India

Country Focus Report

2025

Credit: Nina Luong

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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

- Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms
- Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework
- Accessible and Sustainable Resources
- Open and Responsive State
- Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society
- Access to a Secure Digital Environment

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

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

Reporting period covered: Jan 2025 – November 2025

Brief Overview of the Country Context

The enabling environment for civil society in India is shaped by a complex blend of laws, policies, administrative practices, and prevailing social attitudes. In the period of 2024 to 2025, several developments have significantly influenced India's civic space.

The general elections were held from 19 April to 1 June 2024 in seven phases, which reaffirmed the ruling government's dominance and set the tone for the political climate that followed. The elections were accompanied by heightened political polarisation, restrictions on dissent, and increased pressure on activists, journalists, and community groups. Civil society organisations (CSOs) reported instances of surveillance, harassment, and stigmatisation, particularly those critical of government policies or engaged in rights-based advocacy. The post-election period reinforced a narrative of suspicion toward independent voices, narrowing the space for civic participation and dialogue.

The India–Pakistan conflict in May 2025, which followed the April 2025 Pahalgam terror attack in Jammu & Kashmir, further affected the situation for civil society. On 22 April 2025, Islamist militants from The Resistance Front (TRF), linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba, killed 26 civilians—mostly Hindu tourists—in Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam, Jammu & Kashmir. India responded on 6 and 7 May with Operation Sindoor: precision missile strikes on nine terror sites in Pakistan and PoJK, targeting Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba camps without hitting military assets. [The four-day confrontation, known as *Operation Sindoor,* marked a turning point in India's security posture](). It reinforced a climate of high-level vigilance, where CSOs working on peacebuilding, human rights, and cross-border solidarity faced intensified scrutiny of foreign funding and collaborations. Internet shutdowns and surveillance measures during this period further restricted civic participation and freedom of expression.

The series of tightening India's regulatory and legal environment continued in 2025. Laws such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) were applied against activists and NGOs, creating fear and uncertainty. Foreign Contribution Regulations Act (FCRA) restrictions intensified, though the Rural Development Trust's licence renewal in mid-2025 marked a rare exception. Meanwhile, tax reforms under the Finance Act in April 2025 eased compliance for smaller NGOs by extending 12AB validity to ten years, though dual 80G requirements remain burdensome. There was a shift in funding and civic participation. International support contracted due to stricter FCRA rules and geopolitical tensions, while domestic philanthropy and corporate social responsibility (CSR) contributions expanded. Youth-led initiatives and digital mobilisation brought new energy and

innovation to civic activism, even as official discourse continued to stigmatise CSOs, and misinformation campaigns undermined public trust. Restrictions on social media and periodic internet shutdowns further hindered participation, yet collaborations between CSOs and local government bodies — such as through the National Human Rights Commission's human rights camps in late 2025 — signalled cautious openings for dialogue and reform. Taken together, these developments illustrate India's civic space as one of constraint and resilience. Civil society continues to adapt in the face of political polarisation, regulatory hurdles, and digital restrictions, while cautiously exploring new avenues for collaboration and reform.
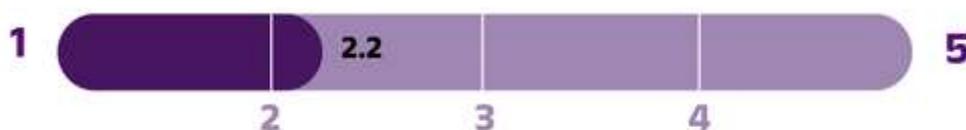
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B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

PRINCIPLE SCORE

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

Score: 2.2/5 [1]

1.1 I Freedom of Association

India's constitutional framework recognises the right of individuals to form associations and organisations, but in practice this freedom has been increasingly undermined by the use of restrictive laws such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) under the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). These laws, while apparently designed to protect national security and regulate foreign funding, have often been used against civil society groups, activists, and NGOs through arbitrary licence cancellations or suspensions under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) affecting over 19,000 organisations since 2014, bank account freezes and financial probes via PMLA, and prolonged pre-trial detentions without bail under UAPA's stringent provisions.

Environmental activists have faced police crackdowns during protests, and accountability advocates such as Right to Information (RTI) activists have been targeted, with tragic cases like the strangulation of Gujarat RTI activist Rasik Parmar, on 14 October 2025 underscoring the risks of engaging in transparency work. The cumulative effect of these measures is a chilling environment where individuals and groups hesitate to associate openly, fearing surveillance, harassment, or worse.

Right to Information (RTI) activists face assaults/murders often tied to local powerbrokers. Cumulative effects include asset seizures under PMLA, UAPA sedition tags blocking bail, and family targeting.

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

While the legal right to association exists on paper, its realization is severely compromised by arbitrary enforcement and stigmatisation, eroding trust in the state's willingness to protect civic freedoms.

1.2 I Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The right to peaceful assembly is another cornerstone of democratic participation, yet in India it has been systematically curtailed through both legal restrictions and excessive enforcement of restrictions. Police raids and arrests during protests are increasingly common, often carried out without clear charges or due process. Internet shutdowns have become a routine tactic during demonstrations, effectively silencing communication and preventing coordination among protesters. In April 2025, District Magistrates imposed bans on Waqf Act protests, limiting gatherings to fewer than four people— an arbitrary threshold that effectively disabled collective action. The use of deadly force, such as the killing of four protesters in Ladakh on 24 September 2025, illustrates the extreme measures taken to suppress dissent.

Even symbolic acts of assembly are criminalised, as seen on 12 October 2025, when ten students from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences were arrested for commemorating Professor GN Saibaba. These measures not only violate constitutional protections but also send a clear message that dissent will be met with intimidation, censorship, or violence. The result is a pervasive fear that discourages citizens from exercising their right to assemble, hollowing out one of the most fundamental avenues of democratic participation.

1.3 I Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression, while constitutionally guaranteed, is increasingly undermined by state practices that target journalists, students, and activists. On 2 May 2025, in Jammu and Kashmir region authorities have blocked social media accounts and VPNs, cutting off access to platforms that are vital for communication and dissent. Beyond these direct restrictions, the government has cultivated a narrative that stigmatises critics by labelling them "anti-national" or "foreign agents," delegitimising dissenting voices and fostering self-censorship. This narrative, combined with legal harassment and surveillance, has created an environment where individuals are reluctant to speak out, fearing reprisal.

