# Nepal

## Country Focus Report

## 2025

Credit: Pratisha Manandhar

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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.

# Brief Overview of the Country Context

Nepal, a landlocked South Asian nation, transitioned to a federal democratic republic in 2008 after abolishing the 239-year-old monarchy. This change followed the 2006 People's Movement (*Jana Andolan II*), which ended the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) and led to the Constituent Assembly promulgating the 2015 Constitution of Nepal. The Constitution established a federal system with seven provinces and empowered local governments, guaranteeing multiparty democracy, sovereignty vested in the people, secularism, and fundamental freedoms, including expression. There are legal provisions to mainstream social and gender inclusion through policies such as the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Policy 2021 and the Election Commission's Gender and Inclusion Policy, 2021 which promotes inclusion of marginalised communities (Dalits, Madhesis, Adibasi Janajatis) and legally mandates at least 33% women's participation in various governance mechanisms.

Despite these advances, Nepal has faced political instability, with 14 governments since 2008 and none completing a full five-year term. Fragile coalitions, corruption scandals, delayed service delivery, persistent accountability gaps, and limited employment-generating investments have fuelled public frustration, alongside high youth unemployment, mass emigration, and aid dependency.

Nepal is scheduled to graduate from Least Developed Country (LDC) status on 24 November 2026, reflecting progress in human assets and economic vulnerability, though sustainable growth remains challenged. From a civil society perspective, Nepal's civic space is rated "obstructed" by the CIVICUS Monitor, marked by restrictions on association, assembly, and expression, and the enabling environment is marred by bureaucratic obstacles and resource constraints for civil society organisations (CSOs). The 2025 crisis has deepened public distrust, disrupted CSO operations, and reinforced the urgent need for inclusive governance to amplify marginalised voices and support Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The aftermath of the Gen Z protests led to the collapse of the existing government and the formation of a new interim government under the leadership of a former Chief Justice, with a mandate to conduct elections. The polls will test generational divides, and successful elections would restore constitutional order and respond to the public demand for clean, effective governance. This report covers the period October 2024-2025.

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# B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

## PRINCIPLE SCORE

## 1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

*Score: (Obstructed)[1]*



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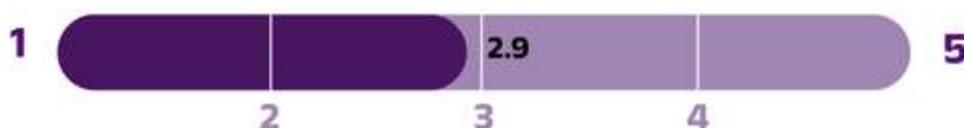
**1.1 Freedom of Association**

Nepal's Constitution guarantees fundamental civil liberties, but the practical environment shows increasing restrictions on peaceful assembly, expression, and association. Recent years have seen arbitrary arrests, excessive force during peaceful protests, and even the use of firearms, with reports of unlawful killings that remain uninvestigated. Authorities have issued orders limiting public gatherings and have curtailed dissent against government policies. These patterns were evident during both the pro-monarchy protests in March 2025 and the youth-led Gen Z protests in September 2025, where security forces employed heavy-handed tactics to control demonstrations.

Journalists and media outlets have faced threats, physical attacks, arrests, censorship, and judicial harassment for critical reporting. Online freedoms have also deteriorated, the Electronic Transactions Act (2008) has been repeatedly misused to suppress digital expression, and actions such as the nine-month TikTok ban, restrictive cyber policies, and increased monitoring reflect a tightening control over the digital sphere. Activists and human rights defenders continue to be targeted through surveillance, intimidation, reprisals, and politically motivated cases, undermining their ability to engage freely in civic activities. These

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

trends run counter to Nepal's commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and obligations made at the UN Human Rights Council, where the government accepted several recommendations to protect freedom of expression and ensure the safety of civil society actors, including journalists and human rights defenders, but has only partially implemented these in practice. As CIVICUS concludes, Nepal's civic space is obstructed.

## 1.2 Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Nepal's Constitution (Article 17) guarantees the right to freedom of peaceful assembly without arms, subject to reasonable restrictions in the interests of public order, health, or morality. In practice, however, this right has been significantly obstructed through disproportionate use of force, arbitrary restrictions, and impunity for violations.

Authorities have imposed prohibited zones, curfews, and blanket restrictions to suppress dissent. Security forces have frequently employed excessive measures, including tear gas, water cannon, batons, rubber bullets, and live ammunition against largely peaceful gatherings. Documented cases include arbitrary arrests, and patterns of impunity.

