement government cyber-security policy, which risks conflating security functions with political interests. Meanwhile, Section 4B establishes a Cybersecurity Committee heavily composed of security-sector representatives, weakening prospects for impartial oversight. Together, these provisions heighten the risk of disproportionate or politically motivated surveillance, thereby discouraging free expression, advocacy, and digital organising within civil society.

Government censorship in 2025 was characterised not by formal takedown orders but by monitoring, intimidation, and selective arrests. Digital rights monitors documented numerous instances of activists and journalists being summoned, questioned, or charged for online posts critical of state authorities. Enforcement was often triggered by state surveillance of WhatsApp groups or reports from ruling-party-aligned online actors, known as [Varakashi](#), who conducted coordinated harassment, doxxing, and smear campaigns. These campaigns disproportionately targeted women human rights defenders and LGBTQI+ activists, combining gendered abuse with political vilification. The surveillance was both comprehensive—monitoring multiple platforms—and targeted at governance and rights-based CSOs.

Social media companies such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X played an ambiguous role. While they remained accessible and did not implement government-mandated nationwide blocks, they complied with content removal or account restriction requests related to “security” or “coordinated inauthentic behaviour,” often without transparency or effective appeal mechanisms. This aligned unevenly with government priorities and left activists vulnerable to erroneous or politically motivated takedowns. The absence of meaningful platform accountability mechanisms further weakened digital civic space.

Several incidents in 2025 highlighted the risks to activists, journalists, and CSOs. Following the protests on 31 March 2025, multiple journalists and civil society organisers were detained under the Cyber and Data Protection Act for allegedly circulating “false information” online. A striking example occurred in April 2025, when ZimRights was falsely implicated in orchestrating protests through a manipulated video amplified by ruling-party-aligned accounts.

The resulting online vitriol and threats forced temporary office closures, suspended digital engagement, and created tangible security risks for staff. Similar patterns were documented against other governance-focused CSOs and independent journalists, whose online criticism triggered state and non-state reprisals.

Rights-based organisations, minority-serving CSOs, women-led groups, and LGBTQI+ activists experienced the most severe targeting, combining digital harassment with offline threats. Rural and grassroots organisations were further disadvantaged by the digital divide, which limited access to secure communication tools and increased exposure to misinformation and surveillance.

Digital rights in Zimbabwe during 2025 existed in form but were weak in practice. While the government avoided large-scale internet shutdowns, it relied on expansive cyber-laws, intensive surveillance, and digital harassment to constrain civic expression. The result was a digital environment that remained technically open yet substantively disabling, particularly for advocacy-oriented and marginalised civil society actors.

6.2 | Digital Security and Privacy

Digital security and privacy conditions for civil society actors in Zimbabwe in 2025 remained [very fragile](#), with persistent [evidence](#) of cyberattacks, surveillance, and coordinated online intimidation. These [threats](#) disproportionately affected organisations engaged in governance accountability, human rights documentation, election monitoring, and [LGBTQI+](#) advocacy. Reports from digital rights monitors and CSO incident logs recorded repeated attempts to infiltrate devices, compromise communications, and obtain sensitive data, undermining CSOs' operational security and the safety of their staff and beneficiaries.

Civil society actors' digital security and privacy are shaped ambivalently by Sections 164–164G of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act [Chapter 9:23], which offer certain protections while simultaneously creating risks for overreach. On the positive side, provisions addressing incitement to violence (s.164), threats (s.164A), cyber-bullying and harassment (s.164B), the non-consensual distribution of intimate images (s.164E), racist or xenophobic material (s.164F), and identity-related offences (s.164G) provide important safeguards for vulnerable individuals and help to curb genuine online harm. However, these protections are tempered by broad and sometimes vague offences—particularly those concerning “false” data messages intending to cause harm (s.164C)—which may be interpreted expansively and risk being used to constrain legitimate advocacy, critical reporting, or dissent. The severity of penalties, coupled with wide discretionary powers afforded to enforcement agencies, may exert a chilling effect on activists and human rights defenders, limiting the free exchange of information essential to civil society's role in democratic oversight. In practice, these powers are applied unevenly: state agencies frequently rely on them to arrest activists, whereas pro-government actors involved in coordinated disinformation, harassment, or manipulation of online content rarely face comparable enforcement.