Conclusion: The CIVICUS Monitor's classification of India's civic space as "Repressed" reflects this disabling reality: while legal protections exist, their arbitrary enforcement and the broader climate of fear severely undermine genuine freedom of expression. The silencing of voices—whether through censorship, intimidation, or narrative manipulation—weakens the democratic fabric by preventing open debate and accountability. For India's civic space to recover, civil society must continue demanding impartial investigations into security force actions and resist the use of laws like UAPA and FCRA against critics. Only by restoring trust in these fundamental freedoms can democratic participation flourish both offline and online.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

Score:

1   2   **2.7**   3   4   **5**
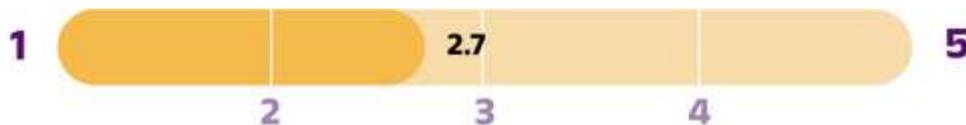
2.1 | Registration

Registering a non-profit in India is relatively straightforward if founders follow established legal frameworks such as the Societies Registration Act, 1860, the Indian Trusts Act, 1882, and the provisions for Section 8 companies under the Companies Act, 2013. Each of these instruments provides clear guidelines, yet confusion often arises not from gaps in law but from key differences between the registration processes, requirements, and implications of registering under the respective framework. This includes diverging provisions on governance structures, geographic scope, compliance and reporting burdens, and asset ownership. In addition, timelines for obtaining income-tax exemptions under guidelines and circulars issued by the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) under the Income-tax Act, 1961, and the relative ease of securing Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) registration through the Ministry of Home Affairs are frequently overlooked. As a result, many organisations make registration choices based on convenience or anecdotal advice rather than aligning with long-term objectives, underscoring the need to assess and advocate for a more enabling registration environment to bridge these mismatches.

For instance, groups aiming to operate nationally may register under state-level societies without realizing the limitations, while others underestimate the compliance intensity of Section 8 companies. Correcting such mismatches later is legally complex, resource-intensive, and time-consuming, especially for smaller Civil Society Organisations. Thus, while India's registration ecosystem is functional and accessible, the existence of several registration systems means that CSOs are required to be knowledgeable in each to identify the best registration process for them. As a result, knowledge gaps and procedural misunderstandings often prevent the registration environment from being fully enabling in practice.

2.2 | Operational Environment

Although most NGOs registered in India are legally empowered to operate and implement programmes on a nationwide basis irrespective of their chosen form (Society, Section 8 Company, or Public Charitable Trust), participants noted a number of practical constraints imposed on ground-level operations. In certain cases, resolving such impediments through appeals to higher authorities proves lengthy, politically sensitive, or effectively inaccessible, resulting in prolonged operational disruptions.

Central and state policies, especially those linked to the [Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA)](#), have a significant indirect impact on organisational autonomy and sustainability. Provisions related to [FCRA registration](#), [renewal delays](#), prior permission requirements, account designations, and heightened scrutiny based on programmatic focus or perceived ideological positioning often limit access to international funding. While the FCRA 2025 rules are designed to align with global anti-money laundering norms, addressing concerns about foreign influence in sensitive sectors like education and environment, the MHA is utilising these to target NGOs, often hindering NGOs' ability to access both international and domestic donor resources. This creates funding uncertainties that significantly affect programme sustainability despite the absence of an explicit nationwide operational ban.

While these provisions do not formally restrict objectives or governance structures, they materially influence strategic choices, scale of operations, and long-term planning. In several cases, organisations reported that contesting adverse administrative decisions through appeals or judicial remedies is time-consuming, resource-intensive, and politically sensitive, making such remedies effectively inaccessible for smaller or regionally based NGOs.

The consultation participants further noted that a range of socio-political factors, regional administrative practices, and evolving regulatory interpretations frequently impose practical constraints on ground-level operations. These constraints do not usually arise from explicit prohibitory laws but from the manner in which existing laws and executive powers are implemented. For example, permissions related to land use, public gatherings, or field activities are often subject to discretionary approvals under general administrative and public order laws, which can restrict operational freedom in practice.

Taken together, the legal framework provides moderate protection for organisational autonomy in terms of objectives and governance, but inconsistent implementation, discretionary administrative practices, and restrictive funding-related regulations constrain effective operational freedom.

2.3 | Protection from Interference

No arbitrary statutes exist in India that permit forcible dissolution of a lawfully registered non-profit entity; dissolution can only occur strictly in accordance with the organisation's own governing document (Memorandum, Rules & Regulations, or Trust Deed), by voluntary decision of its members, trustees or directors, or when regulatory authorities revoke critical operating licences such as FCRA licences or 12A/80G tax exemption in accordance with the procedure established under the respective laws. In the period of 2023-2024, [7,500 organisations](#) were denied their FCRA licences by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), according to the ministry`s annual report. Failure to comply with relevant provisions of the Income Tax Act, 1961 and the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 may trigger consequential effects, like dissolution of the organisation.

[At the same time, the law permits indirect forms of external intervention](#) through state authorities exercising statutory inspection, inquiry, and enforcement powers. Intensified scrutiny under the FCRA, including alleged violations of its ban on sub-granting and the cap of 20% on administrative expenses lead to the suspension or [cancellation of thousands of](#)

licences. Relevant provisions of the Income Tax Act, 1961, the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010, and state-level society or trust laws authorise inspections, audits, and inquiries into financial records, governance practices, and programmatic activities.