A prominent example is the youth-led "Gen Z" protests in September 2025, ignited by frustration over corruption and a government ban on social media platforms. On 8 September 2025, in Kathmandu alone, security forces killed at least 19 protesters and injured over 100, using lethal force in non-threatening situations. At least 76 were killed in the 2 days of violence, around 47 of them in Kathmandu, including 3 policemen. Human rights organisations described the response as unlawful and disproportionate, violating Nepal's obligations under the ICCPR. These restrictions disproportionately impact marginalised communities because restrictions on assembly and heavy-handed enforcement further limit the ability of groups such as youth, Dalits, Indigenous Communities, women, and human rights defenders to safely mobilise, voice grievances, and influence decision-making, while also exposing them to higher risks of arrest and violence with limited accountability. Moreover, the halting of court proceedings during periods of unrest and the heavy deployment of police around judicial and administrative institutions have disrupted access to justice.

## 1.3 Freedom of Expression

The Constitution of Nepal (Article 19 - Right to Communication) protects freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to seek, receive, and impart information, with limited restrictions on grounds such as sovereignty or public order. In reality, this right has deteriorated due to harassment of journalists, misuse of laws, and increasing digital controls.

Journalists face threats, physical attacks, arrests, and judicial harassment for critical reporting. Between May 2024 and April 2025, monitoring by the Federation of Nepali Journalists recorded 28 physical assaults, 24 obstructions or detentions, 13 threats, and two arrests of journalists.

Online expression has faced severe restrictions. The Electronic Transactions Act (2008) has been repeatedly misused to suppress dissent. Proposed legislation, including the Social Media Bill (2025), grants broad powers for content regulation under vague terms, risking further criminalisation of speech. These measures foster self-censorship and target activists and critics, contravening ICCPR commitments.

Despite constitutional guarantees, fundamental freedoms in Nepal are increasingly restricted in practice. Peaceful assembly and association are constrained through arbitrary arrests, excessive use of force, curfews, and prohibited zones, with the September 2025 Gen Z protests resulting in at least 76 deaths and hundreds of injuries. Freedom of expression has deteriorated due to threats, attacks, and legal harassment of journalists, alongside shrinking online civic space through platform bans, misuse of the legal authority, and restrictive proposed legislation such as the Association Bill (2025) and Social Media Bill (2025). Digital surveillance and vague content regulation have fostered self-censorship and targeted activists and human rights defenders. Marginalized groups are disproportionately affected, facing higher risks of violence and arrest with limited accountability. These trends undermine Nepal's obligations under the ICCPR and confirm an obstructed civic space. The successful elections would restore constitutional order and respond to the public demand for clean, effective governance.

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# PRINCIPLE SCORE

# 2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

*Score:*

1     **2.3**     5

2     3     4

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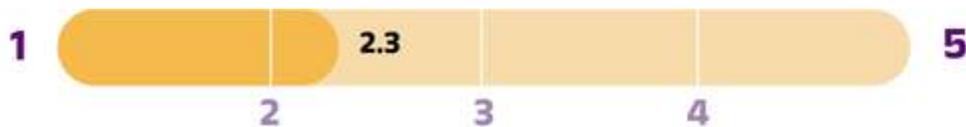
**2.1 Registration**

Although the Constitution of Nepal (Articles 16-17 and 43) guarantees freedom of association, the legal framework governing civil society organisations (CSOs) in Nepal remains fragmented and outdated. It is primarily guided by the [Association Registration Act (1977)](#), the [National Directorate Act 2018 (1961)](#), [the Company Act 2063 (2006)](#), [the Forest Act 2049 (1992)](#), [the Cooperative Act 2048 (1991),](#) [the Poverty Alleviation Fund Act 2063 (2006)](#), and the [Social Welfare Act (1992)](#). Registration and compliance processes involve multiple authorities including District Administration Offices (DAOs), the Social Welfare Council (SWC), local governments, and tax offices—resulting in bureaucratic delays, duplication of reporting, and inconsistent approvals. These overlapping mandates have created significant operational [inefficiencies and administrative burdens for CSOs](#) at all levels.