Cyberattacks and infiltration attempts were recurrent and often politically timed. CSOs experienced phishing attacks targeting email and WhatsApp accounts, attempts to take over Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) profiles, malware sent through falsified meeting invitations, and unauthorised access to cloud-based repositories. Although direct attribution was difficult due to the opaque nature of surveillance practices in Zimbabwe, the timing and targeting of these incidents—frequently coinciding with advocacy campaigns, protests, or election-related reporting—suggested probable links to state actors or politically aligned groups. The pattern mirrored regional trends of “state-linked cyber intrusion against civic actors.” LGBTI

organisations and women human rights defenders were [particularly vulnerable](#), reporting [breaches](#) followed by [threats](#) that exploited the social sensitivity of their work.

Disinformation, intimidation, and coordinated manipulation of online discourse were widespread. Credible [documentation](#) indicated the involvement of government-linked social media accounts, political bots, and ruling-party-aligned online networks—commonly referred to as [Varakashi](#)—in spreading false allegations, doctored screenshots, and personalised attacks targeting CSOs. These campaigns sought to discredit organisations, delegitimise their work, incite harassment, and manipulate public opinion. They frequently followed or preceded cyberattacks, exacerbating reputational harm and heightening security risks. A notable example occurred in April 2025, when a fabricated video falsely linking ZimRights to protest coordination was circulated by coordinated accounts, prompting threats against staff, forced office closures, and suspension of digital programming. This case illustrated the tightly connected ecosystem of disinformation, cyberattacks, and offline intimidation.

Rights-based and governance-focused organisations [were targeted more frequently](#) than service-delivery groups. Rural, youth-led, minority-focused and women-led CSOs faced additional risks due to limited access to secure technology, low digital literacy, and weaker institutional cyber-defences. The digital divide exacerbated vulnerability: poor connectivity, reliance on personal devices, and absence of secure servers or ICT personnel left smaller organisations unable to withstand sophisticated cyber threats.

The combined effect of cyberattacks, surveillance, legal uncertainty, and reputational manipulation significantly weakened CSOs' ability to operate safely and effectively online. Many organisations reduced digital data collection, shifted sensitive communications offline, or avoided cloud storage due to fear of interception. Survivors of human rights abuses, whistle-blowers, and grassroots monitors became reluctant to report violations digitally, undermining documentation efforts. In the absence of independent oversight, impartial remedies, or donor-supported digital security capacity-building, the digital environment in 2025 remained formally regulated but practically insecure.

Overall, Zimbabwe's digital security landscape in 2025 was characterised by pervasive threats, weak legal protections, and active disinformation campaigns. Cyberattacks and online intimidation were frequent, targeted, and impactful, and existing laws offered little recourse or protection. Digital rights were therefore recognised in form but largely unenforceable in practice.

6.3 | Digital Accessibility

Digital [accessibility](#) in Zimbabwe in 2025 remained [constrained and uneven](#), with significant implications for civil society's ability to participate in online civic processes. Despite incremental improvements in national connectivity, the digital environment continued to fall short of international standards for affordability, reliability, and inclusive access. Internet penetration remained low—estimated at approximately 38.4 per cent, according to [DataReportal's Digital 2025: Zimbabwe](#)—placing the country below both global and [regional averages](#). This overall figure concealed sharp disparities: urban areas benefitted from [relatively stable](#) mobile broadband and denser infrastructure, while rural districts remained underserved due to sparse base-station coverage, unreliable backhaul links, frequent electricity outages, and prohibitive data costs. These structural limitations significantly hindered CSOs' capacity to access, produce, and disseminate online content, particularly for organisations operating outside major cities.