Consultation participants noted that the scope of inspections is often broad, the thresholds for initiating inquiries are not always clearly articulated, and multiple authorities may exercise overlapping jurisdiction, resulting in frequent or prolonged scrutiny. While organisations retain the statutory and constitutional right to seek reinstatement of permissions or to challenge adverse orders through appellate or judicial mechanisms, including appeals before Income Tax authorities, the FCRA Appellate Authority, High Courts, or the Supreme Court, these remedies are typically time-consuming and resource-intensive dissolution steps. In practice, repeated inspections, prolonged suspension of registrations, or extended delays in adjudication can disrupt operations even in the absence of a final dissolution order. Consequently, although dissolution remains a measure of last resort governed by due process rather than executive impulse, the regulatory inspection regime can function as a form of indirect third-party interference when applied inconsistently or without proportionality, as evidenced by high-profile cases like Amnesty International India's 2020 account freeze (halting operations entirely) and Greenpeace India's 2015 registration cancellation (severely curtailing activities), often on vague grounds of 'national interest' or minor reporting lapses.

Conclusion: While statutes prevent arbitrary dissolution, the regulatory framework's opacity—meaning unclear rules and complex procedures—and uneven enforcement make it tough for most non-profits to operate smoothly. This setup demands expert legal knowledge just for basic compliance, putting well-funded groups at an advantage while smaller, grassroots CSOs struggle with delays, audits, and funding hurdles. In simple terms, smaller community-based organisations often lack the lawyers or advisors needed to navigate FCRA renewals, tax filings, or regional approvals, leading to unintentional violations and shutdown risks despite following the law in spirit. True reforms—like streamlined online portals, clearer guidelines, and fewer overlapping checks—would make the system fairer and more accessible.

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PRINCIPLE SCORE

3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

Score:

1 — 2.5 — 5
2 — 3 — 4

3.1 | Accessibility

Civil society actors in India face persistent barriers to accessing financial resources, particularly from institutional donors, both domestic and international. While funding sources exist including government schemes, corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, and foreign contributions, they are limited in scope. Additionally, accessing foreign funding is often politically sensitive, as it requires FCRA licences which can be cancelled on grounds of "non-compliance with reporting requirements" or on grounds of activities deemed "political" or against "national interest" and "economic security". Access to foreign funding is further subject to heavy regulation, complex multilayered application procedures, and outright cancellations or denials due to FCRA norms. Most CSOs, especially those working in rights-based advocacy, smaller and grassroots organisations are highly dependent on a relatively limited pool of institutional donors.

Access to donor funding is hindered by opaque approval processes, limited outreach mechanisms, and insufficient capacity support for producing high-quality, evidence-based proposals and impact reports. Domestic philanthropic support and CSR contributions remain fragmented and small-scale, with limited presence outside urban centres, largely concentrated among larger, compliance-ready NGOs and frequently driven by corporate branding or geographic preferences, reinforcing dependence on a narrow set of donors and increasing financial vulnerability.

Financial institutions and chartered accountants of the organisations play a significant gatekeeping role, imposing enhanced due diligence requirements on NGOs, particularly those receiving foreign contributions or operating in sensitive thematic areas, resulting in account freezes, delays in transaction processing, frequent requests for additional documentation, and conservative interpretations of regulatory obligations under anti-money laundering and FCRA-

related norms and practices cited by consultation participants as recurring obstacles that disrupt cash flows and undermine programme continuity.

Government funding is often tied to short funding cycles and stringent utilisation and reporting norms, limiting organisational flexibility. Combined with the widespread lack of professional capacity, these financial and institutional barriers leave many promising initiatives under-resourced despite the presence of capital within the broader philanthropic space and the existence of tax incentives. Taken together, the existence of tax incentives and multiple funding sources is offset by regulatory opacity, institutional gatekeeping, capacity-related constraints, regional disparities, and political sensitivity that limit equitable and predictable access to resources, reflecting an average enabling context in which opportunities exist but are constrained by systemic and operational challenges.

3.2 | Effectiveness

Donor priorities, funding structures, and compliance demands restrict CSOs from using available resources effectively or strategically. A common constraint reported by CSOs is donor rigidity in thematic focus, preferred methodologies, geographic locations, and budgetary frameworks, particularly in competitive grant cycles, compelling CSOs to continually adapt or reframe their interventions to remain eligible for support.

CSR entities concentrate their contributions on [thematic areas and geographic locations](#) aligned with corporate priorities, regulatory compliance considerations, or brand visibility, often [excluding organisations](#) working outside those parameters. While larger, well-established NGOs may occasionally engage in consultative dialogue, most CSOs experience CSR relationships as transactional rather than collaborative, with negotiation space confined to minor operational adjustments and little flexibility on objectives, budgets, or indicators, effectively positioning CSOs as implementing partners rather than co-creators of programmes. Government authorities and agencies enforce their own limitations on permissible content coverage, programmatic priorities, and implementation approaches through top-down programme design, rigid guidelines, and tightly controlled norms, such as the [CSR Compliance Amendment Rules, 2025](#) which came into effect in July 2025. Under these Ministry of Corporate Affairs rules, opportunities for CSOs to influence priorities or adapt interventions based on local realities and ground realities are limited, and deviation from prescribed norms often risks funding withdrawal or administrative penalties.

Consultation participants noted that government funding relationships were described as the most restrictive, in terms of procedures and structures imposed. Funding relationships with international donors are characterised by hierarchical dynamics where CSOs serve merely as implementers for grants from international or institutional funders such as multilaterals like the World Bank/UNDP, bilateral agencies like USAID, or large foundations. With these donors setting priorities,) local organisations are relegated to an implementing role with little influence on strategic direction.

Collectively, these overlapping constraints, while individually justifiable from the funders' perspective, frequently reduce the overall autonomy and effectiveness of civil society organisations, forcing them to prioritise funder-driven agendas over ground realities and thereby diluting their potential impact, stifling innovation, and hindering programme agility, especially in rural, underserved, or sensitive contexts. Smaller CSOs face disproportionate administrative burdens such as detailed audits, reporting fatigue, and compliance documentation beyond their technical or staffing capacities. These compounding issues - hierarchical donor-CSO relationships, delayed disbursements where applicable, overregulation, and limited negotiating power - constitute a disabling environment, where autonomy exists in principle but is substantially curtailed in practice by the dominance of donor-defined priorities and the transactional nature of most funding relationships.