In 2025, the government introduced a [draft Association Act aimed at consolidating existing legislation](#). However, the drafting process, led by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) instead of the Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens (MoWCSC) raised serious concerns among civil society actors that CSOs were being viewed through a security lens rather than as partners in development. The proposed bill grants excessive discretionary powers to government authorities and introduces cumbersome procedures for registration, renewal, and operation. Without meaningful consultation and inclusion, the new Act risks overregulation, threatening CSO autonomy, legitimacy, and independence. In response, [the](#) [NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN) and over 40 CSOs Networks jointly issued a position paper](#) [calling for the reinstatement of oversight under a development-oriented ministry,](#) simplified regulatory processes, and the establishment of an independent Social Development Board. Although

continued advocacy raised expectations for a more enabling and CSO-friendly revision, the recent political shift has made progress uncertain.

There are instances of government officers exercising arbitrary discretion. This includes denying registration based on the organisation's proposed name, particularly affecting marginalised groups or rights-based advocacy-focused organisations like LGBTIQ+ communities. There have also been instances where officials expect unethical benefits to process files.

In many regions, CSOs are required to register at the ward level and again at the municipal level, in addition to registration with the District Administration Office (DAO). CSOs operating in multiple districts are often required to either register separately or obtain permission from each respective DAO and local government. Although Nepal has adopted a federal structure, provincial governments do not yet have a defined legal mandate for CSO regulation and mobilisation. Crucially, affiliation with the Social Welfare Council (SWC) is mandatory for accessing international resources and remains highly centralised. As a result, CSOs—particularly those from remote areas—must travel to the capital for affiliation and renewal, incurring high costs and facing a non-transparent, bureaucratic affiliation process.

Despite legal provisions for Tax/VAT exemption for non-profits, organisations often face arbitrary demands from tax officers to pay VAT. Additionally, CSOs are required to pay regulatory fees to the SWC, yet the facilitation and support provided by the government in return are viewed as unsatisfactory. The absence of a digital governance system forces CSOs to rely on manual, paper-heavy processes. This not only breeds inefficiency, it leads to issues such as plagiarism of constitutional documents among CSOs, further complicating the verification process.

## 2.2 Operational Environment

The general policy environment is moderate, permitting CSOs to operate; the practical landscape is marred by excessive bureaucratic oversight, a lack of trust from authorities, and restrictive financial controls.

The SWC has the mandate to approve and regulate all non-government projects that receive foreign aid. The SWC project approval process is lengthy and cumbersome, creating a control mindset rather than a facilitative one for the new project to operate. This disproportionately affects organisations from remote areas who face language barriers and high costs of travelling to the capital to get approval for new projects. Monitoring is mandatory per government requirements; however, mechanisms are problematic: monitoring fees are often tied to funding volume, requiring CSOs to pay for their own oversight. In this context, there is a fundamental lack of reciprocal accountability regarding CSO regulation. While CSOs are required to pay fees to the SWC to cover the costs of project monitoring and evaluation, the SWC is not held accountable for the quality, timeliness, or conduct of this monitoring and evaluation. CSOs pay for a service that is often delayed or ineffective, with no mechanism to demand accountability from the regulator. Additionally, CSOs face difficulties securing approvals for projects focusing on sensitive issues, such as anti-corruption. CSOs led by persons with disabilities, women, and survivors face compounded barriers due to the lengthy, bureaucratic and centralised nature of SWC procedures.

The operationalisation of federalism has created new layers of red tape for CSOs. Organisations working across multiple geographies such as victim support networks must secure separate approvals to execute the projected activities and submit completion reports

to every local unit they operate in, which is administratively overwhelming. At the local level, operations are further hampered by reported favouritism and nepotism, where personal connections often outweigh organisational merit.

Meanwhile, the [2024 amendment to the Money Laundering Prevention Act](#) has heightened financial scrutiny on foreign-funded organisations, further complicating operational procedures. Persistent delays by the SWC in approving non-infrastructure projects have also hindered programme implementation. The political crisis following the September 2025 protests and the subsequent dissolution of Parliament have stalled legislative reforms, leaving the future of CSO-related laws uncertain.

## 2.3 Protection from Interference

Although CSOs are theoretically able to influence national issues, the legal framework provides minimal protection against state and non-state interference. In practice, CSOs, particularly those advocating political or social justice issues, face significant insecurity, political threats, and a lack of state protection during periods of unrest.

CSOs that challenge the status quo or raise sensitive political or social issues frequently face threats from political parties or people associated with political and informal groups. The [laws regarding the protection of Human Rights Defenders and CSO activists](#) are not sufficiently clear or enforced. Activists report that raising such issues often invites political retaliation rather than state protection.