Affordability remained one of the most significant barriers. Mobile data prices in Zimbabwe ranked among the [least affordable](#) relative to income in Southern Africa, with many rural and low-income users spending over 10 per cent of monthly earnings on basic connectivity—far above the UN Broadband Commission’s [2 per cent affordability benchmark](#). This limited regular internet use among citizens and forced small CSOs to ration data, delay reporting, or rely on intermediaries in urban centres, thereby reducing their autonomy and slowing community-level responsiveness.

Government commitments to expand digital access yielded limited practical outcomes. While the [Presidential Internet Scheme](#) (announced in April 2025) aimed to accelerate last-mile connectivity, there was no measurable improvement in rural infrastructure by year-end. Implementation of the [National ICT Policy \(2022–2027\)](#)—notably provisions under [Pillar 2 \(Universal Access and Digital Inclusion\)](#) and gender-responsive access targets—remained slow, undermined by financing constraints, weak public–private coordination, and persistent national power shortages. Unreliable electricity supply further constrained CSOs and communities, causing repeated disruptions to digital programming, damaging equipment, and forcing organisations to revert to paper-based processes.

ICT and digital literacy also remained uneven. Although several digital skills initiatives—such as the Zimbabwe Digital Skills Development Programme (launched February 2025)—sought to enhance information and data literacy, uptake was limited by inadequate resources in rural schools, insufficient teacher training, and shortages of devices. Many CSO staff, particularly those in rural or grassroots organisations, lacked the technical proficiency required to interpret online information securely, use encrypted tools, or navigate digital platforms confidently. This skills gap heightened exposure to disinformation, phishing, and security threats, and reduced the ability of CSOs to engage fully in online advocacy, monitoring, and documentation.

Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, were unevenly integrated into the civic landscape. While national training programmes claimed to reach significant numbers of teachers and youth with introductory AI concepts, CSOs—especially smaller and marginalised groups—had limited access to advanced ICT infrastructure or training. Most lacked the skills and tools needed to adopt AI-supported data analysis, automated reporting systems, or digital security technologies. The AI literacy gap compounded existing digital inequalities and risked further marginalising organisations already operating with minimal technological capacity.

Digital inequalities disproportionately affected women, persons with disabilities, rural youth, and ethnic minority communities. Women were estimated to be 20–30 per cent less likely to own smartphones due to income constraints, social norms, and unpaid care responsibilities. Persons with disabilities faced inaccessible platforms and limited availability of assistive technologies. Minority-language groups struggled with English-dominant online content, further restricting meaningful engagement. These intersecting exclusions reinforced structural inequalities in access to civic information, participation in CSO programmes, and engagement in national dialogue.

Overall, while internet access in Zimbabwe formally expanded in 2025, meaningful digital inclusion remained limited by affordability constraints, infrastructural deficits, unreliable electricity, low ICT and AI literacy, and slow policy implementation. These barriers significantly restricted CSOs’ operational capacity and reinforced existing social and economic inequalities, leaving digital accessibility formally improving but substantively disabling for civic participation.

C) Recommendations

This Country Focus Report identifies persistent and interlinked constraints across all six pillars of the enabling environment for civil society in Zimbabwe—from restrictive laws and weak accountability mechanisms to digital insecurity, funding fragility, and limited inclusion. The following targeted recommendations respond directly to these challenges and outline priority reforms for key actors.

1. Recommendations to the Government of Zimbabwe

1.1 Protect Fundamental Freedoms and Human Rights Defenders

The Government should establish a national, statutory protection mechanism for human rights defenders, consistent with constitutional guarantees under Sections 56–61 and 68. Key elements should include:

- Clear referral pathways to legal aid, psychosocial support, and medical assistance;
- Rapid-response protocols for threats, arbitrary detention, online harassment, or office raids;
- Gender-sensitive, disability-inclusive measures prioritising rural, LGBTQ+, and minority defenders;
- Oversight by an independent body, such as the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC), to safeguard impartiality.

This responds directly to the pervasive fear, reprisals, and impunity documented across Sections 3–5.