3.3 | Sustainability

Civil society organisations in India, particularly rights-based, advocacy-oriented, and grassroots ones, face systemic barriers to long-term financial sustainability due to heavy reliance on short-term, project-specific funding cycles and a narrow donor base. This donor dependency restricts investments in staff development, retention, capacity development, digital systems, and institutional infrastructure. A critical issue is the severe lack of unrestricted/core funding, creating persistent financial instability and a constant struggle to maintain operational continuity amid unpredictable funding flows and donor shifts. Regulatory restrictions under frameworks like FCRA limit flexibility in fund utilisation and increase the risk of suspension or delay of funds due to minor procedural lapses, forcing many CSOs to operate in a constant state of compliance management and diverting scarce resources away from mission-driven work toward administrative survival.

Self-reliance through income generation is constrained by Section 2(15) of the Income Tax Act, which revokes tax-exempt status if business receipts exceed 20% of total income, amid ambiguities in what constitutes "trade or commerce." While Indian law permits certain forms of fee-based services, social enterprise activities, and interest income provided these remain ancillary to charitable objectives, organisations face practical constraints in scaling such models including lack of start-up capital, donor resistance to hybrid financing approaches, and capacity gaps in business planning and market engagement. Macroeconomic instability and skill gaps in proposal writing further exacerbate funding volatility for smaller CSOs.

Conclusion: CSOs in India face significant challenges in accessing diverse and sustainable resources. Financial sustainability remains a key concern, particularly for grassroots organisations heavily reliant on a shrinking pool of institutional donors, both domestic and international. Domestic funding sources including government schemes and CSR programmes are limited, compliance-heavy, and unevenly distributed, while capacity-building opportunities are insufficient, particularly for smaller entities. This environment often undermines the resilience and independence of CSOs, especially those working on sensitive, rights-based, or marginalised issues.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

4. Open and Responsive State

Score:

1 — 2 — **2.6** — 3 — 4 — 5
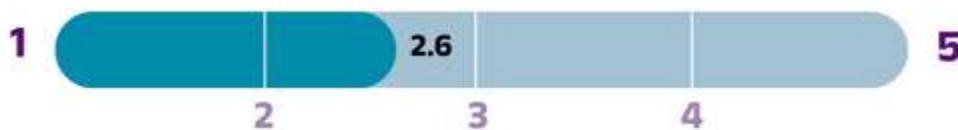
4.1 | Transparency

While a legal framework for transparency exists in India, its implementation is weak. India's Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, and other statutory provisions remain legally intact, yet their implementation continues to be marred by weak institutional capacity and frequent violations. Public access to government information is possible but often characterised by prolonged response times, bureaucratic inefficiencies, inconsistent implementation across departments and states, and arbitrary denials or partial disclosures. Key policy documents or budgets may be delayed or released in incomplete formats, and proactive disclosure, though present through online portals, is limited in scope and usability. Government officials may show some willingness to provide information but often lack the capacity or clear guidelines to do so effectively, compounded by frequent delays, appeals, and occasional misdirection to information other than what had been requested.

Access procedures for public-serving organisations to information on various government schemes, registrations, exemptions, and grievance redressal mechanisms are generally straightforward and well-defined under the relevant statutes and rules, but prolonged response times, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inconsistent interpretation of disclosure obligations significantly undermine their effectiveness. Although a significant portion of these processes have now transitioned to online portals, this digital shift often impedes access for grassroots and rural organisations that lack reliable internet connectivity, technical capacity, or dedicated personnel to navigate the systems. Grievance redressal and appellate mechanisms, while available under law and with strict sanctions for officers who unlawfully deny information, are slow-moving and resource-intensive, discouraging smaller CSOs from pursuing them. These trends demonstrate that although a legal framework for transparency exists, it is unevenly applied, subject to bureaucratic discretion, and marked by gaps between formal guarantees and operational realities. Taken together, India's legal framework for access to information is

relatively robust, but gaps between law and implementation significantly constrain its utility for civil society in practice, reflecting an average enabling environment where access exists in principle but remains inconsistent and unevenly realised.

4.2 | Participation

Opportunities for civil society participation in policy-making exist but are often selective and exclusionary. While some formal consultation mechanisms are in place such as various national committees and platforms under NITI Aayog and the Ministry of Finance that routinely consults selected CSOs during pre-budget deliberations, they are frequently ad hoc, non-transparent, irregular, selective, and convened only when the government finds it convenient, with state governments following their own ad-hoc processes. This prevents consistent and meaningful input from a diverse range of civil society actors. CSOs continue to contribute substantial technical expertise and ground-level field insights, almost always on a pro-bono basis, yet there is no formal obligation or guarantee that their recommendations will be adopted or even meaningfully reflected in final policy outcomes, resulting in a consultative process that is appreciative in rhetoric but limited and unpredictable in practice. Expert panellists shared that even where formal consultation spaces exist, practical access was highly constrained for smaller, grassroots, women-led, minority-led, or rights-based organisations, which face barriers that effectively sideline them from policy dialogue— particularly in sensitive domains. For example, national security and disaster management (e.g., COVID-19 relief) saw selective NITI Aayog engagements with larger CSOs, excluding grassroots voices despite court pushes for broader inclusion.

These developments show that civil society participation in India's policymaking processes remains narrow, controlled, and exclusionary. Formal engagement is either tokenistic or limited to government-aligned actors, while meaningful dialogue with independent CSOs occurs more often as a result of informal mobilisation and public pressure than through institutionalised, transparent mechanisms of consultation. Taken together, CSOs in India are invited by the government for participation and consultation strictly on a case-by-case basis rather than through any institutionalised, predictable mechanism.