The vulnerability of CSOs was starkly evident during recent political unrest and the Gen Z protests. The state failed to provide adequate security for humanitarian organisations. For instance, an organisation providing protection for persons affected by gender-based violence was forced to close its shelter home in Morang due to security threats and the escape of prisoners in the area. The government lacked strict provisions to secure these facilities during the transition.

Institutional structures for protection have weakened. The 2025 unrest resulted in a severe deterioration in security for those working with survivors of human rights violations and trafficking, citing incidents where courts were fired upon, resulting in the destruction of over 9,000 case files and the escape of over 5,000 prisoners. This [collapse of the justice mechanism](#) leaves CSOs and survivors without recourse or physical safety.

These risks faced by CSOs are reinforced by an insecure information environment. Traditional media and professional journalists have been attacked, creating a vacuum filled by rampant misinformation and disinformation, which further endanger civil society actors and delegitimises their work.

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# PRINCIPLE SCORE

# 3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

*Score:*

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1    2    2.5    3    4    5
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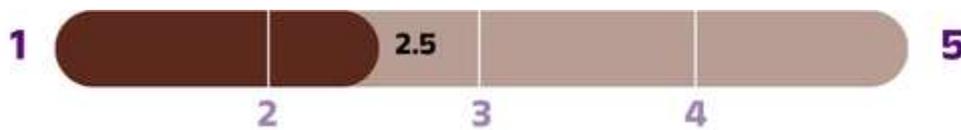
### 3.1 Accessibility

Although funding sources exist, accessibility is increasingly restricted by a shrinking donor landscape, exclusionary compliance requirements, and a control mindset within domestic financial institutions. The sector remains heavily dependent on external donors, but resources are contracting. Significant reductions in the availability of funding from donors such as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the closure of USAID projects have severely impacted the financial stability of many CSOs. Furthermore, shifting donor priorities, sometimes influenced by external geopolitical trends, have reduced funding availability for specific marginalised sectors, such as LGBTIQ+ and environmental advocacy groups.

There is a growing disconnect between large donors and grassroots organisations. High compliance thresholds, complex application formats, and requirements for high financial turnover effectively exclude small, campaign-based, or expertise-driven organisations. Groups led by marginalised communities (for instance people with disabilities) often lack the technical capacity or language to navigate these complex procurement systems.

Access to domestic resources is hindered by bureaucracy and politicisation. Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB), the Central Bank in Nepal, exhibits a control-oriented approach rather than a facilitative one. Following strict directives from the NRB focused on Anti-Money Laundering (AML), banks have created hurdles in channeling funds, demanding a bulk of justification and evidence to channel the funds. This regulatory friction is justified by a prevailing narrative stigmatising CSOs as dollar farming agents, which delegitimises their work. Experts and CSO leaders reported that only approximately one quarter of donor funding is channeled directly to CSOs, often in the form of unrestricted or semi-flexible support, despite CSOs being portrayed as primary recipients of foreign funds.

Although the [Industrial Enterprise Act] mandates Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and banks and financial institutions (BFIs) are required to allocate CSR funds as per [Nepal Rastra Bank's Circular] No. 11/073/74, these funds are largely inaccessible to independent CSOs. Private companies frequently bypass CSOs by establishing their own foundations to manage CSR spending, rather than partnering with existing CSOs.

At the local level, while government funds exist, accessing them is often regressive. Panel participants raised concerns that non-profit organisations are frequently forced to register for VAT to receive government grants, though it is not mandatory as per the law. As a result, many local governments and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) increasingly prefer to partner with private companies rather than CSOs, as compliance requirements and procedural processes for companies are perceived to be simpler and less restrictive. This has led to a gradual shift away from CSO partnerships.

Access to resources, both from the government and some international partners, is often determined by relationship rather than capability. Experts from Madesh and Gandaki reported that government funding in their provinces is directed toward those with political or bureaucratic connections. Similarly, some INGO/donor partnership processes are viewed as mere formalities, where partners are pre-selected based on informal networks or financial interests rather than open competition. A significant information asymmetry exists; many eligible organisations, particularly outside the capital, are unaware of available funding opportunities.

An emerging concern is the increasing tendency of INGOs operating in Nepal to directly access funds that are earmarked for or mobilised within the country, subsequently channeling them through large agencies for implementation. This practice limits direct access for national and community-based CSOs and contributes to resource concentration among larger organisations, further marginalising grassroots actors. In addition, continued reliance on physical submission requirements for applications and reporting places organisations based outside urban centres at a structural disadvantage.