1.2 Reform the Legal and Regulatory Framework Governing Civil Society

The Government should repeal or substantially amend restrictive provisions of the PVO Amendment Act, particularly those that:

- Authorise ministerial directives without judicial scrutiny;
- Enable deregistration, suspension, or asset freezing without clear appeal safeguards;
- Criminalise administrative non-compliance or unregistered activities.

Reforms must introduce due process guarantees, proportional sanctions, and automatic suspensive effect during appeals, aligning with Section 68 on administrative justice. This would mitigate selective enforcement and self-censorship repeatedly reported in 2025.

1.3 Institutionalise Meaningful Civil Society Participation

To overcome episodic and tokenistic consultation, the Government should:

- Establish statutory multi-stakeholder forums within central and local government structures;
- Publish consultation agendas, timelines, submissions, and outcomes;
- Provide written, publicly accessible explanations of how CSO input influenced decisions—or why it was not adopted.

These measures address the weak participatory standards evident in law-making, budget processes, and consultation on the PVO Amendment Act.

1.4 Safeguard Digital Rights and Privacy

To halt intrusive surveillance and digital intimidation, the Government should:

- Require judicial warrants for communications interception;
- Clarify vague “national security” definitions in the Cyber and Data Protection Act;
- Enforce remedies for unlawful monitoring, data misuse, and cyberattacks;
- Establish an independent data protection authority.

This is essential to counter the chilling effects, cyber intrusions, and disinformation described in Sections 6.1 and 6.2.

1.5 Expand Digital Infrastructure and Accessibility

To address structural barriers identified in Section 6.3, the Government should:

- Accelerate rural network expansion, fibre rollout, and electrification;
- Reduce data costs to align with the UN Broadband Commission’s 2% affordability benchmark;
- Implement inclusive digital literacy programmes targeting women, youth, minorities, and persons with disabilities.

2. Recommendations to the Donor and International Community

2.1 Establish Coordinated Rapid-Response and Protection Mechanisms

Given escalating risks to activists and HRDs, donors should support:

- District-level rapid response systems capable of mobilising within 24–48 hours;
- Emergency legal, medical, transport, and safe-house support;
- Trauma-informed, gender-responsive, and disability-inclusive services.

This addresses urgent security gaps across Sections 4–6.

2.2 Expand Flexible and Inclusive Funding Models

To counter funding fragility and inequalities identified in Section 3:

- Create pooled funds, micro-grants, and simplified reporting tailored to CBOs;

- Permit adaptive budgeting in response to inflation, digital attacks, or state interference;
- Offer compliance mentorship and digital-security support rather than penalising small CSOs.

This strengthens financial resilience and supports grassroots and minority-serving organisations.

2.3 Invest in Digital Safety, Infrastructure, and AI Literacy

Donors should:

- Fund digital security training prioritising high-risk CSOs;
- Provide secure communication tools, encrypted servers, and incident-response support;
- Support AI and data literacy training for CSOs to reduce digital exclusion and improve evidence-based advocacy.

3. Recommendations to Civil Society

3.1 Strengthen Community-Based Monitoring and Documentation

CSOs should:

- Train local monitors in safe, ethical, and verifiable documentation;
- Facilitate submissions to regional and international mechanisms (e.g., ACHPR, UN Special Procedures);
- Employ survivor-centred, disability-inclusive and gender-sensitive methods.

This addresses documentation gaps and increases accountability leverage.

3.2 Engage Proactively in Media and Public Discourse

To counter misinformation, hostile narratives, and declining public trust:

- Develop coordinated media strategies emphasising factual, accessible communication;
- Train journalists on civic space issues and rights-based frameworks;
- Amplify minority, rural, and youth perspectives to rebalance public discourse.

3.3 Enhance Digital Resilience and Technology Adoption

CSOs should:

- Adopt secure communication practices and routine digital-security audits;
- Invest in AI and data literacy for staff;
- Expand partnerships with tech-focused NGOs to improve online safety.

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 December 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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