While civil society engagement in national-level decision-making is thus limited, the National Human Rights Council has signalled renewed openness for dialogue. For example, in July 2025, it organised a human rights camp in Odisha, bringing together civil society groups, government officials, and affected communities. The event provided a platform to raise concerns related to displacement, tribal rights, and access to justice, signalling an opportunity for constructive dialogue in regions where civil society voices are often marginalised. Similar camps were organised in other states as well. The NHRC also sensitised key officials— including the Chief Secretary and Director General of Police—on issues like violence against women and children. Similarly, there has been openness to dialogue in specific fields of governance, such as climate policy. Additionally, engagement with CSOs differs significantly across the country. States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu have relatively structured mechanisms, such as regular pre-legislative consultations and local governance forums involving CSOs in planning, but consultations are ad-hoc and selective in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, excluding grassroots groups in favour of larger NGOs.

4.3 | Accountability

There is a near absence of meaningful mechanisms in India through which civil society can hold the state accountable for its commitments to engagement, transparency, or consultation. While consultations or engagement forums do occur sometimes, there is generally no follow-up, feedback, or appeal process to understand how CSO input is used or why it is rejected.

Accountability in practice tends to be distinctly [one-sided](#), with CSOs subjected to stringent scrutiny and penalties while government bodies infrequently address concerns, queries, or information requests raised by civil society in a timely or transparent manner. Regulatory accountability for CSOs is rigorously enforced through mandatory annual activity reporting, financial audits, and filings prescribed under various national and state laws, underpinned by a well-established practice of detailed compliance and disclosure requirements. Consultation participants observed that accountability mechanisms in the opposite direction, particularly government feedback to CSOs following their participation in consultations, advisory committees, or policy dialogues remain weak and inconsistent. In many cases, submissions are acknowledged formally, if at all, without any substantive response or explanation. These findings confirm that India lacks functional, responsive, and transparent mechanisms for ensuring accountability to civil society actors, and this absence of predictable feedback mechanisms significantly undermines trust in participatory processes, reflecting a severely constrained enabling environment for meaningful accountability in state–civil society engagement.

Conclusion: In India, the relationship between the state and civil society is characterised by cautious engagement and limited responsiveness. While the government acknowledges civil society's role in development and social welfare, particularly in areas like poverty alleviation and disaster response, consistent and meaningful consultation mechanisms remain underdeveloped. Political priorities, bureaucratic inertia, and regulatory concerns frequently restrict state institutions' openness to civil society input, leading to marginalisation or exclusion from formal decision-making processes for actors working on sensitive issues like human rights or governance reforms. Despite some positive developments in specific sectors, such as environmental and climate policy, overall engagement remains uneven across states and sectors, reflecting a challenging environment for open and responsive governance.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society

Score:

1	**2.0**			5
	2	3	4	
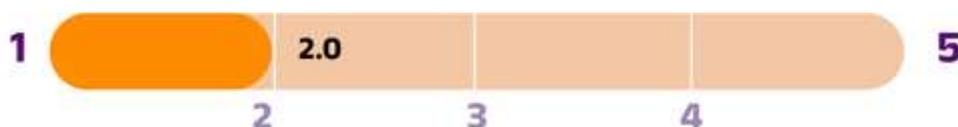
5.1 | Public Discourse and Constructive Dialogue on Civil Society

Public discourse surrounding civil society organisations (CSOs) in India is shaped by a complex interplay of historical legacies, political narratives, and media framing. While CSOs have played a pivotal role in promoting democratic values, human rights, and service delivery, their legitimacy is frequently contested in public and official narratives. There was near consensus among consultation participants that public discourse around civil society remains largely dismissive or hostile, particularly toward CSOs working on rights-based, advocacy-oriented, or critical issues.

Government actors and large sections of the media frequently use negative rhetoric, often branding NGOs as unaccountable, foreign-influenced, obstructive to development, or misaligned with national priorities to delegitimise dissenting voices. Such framing fosters public suspicion and erodes trust, portraying civil society as an extension of external agendas rather than indigenous democratic actors. Media narratives frequently rely on sensationalism and misinformation, leading a significant section of the public to view CSOs as obstacles to economic growth, accuse them of receiving excessive foreign or corporate funding, or even allege that NGOs serve as fronts for money-laundering or concealed business agendas. High-profile scandals, often amplified through selective reporting and orchestrated social-media campaigns, have further entrenched perceptions that CSOs lack transparency and financial accountability, even though the sector remains one of the most heavily regulated in the country, with stringent annual reporting, audit, and disclosure requirements.

Mainstream media remains overwhelmingly dominated by political and entertainment content, while the frequently complex, jargon-heavy language adopted by many CSOs makes it difficult to effectively communicate their contributions or spark broader public debate. Traditional public spaces for civic discourse are steadily shrinking, with the rise of digital technology

introducing new challenges as algorithms amplify polarised or commercial content, allowing serious societal concerns to surface only fleetingly during moments of crisis or viral outrage. Positive recognition of a few CSOs' contributions, particularly in areas such as disaster response, public service delivery, or community resilience, tends to be episodic and often limited to organisations closely aligned with government programmes, with government agencies occasionally acknowledging CSO contributions through awards, partnerships, or public commendations. These instances are neither systematic nor sustained and rarely translate into broader public dialogue about the sector's independence, diversity, or democratic role, as most substantive dialogues remain confined to academic institutions and specialised forums. These attitudes are amplified by politicised media coverage and editorial bias, creating an ecosystem where critical civic voices are delegitimised or ignored. This constrained public discourse environment characterised by limited platforms, uneven recognition, recurring anti-NGO framing, and limited or no opportunities to engage in constructive dialogue reflects a weak enabling environment where visibility exists but is shaped more by government authorities and media controlling narratives than open discourses.

5.2 | Perception of Civil Society and Civic Engagement

While public scepticism about CSOs persists, especially regarding foreign-funded or rights-focused organisations, there is also growing recognition of civil society's contributions to humanitarian, educational, and environmental causes. Public perception of civil society in India remains uneven and fragile, shaped by reduced trust in civil society as a result of negative framing of CSOs and funding scandals, declining spaces for collective action, and a broader sense of political and civic disempowerment among citizens. While CSOs continue to work closely with communities at the grassroots level, particularly on issues of welfare delivery, disaster response, livelihoods, and rights awareness, large sections of the population do not consistently perceive civil society as a channel through which they can meaningfully influence public decision-making or structural change, leading to limited direct engagement. There is no single comprehensive, up-to-date national report solely dedicated to public trust levels in CSOs or NGOs, unlike surveys for government or media trust (e.g., Edelman Trust Barometer).