### 3.2 Effectiveness

CSOs can operate; however, their overall effectiveness is compromised by donor-driven agendas, rigid bureaucratic timelines, and a hierarchical aid structure that limits local ownership.

A significant disconnect exists between donor priorities and ground realities. Some [donors set agendas based on their own strategic interests] rather than the actual needs of the community. Funds are rarely allocated for proper pre-project needs assessments, leading to interventions that may not address the root causes of issues.

The bureaucratic lag between proposal submission and project approval, often spanning a year or more, renders many interventions obsolete by the time implementation begins, as the context on the ground has changed. Furthermore, donor criteria regarding beneficiaries are often rigid and complex. For instance, experts shared that organisations working with trafficking survivors have faced challenges where donor criteria restrict support to specific types of beneficiaries, ignoring the holistic needs of survivors, and donors remain reluctant to adapt these criteria.

The relationship between donors/INGOs and local CSOs remains largely hierarchical rather than collaborative. Local CSOs are often treated merely as implementing partners or sub-contractors without meaningful decision-making power. Additionally, there are concerns over

the misallocation of resources. In some cases, CSOs and their funding partners (donors and INGOs) prioritise intervention sites that are relatively accessible and logistically convenient, rather than those facing the greatest need. These locations may be portrayed as remote, vulnerable, or marginalised in project proposals and reports to align with donor expectations, even when they do not represent the most excluded or hard-to-reach communities. Such practices undermine the principle of reaching the most vulnerable populations and can perpetuate inequities in aid distribution.

Reductions in traditional bilateral aid, including shifts in FCDO funding allocations, combined with an increasing reliance on private-sector contributions such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) spending by banks and companies, are reshaping the funding landscape for non-profit CSOs. While private sector engagement can create new partnerships, CSR funding is often short-term and project-based, and may not provide the predictable, core support required for long-term institutional sustainability and advocacy work.

### 3.3  Sustainability

The sustainability of the sector is critically threatened. CSOs are struggling to maintain operations due to the elimination of core funding, a lack of legal mechanisms for self-reliance, and restricted access to domestic private sector funds. Consequently, many CSOs are forced to chase funds outside their core priorities to survive, diluting their impact.
There has been a drastic shift in donor policy regarding overhead costs. Previously, donors covered administrative and operational costs, but now funding is strictly project-based. This has made CSOs institutionally unsustainable. Essential services, such as shelter homes, are facing closure because they cannot secure funds to pay rent or retain staff, as donors refuse to cover these non-programmatic expenses.

While there is rhetoric about shifting to self-reliance, the legal environment does not support it. The government lacks a clear Social Entrepreneurship Policy, meaning non-profits cannot easily engage in income-generating activities to subsidize their social missions without facing legal or tax complexities.

Experts participating in national-level consultations reported increasing pressure from some development partners for CSOs to produce detailed and emotionally compelling beneficiary narratives, particularly involving survivors of severe gender-based violence (GBV), as a condition for demonstrating impact and securing continued funding. These requests often include victims/survivors of human trafficking (especially sex trafficking), rape and sexual violence, domestic violence, and other forms of abuse. In some instances, this involves publishing anonymised case studies, testimonies, or photos in proposals, reports, or donor communications. This monetisation of trauma - often required to secure funds - threatens the fundamental privacy rights and dignity of the beneficiaries. Legally securing long-term funds (such as endowments or reserve funds) is difficult under the current regulatory framework, leaving CSOs in a permanent state of financial insecurity.

CSOs in Nepal face increasing constraints in accessing and sustaining resources due to a shrinking development partners (DPs) landscape, restrictive compliance regimes, and a control-oriented financial system. Heavy dependence on external funding combined with major donor withdrawals, shifting geopolitical priorities, and high compliance thresholds has disproportionately excluded grassroots and marginalized-led organizations from funding opportunities. Access to domestic resources is further constrained by politicization, limited access to CSR funds, and informal practices where funding is influenced by political or

personal connections rather than organizational capacity. CSO effectiveness is further weakened by donor-driven agendas, rigid bureaucratic timelines, and hierarchical partnerships that limit local ownership and responsiveness to community needs. Sustainability remains critically threatened by the lack of core funding, strict project-based financing, and the absence of a supportive social entrepreneurship framework, forcing CSOs to compromise priorities and, in some cases, ethical standards. Overall, the resource environment permits basic survival but undermines the long-term independence, effectiveness, and integrity of civil society.