Levels of civic engagement beyond immediate service delivery remain relatively low, with participation in CSO-led mobilisations, advocacy campaigns, or public consultations tending to be episodic and issue-specific, often triggered by crises rather than sustained civic consciousness. Fear of reprisals, protest fatigue, shrinking spaces for peaceful assembly, and increased regulatory scrutiny of collective action have contributed to public reluctance to engage openly with civil society initiatives, particularly those addressing rights-based or governance-related issues, resulting in increasingly personalised and informal rather than organised collective participation. Participants also highlighted a growing perception among citizens that their individual or collective actions have limited influence on policy outcomes or governance decisions, weakening trust in participatory processes. Although India has a long tradition of civic movements, this legacy is not consistently translating into contemporary engagement, especially among urban youth and first-time voters, who are less involved in traditional civil society engagement but are participating actively in shaping public discourse, engaging in volunteerism, and driving change through digital activism and social entrepreneurship.

India lacks a stand-alone formal subject called "civic education". It remains a critical gap: while constitutional values and citizenship are formally included in school curricula, practical civic education focused on rights, responsibilities, democratic participation, and engagement with institutions is limited in depth and effectiveness. Outside formal education systems, few

sustained public initiatives exist to build civic literacy. Consequently, public understanding of the role, diversity, and legitimacy of CSOs remains shallow and fragmented.

Despite these challenges, civic engagement in India is not static. It is evolving in response to shifting demographics and technological access, with pockets of strong community trust, youth-led initiatives, digital advocacy campaigns, and localised volunteer networks suggesting new forms of participation outside traditional political frameworks. This duality of innovation and inhibition, limited depth of civic engagement, weak sense of public agency, and underdeveloped civic education underscores a poor but not entirely absent enabling environment.

5.3 | Civic Equality and Inclusion

Marginalised communities in India, including those marginalised on the basis of poverty, caste, gender, disability, religious or linguistic minority status, and non-normative gender or sexual identities continue to face legal, structural, and societal barriers to civic participation. Although legal and constitutional frameworks formally guarantee equal rights and civic participation through provisions related to equality before the law, freedom of expression, association, and participation in democratic processes, along with affirmative action policies, reservations, and targeted welfare schemes, they remain weakly implemented with little to no formal oversight ensuring inclusive engagement or non-discriminatory treatment in civic forums. Persistent social and economic barriers significantly constrain the ability of marginalised communities to engage meaningfully in civic processes: economic precarity, limited access to education, digital exclusion, geographic isolation, and immediate livelihood concerns restrict participation beyond basic electoral engagement.

Social tolerance and respect for diversity were described as uneven and increasingly polarised. While pluralism remains embedded in constitutional values and everyday community practices in many regions, public expression of dissenting identities or views, especially those challenging dominant social, religious, or political narratives, often disproportionately attracts stigma, harassment, or intimidation.

Women in India endure both online and offline harassment that severely restricts their civic involvement. Reports indicate a sharp rise in cybercrimes against women—from 22,188 cases in 2020 to over 48,000 by 2024 per the National Cybercrime Reporting Portal—with coordinated trolling, deepfakes, and rape threats disproportionately targeting female journalists and activists.

Accessibility and inclusion for persons with disabilities (PwDs) in India remain uneven. Despite the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, RPwD Act 2016 and Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan), gaps in infrastructure, employment, data, and enforcement persist. Similarly, while the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 exists, access to basic goods and services such as banking, finance, housing, healthcare, employment and education remain limited for trans people. Lack of understanding and intolerance towards the LGBTQIA+ community are at similarly high levels, both in larger cities and in rural areas.

India being such a large and diverse country, structural barriers within civic processes themselves such as language dominance, formalised participation procedures, and urban-centric consultation mechanisms frequently exclude grassroots voices, with CSOs working with marginalised groups often acting as intermediaries rather than enablers of direct participation, reinforcing dependency. While some urban centres have witnessed modest civic engagement by youth and women's groups through community-driven outreach projects, these remain isolated efforts and lack systemic state support. While legal guarantees for equal

participation exist, entrenched social hierarchies, economic inequalities, declining tolerance for diversity, and the   gap between formal rights and lived experience substantially weaken their realisation in practice, reflecting a poor but not entirely closed enabling environment for inclusive civic participation.

Conclusion: In India, public perception of civil society is mixed, shaped by a complex interplay of political, social, and media dynamics. While CSOs play a vital role in directly influencing people's daily lives through sustained work on critical areas such as climate change, disaster mitigation, rehabilitation, and social cohesion, often filling gaps left by state and market mechanisms, scepticism and mistrust are fuelled by limited transparency perceptions, negative narratives, and weak democratic engagement. Media coverage is often limited, biased, or sensationalised, hindering social acceptance and engagement. Political polarisation, shrinking public spaces, and limited civic education further constrain the overall public discourse.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Score:
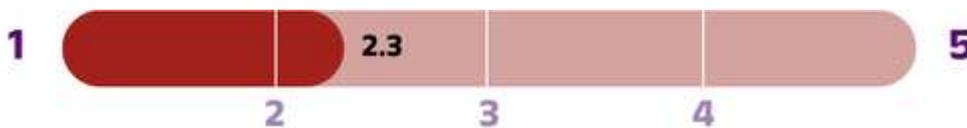
6.1 | Digital Rights and Freedoms

India's digital environment for civil society is governed by a combination of constitutional protections for freedom of expression and a growing body of statutory and executive regulations that shape online conduct, providing an open internet environment for most users. Laws such as the [Information Technology Act, 2000](#) and subordinate rules including the [Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules](#) establish the legal basis for regulating online content, intermediary responsibilities, and government takedown powers. While these frameworks do not impose blanket restrictions, they provide the state with broad discretion to block content, direct platforms to remove information, and require compliance with data and content moderation orders. Consultation participants observed that restrictions are occasionally imposed on specific services or platforms due to social, political, or public order considerations, often through [temporary regional internet shutdowns](#), platform-specific blocking, or targeted content removals. Political and rights-based content, particularly that which is critical of government policies or highlights dissent, is perceived as more vulnerable to takedown requests or scrutiny, even when such actions are framed as lawful and exceptional, with a widespread belief persisting among civil society actors that online content and communications are subject to varying degrees of monitoring by state agencies, influencing self-censorship and the choice of digital tools despite the absence of pervasive day-to-day restrictions for the majority of users. While users have several legal recourses available in cases of takedown requests, success varies and requires swift action.