# PRINCIPLE SCORE

# 4. Open and Responsive State

*Score:*

| 1 | | | 2.8 | | | 5 |
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| | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | |
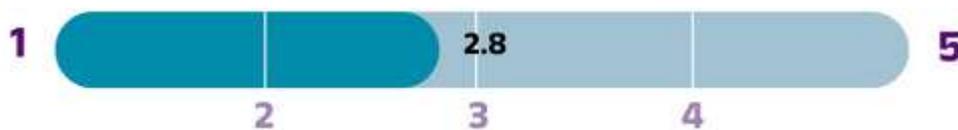
## 4.1 Transparency

Although the legal framework and digital tools for transparency exist, implementation remains inconsistent, and there is a significant lack of reciprocal transparency in decision-making processes.

The state has established legal mechanisms such as the Right to Information (RTI) Act and the *Hello Sarkar* (Hello Government) grievance redressal portal. These platforms, aided by the growing reach of digital media, have theoretically improved public access to information; however, implementation is poor. As per the RTI Act, CSOs that receive government or international funds are classified as public bodies. They are required to proactively disclose information on a regular basis, including their activities, financial status, and decision-making processes. CSOs are legally required to appoint an information officer and provide information to citizens upon request.

Under Nepal's Right to Information (RTI) framework, CSOs are required to ensure regular transparency, including making their financial and programmatic activities publicly accessible every three months. They are also expected to designate a staff member to serve as an information officer responsible for responding to information requests. While the government has mandated information officers in every government agency, these requirements create a disproportionate burden for small and community-based CSOs with limited human and financial resources. For organisations operating with minimal staff, assigning a dedicated RTI focal person and maintaining periodic public disclosures adds administrative strain that can divert capacity away from core programmatic work. Moreover, proactive disclosure practices among public institutions themselves remain inconsistent, often requiring persistent effort to obtain basic information.

A major challenge is the asymmetry in transparency expectations in terms of budget and in the decision-making process. Although government agencies have policies on transparency and accountability, these are not consistently applied in practice. While the government demands rigorous transparency and reporting from CSOs, their own decision-making processes, particularly regarding partnership selection and funding allocation often lack transparency. CSOs frequently find these processes opaque and inaccessible.

Similarly, in several instances, government agencies reportedly invited a limited, pre-selected group of CSOs to apply for grants intended for the broader civil society sector, often through quotation-based procedures that formally require multiple applicants. Although such processes are documented on paper, transparency in implementation is frequently lacking. CSOs are often not informed whether their proposals have been accepted or rejected, nor provided with reasons for decisions, unless they formally request such information under the RTI Act.

## 4.2 Participation

In Nepal's federal, provincial, and local governance system, civil society (CS) actors are legally entitled to participate in decision-making through mechanisms established by the Local Government Operation Act 2017, and various social accountability tools (public hearing, social audits, and the seven-step planning process). While the government has established channels for dialogue, and CSOs are occasionally consulted, participation remains selective, sporadic, and frequently superficial. Consultative processes tend to prioritise established networks, with limited engagement of independent, grassroots, or thematic CSOs. Participation is often restricted to the same organisations or individuals, selected based on familiarity, convenience, or existing relationships with government actors, rather than representativeness or expertise.

Consultation processes are not inclusive. For instance, the recently published CSO Bill was introduced without meaningful consultation with civil society actors and, rather than promoting civic space, adopts a restrictive approach. There is a persistent pattern of discrimination based on a CSO's political alignment or their stance toward government policies. Organisations perceived as critical of the state or those working on politically sensitive issues are frequently excluded from decision-making forums, while government-friendly or politically affiliated organisations are prioritised.

Experts shared that even when CSOs are invited to contribute, the engagement is often treated as a procedural formality (tick-box exercise) rather than a genuine effort to incorporate civil society views. While CSOs are frequently invited to policy dialogues at national and sub-national levels, implementation of their recommendations is poor, and the voices of marginalised communities remain underrepresented in these forums. In addition, selective invitation practices, tokenism and structural barriers such as limited capacity and access contribute to the continuing underrepresentation of grassroots groups representing Dalits, indigenous peoples, or remote communities.

While some positive examples of CSO-government collaboration exist, such as partnerships with the Ministry of Forests and Environment and UN agencies to promote sustainable mountain development under the International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development (2022), these highlight targeted knowledge exchange and regional dialogues. However, such instances remain exceptions rather than the norm for broader policy engagement.