Participants also expressed concern about the detention, questioning, or [harassment of activists, journalists, and critics](#) in relation to online expression under provisions of criminal law, public order statutes, or digital regulations. Although such cases are not universal, their

visibility contributes to a broader perception that digital expression, especially on political or rights-based issues, carries legal and personal risk.

India's legal framework provides partial protection for online expression but is counterbalanced by expansive regulatory powers, selective enforcement, and perceived surveillance, where digital spaces remain usable for civil society engagement, yet uncertainty around content regulation and accountability mechanisms constrains their full potential.

Together, these developments have created a mixed digital environment marked by selective censorship and shrinking civic space for critical voices, reflecting an average enabling context where digital freedoms exist but are moderated by legal and practical risks.

6.2 | Digital Security and Privacy

India's digital environment is characterised by emerging data protection frameworks alongside persistent surveillance concerns, rising cyber threats, and uneven accountability for civil society actors' digital safety. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (DPDP Act) introduces a comprehensive data-protection framework centred on consent requirements, data minimisation, rights to erasure and correction, and mandatory breach notifications, marking a significant step toward formal regulation of personal data. Yet, for civil society organisations (CSOs), the shift toward increased online reporting and digital compliance under various laws inevitably means greater exposure of their own data as well as the sensitive personal data of beneficiaries and staff in cyberspace, heightening risks of breaches or misuse. Consultation participants reported a rising incidence of cyber risks affecting civil society, including phishing attacks, unauthorised access to email and cloud systems, website defacement, data scraping, and targeted harassment through coordinated online campaigns. While such attacks are often attributed to non-state actors such as hacktivist groups, ideological networks, or opportunistic cybercriminals, participants also expressed concern about opaque state surveillance practices and the limited transparency surrounding lawful access to digital data by government agencies.

Notably, participants highlighted that Section 17 of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act grants broad exemptions to the central government and its agencies for accessing or processing personal data on grounds of national security, public order, and other stated purposes. This places state entities outside many protective obligations imposed on non-state actors like CSOs, explicitly allowing government access to CSO-held data without equivalent safeguards, and creating an uneven accountability landscape that intensifies concerns, particularly for organisations working with politically sensitive issues or vulnerable populations.

CSOs increasingly face coordinated misinformation campaigns that misrepresent their objectives, funding sources, or activities, often portraying them as politically motivated, foreign-influenced, or unlawful. For example, articles accusing foreign-funded NGOs of narrative warfare spread these narratives rapidly through social media platforms and messaging applications, undermining public trust and exposing organisations to reputational harm and heightened scrutiny. Limited mechanisms, such as National Cybercrime Reporting Portal, PIB Fact Check Unit, for timely correction or redress further exacerbate these risks, where the government has not demonstrated consistent capacity to investigate these attacks or promote disinformation awareness. India's digital security and privacy environment for civil society reflects a mixed reality: strengthened formal data-protection norms coexist with uneven accountability, rising cyber threats, and widespread misinformation, indicating a systematic gap in fully protecting digital security despite legal advancements, indicating an average enabling environment where protections exist but are insufficient to fully mitigate emerging digital risks faced by CSOs.

6.3 | Digital Accessibility Score: 2

Access to digital tools and platforms remains highly unequal across India, restricting the civic engagement and operational reach of civil society, particularly in rural, tribal, and marginalised

communities. While internet penetration and smartphone usage are relatively high in urban and semi-urban areas enabling many larger and well-resourced CSOs to engage with online portals, digital payment systems, and e-governance platforms, these improvements are not uniformly experienced, with significant gaps persisting in rural, tribal, and geographically remote areas where poor connectivity, unreliable electricity, and limited digital infrastructure continue to constrain access, resulting in poor or nonexistent internet infrastructure.

Digital accessibility for civil society organisations and their beneficiaries continues to be significantly hampered by low digital literacy levels of users, including both community members and grassroots workers, who often lack the skills required to navigate online portals, submit mandatory digital reports, or securely manage data, thereby exacerbating the exclusion of the very populations that CSOs seek to serve despite the nominal availability of digital platforms. Even in urban contexts, marginalised groups such as migrants, informal workers, women, and the elderly face barriers related to castes, affordability, language, and limited digital confidence.

As digital processes increasingly become mandatory for service delivery and compliance, these disparities risk excluding the very populations that civil society organisations aim to support. Language and accessibility barriers also constrain digital inclusion, with most official platforms, advocacy campaigns, and public service portals offering limited content in regional languages or formats accessible to persons with disabilities. Women remain disproportionately excluded from meaningful digital participation due to low digital literacy, affordability challenges, and restrictive social norms. This environment of systemic exclusion and infrastructural gaps constitutes a disabling environment reflecting digital tools and platforms that are technically available but significantly restricted in practice for a large portion of civil society actors, reflecting a weak but not entirely absent enabling context for digital accessibility.

Conclusion: India's digital environment for civil society is evolving, with relatively high internet penetration and smartphone usage, but faces significant challenges related to access disparities, security risks, and regulatory oversight. While urban areas benefit from widespread connectivity, rural and remote regions lag behind due to infrastructure gaps and low digital literacy. The government exercises control through regulatory frameworks like the Information Technology Act, targeted content blocking, and intermittent internet shutdowns, which restrict civil society's ability to operate safely and freely online. Legal instruments provide broad powers to monitor and restrict online content, often affecting activists, journalists, and rights-based groups, while cybersecurity infrastructure and comprehensive privacy protections remain unevenly implemented.

C) Recommendations

The findings of this report underscore an urgent need for systemic reform to reverse the ongoing trend of a constrained civic space in India. Guided by the enabling environment framework for civil society, the following recommendations outline a strategic roadmap of actionable priorities for key stakeholders to foster a more open, resilient, and democratic society.

Recommendation 1: Safeguarding Civic Freedoms

For Government –

- Expand dialogue forums to scale up human rights camps (like the Odisha model) nationwide, including CSOs, to amplify marginalised communities' voices in an inclusive manner.
- Streamline CSO registration and compliance nationwide via a unified digital portal to eliminate state variations and ensure seamless freedom of association.
- Ensure authorities respect rights to peaceful assembly and expression by avoiding excessive force, arbitrary arrests, or intimidation during protests across India.

For CSOs & Civil Society –

- Co-develop public dashboards tracking enforcement actions on civic groups, promoting transparency to reduce self-censorship from surveillance fears.
- Raise public awareness about curbs on civic and associative freedoms through simple, evidence-based campaigns, countering the isolation of targeted NGOs.
- Write and publish more positive narratives of the sector, showcasing their vital contributions to social welfare and development.

Recommendation 2: Reform the Legal and Regulatory Architecture

The current legal framework, including FCRA restrictions and Income Tax Act provisions, is primarily used to control rather than enable civil society. A fundamental overhaul is required to shift its purpose towards facilitation, transparency, and protection of civic freedoms.

For the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Finance -

- Initiate a time-bound, consultative reform process with a diverse range of CSOs to amend restrictive FCRA norms and simplify foreign funding approvals.
- Develop a single, simplified legal framework for CSO registration and regulation that is transparent, predictable, and consistent with constitutional freedoms.

- Amend Section 2(15) of the Income Tax Act to raise the 20% threshold for commercial income or provide clearer guidelines for social enterprises, enabling self-reliance.

For the Ministry of Corporate Affairs and State Governments -

- Overhaul opaque banking due diligence and account freeze processes for NGOs, replacing them with evidence-based, time-bound systems.
- Establish an independent oversight body (e.g., ombudsman) to review FCRA denials, tax exemptions, and banking restrictions, with accessible appeals.

For Parliament and Standing Committees -

- Launch public hearings on civic space laws like the FCRA and IT Act, ensuring diverse CSO participation.

For the International Community (EU, UN Special Rapporteurs) -

- Engage with the Government of India to press for FCRA and digital regulation reforms as part of human rights dialogues.

Recommendation 3: Ensure Accessible and Sustainable Resources

Financial sustainability is undermined by donor rigidity, compliance burdens, and limited core funding. Reforms must promote diversified, flexible resources.

For the Ministry of Finance and NITI Aayog -

- Introduce tax incentives and simplified CSR guidelines to encourage domestic philanthropy and core funding for grassroots CSOs.
- Promote flexible government schemes with longer cycles, reduced reporting, and capacity support for smaller organisations.

For the Reserve Bank of India and Financial Institutions -

- Develop simplified banking procedures to eliminate enhanced due diligence delays, account freezes, and transaction hurdles for FCRA-compliant CSOs.

For Institutional Donors and CSR Entities -

- Shift to multi-year, unrestricted funding with collaborative priority-setting, easing hierarchical dynamics and thematic rigidity.
- Establish pooled funds for administrative support and proposal capacity-building for grassroots groups.

For Civil Society Organisations -

- Invest in professional skills for evidence-based proposals and diversify income through scaled social enterprises.

Recommendation 4: Promote Open State-CSO Engagement

State responsiveness is limited by ad-hoc consultations and one-sided accountability. Institutionalised dialogue is essential.

For NITI Aayog and Federal Ministries -

- Establish permanent multistakeholder platforms for policy consultations, ensuring diverse CSO input and structured feedback on recommendations.
- Strengthen RTI implementation with time-bound responses, digital accessibility for rural CSOs, and penalties for delays.

For State Governments -

- Create provincial-level councils for inclusive engagement, prioritising grassroots and rights-based voices.

For the Central Information Commission -

- Reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies in grievance redressal and ensure equitable access across states.

For Joint Government-CSO Platforms -

- Form more government-CSO working groups for biannual progress reports on participatory reforms such as NITI Aayog's Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) Partnership.

Recommendation 5: Protect Digital Rights and Security

Digital spaces face shutdowns, surveillance perceptions, and cyber risks, chilling expression. A rights-respecting framework is vital.

For the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) -

- Limit internet shutdowns and content blocks to judicially reviewed emergencies, with transparent justifications.
- Fully implement the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act with narrowed Section 17 exemptions, establishing an independent Data Protection Commission for CSO data safeguards.

For Law Enforcement -

- Train agencies on proportionate digital surveillance and investigate CSO-targeted phishing, harassment, and misinformation.

For Donors and International Community -

- Fund digital security training, VPNs, and resilient tools for vulnerable CSOs, especially in rural areas.
- Advocate UN review of India's IT Rules and intermediary liabilities.

Recommendation 6: Foster Supportive Public Culture

Mixed perceptions and low civic engagement stem from negative narratives and education gaps. Trust-building is key.

For the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting -

- Cease ambivalent portrayals framing CSOs as foreign-influenced; publicly recognise their democratic role.

For Ministry of Education -

- Integrate practical civic education on rights, participation, and CSO legitimacy into curricula, with community outreach.

For Media and CSOs -

- Promote balanced coverage through joint campaigns highlighting CSO impacts beyond crises.

For All Stakeholders -

- Launch national coalitions to combat misinformation, enhance public agency, and promote inclusive civic mobilisation.

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 was convened in November 2025.** The discussions are supported by secondary sources, such as V-Dem, the Bertelsmann Stiftung Governance Index, the RTI Rating from the Centre for Law and Democracy, and other trusted resources. These sources provide benchmarks for measuring similar dimensions and are complemented by primary data collection and other secondary sources of information available for the country. Guided by these deliberations, the panel assigns scores for each dimension, which the Network Members submit to the Consortium, accompanied by detailed justifications that reflect the country's specific context. To determine a single score per principle, the scores assigned to each dimension are aggregated using a weighted average, reflecting the relative importance of each dimension within the principle. This approach balances diverse perspectives while maintaining a structured and objective evaluation framework.