Meaningful participation is severely hindered by a lack of adequate time. CSOs are often

provided with draft policies or bills at the last minute, making it impossible to conduct necessary research, consult with their constituencies, or provide comprehensive, evidence-based input.

## 4.3 Accountability

There are mechanisms and legal provisions for the government's accountability towards civil society. However, the government rarely provides detailed, systematic feedback on how CSOs' input has been used or why certain recommendations were disregarded. For instance, the NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN) and over 40 CSOs jointly issued a position paper calling for the reinstatement of oversight under a development-oriented ministry, simplified regulatory processes, and the establishment of an independent Social Development Board. To date, the government has not taken any substantive action to address these concerns.

Although public accountability is enshrined in policy frameworks, and tools such as public hearings, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) audits, the Right to Information (RTI) Act, and the Hello Sarkar grievance redressal mechanism are in place, their implementation remains largely procedural rather than outcome oriented. These mechanisms often function as formalities, with limited follow-up, weak enforcement, and minimal impact on decision-making.

Public documentation exists in scattered forms such as municipal annual reports and the government self-evaluation framework (Local Government Institutional Capacity Self-Assessment (LISA), but these documents seldom include clear rationales for rejecting suggestions, often citing only vague budgetary or technical constraints. At federal and provincial levels, accountability is even weaker, with consultations frequently treated as formalities rather than genuine opportunities for input.

Avenues for follow-up and accountability exist in principle, such as judicial remedies, parliamentary oversight, and coalition-based advocacy platforms, however, their effectiveness is inconsistent and heavily dependent on political will and CSO capacity. Parliamentary oversight, in particular, has produced limited critical review or implementation of recommendations. Opportunities for CSOs to monitor government commitments, track the incorporation of their inputs, or demand explanations for non-adoption are further constrained by limited resources at provincial and local levels, fear of reprisals, and the absence of mandatory disclosure requirements across all tiers of government.

Accountability mechanisms remain largely inaccessible and one-sided. Although appeal processes exist on paper, they primarily benefit privileged groups and those with political connections, while bureaucratic impunity persists. For marginalised communities, limited awareness, complex procedures, and systemic discrimination make access to accountability mechanisms largely out of reach.

A sharp distinction exists between political and bureaucratic accountability. While local elected representatives (Local Government) show some degree of accountability to the people due to electoral pressures, the bureaucratic system (civil service and administrative bodies) operates with little accountability to the public in many cases. Bureaucrats often view themselves as insulated from citizen feedback, leading to poor responsiveness in public service delivery. For example, although the seven-step local planning process formally ensures civic engagement—particularly at the third stage—inputs and recommendations submitted by civil society actors are rarely prioritised or formally acknowledged. CSOs are often not informed

whether their inputs have been accepted, rejected, or considered, undermining transparency and trust.

Nepal has established legal and institutional mechanisms to promote transparency, participation, and accountability, such as the Right to Information Act, Public accountability tools, and consultative forums, but their implementation remains inconsistent. While CSOs are subject to stringent transparency and reporting requirements, government decision-making processes, particularly around funding allocation and partnership selection, remain opaque, reflecting a lack of reciprocal transparency. Although laws formally encourage CSO participation in policymaking, engagement is often selective, tokenistic, and politically biased. Consultations are frequently conducted as procedural formalities, with limited time for meaningful input and little evidence that civil society recommendations are incorporated into final decisions. Accountability mechanisms exist in principle but are weak in practice. Feedback on CSO inputs is rare, bureaucratic impunity persists, and appeal processes largely favor politically connected actors. The absence of effective follow-up, mandatory disclosure, and reciprocal accountability undermines trust and constrains meaningful state–civil society engagement.

# 5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society

*Score:*

| 1 | | 2.3 | | | 5 |
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| | 2 | | 3 | 4 | |

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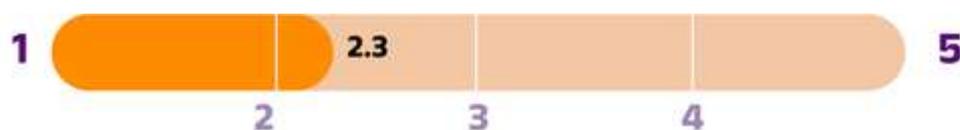
**5.1 Public Discourse and Constructive Dialogue on Civil Society**

Public discourse regarding civil society is characterised by a stark paradox: CSOs are recognised as essential partners during crises yet face a persistent narrative of suspicion and delegitimisation in the political arena.

There is a deep divide in how CSOs are portrayed. During disasters (such as earthquakes, floods) and the implementation of federalism, the government actively partners with CSOs, acknowledging their reach at the local level. However, this is countered by a hostile political narrative that labels CSOs as 'dollar farming' agencies and as 'projectised'. Many CSOs, driven by donor funding models, have moved from broader social movement-based activism toward short-term, donor selected projects with predefined outputs, timelines, and deliverables. Political leaders frequently defame organisations as foreign agents or accuse them of being guided by external forces without proof, damaging their public credibility and project focus. Following the recent Gen Z–led unrest, public debate around CSOs has intensified. Several leaders from major political parties have accused CSOs of playing a role in micro-managing the unrest through foreign investment. This narrative gained particular traction as some protesters were affiliated with certain CSOs. These claims have further fueled suspicion and polarised public discourse.

Additionally, there is a prevailing narrative among the government and political parties that blames CSOs for failing to deliver tangible development results. CSOs often struggle to effectively justify their impact or counter these narratives due to a lack of resources for robust data collection and impact reporting. The government fails to fully own CSOs as an intrinsic part of the nation-building process. Instead, they are often viewed as peripheral or as competitors for resources. CSOs face intense scrutiny regarding their internal transparency.

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Controversies, such as the incident involving the State Affairs Committee where CSOs were accused of trying to influence policymakers through providing snacks/hospitality, are used to delegitimise advocacy work.

## 5.2    Perception of Civil Society and Civic Engagement

Civic engagement in Nepal is at a crossroads; while political participation (voting) remains high, and sporadic organic movements (like the recent Gen Z protests) demonstrate a desire for change, everyday engagement with structured civil society is declining due to projectisation and a generational trust gap.

Perception surveys from the last decade indicate a shift where the media and the Nepal Army are viewed as the most credible institutions. While CSOs continue to enjoy a relatively high level of public trust, this trust has stagnated or declined in recent years due to perceptions that they have become disconnected from community roots. The shift of CSOs from social movement-based organisations toward projectised entities has eroded the broader societal conversation and perception of CSOs in Nepal. Public discussions and views on civil society have become more cynical, sceptical, or dismissive, rather than supportive or constructive. CSOs are increasingly viewed as professional contractors rather than community representatives. As a result, the general public increasingly views civic work as a financial transaction rather than a civic duty, leading to a decline in genuine, self-reliant civic engagement.

There is a significant trust deficit regarding youth-led initiatives. Local officials, political leaders and senior civil society often view informal youth groups as lacking maturity, leading to their exclusion or manipulation within agencies. While youth are eager to engage, evidenced by recent street protests and digital activism, the significant disconnect between the established system and the youth discourages younger generations from engaging through formal institutional channels, pushing them toward informal or confrontational activism.

Organisations representing communities experiencing intersecting forms of marginalisation and exclusion face an even greater burden in justifying their legitimacy and activities, alongside persistent inequalities in access to resources, partnerships, and institutional support. Furthermore, organisations working with sex workers encounter severe challenges, as their area of work lacks clear legal recognition, pushing them into precarious and uncertain conditions.

Citizens often feel powerless to influence the permanent bureaucracy. While they engage with local elected representatives, the lack of accountability within the bureaucratic machinery fosters cynicism regarding the impact of civic engagement on actual service delivery.

The scepticism towards CSOs hinders their ability to mobilise broad public support for long-term advocacy campaigns. Following the Gen Z protests, youth engagement in civil society, political parties, and public forums has received greater attention. However, it remains too early to assess whether this shift reflects a lasting structural change or a temporary response to political pressure.

## 5.3    Civic Equality and Inclusion

Although the Constitution guarantees inclusion, civic equality is undermined by elite capture, legal loopholes, and the total exclusion of specific minority groups.

In addition to constitutional guarantees, several laws, including the Local Government Operation Act (2017), Civil Service Act (1993), Act relating to Compulsory and Free Education (2018), and sector-specific inclusion and commission acts, provide legal mechanisms for inclusive representation and participation. These representation mechanisms are frequently co-opted by the elites within marginalised ethnic communities (the so-called creamy layer), leaving the truly underprivileged citizens unrepresented. Participation for Dalits, people with disabilities, and minorities is often treated as optional or tokenistic rather than mandatory and substantive, though legal provisions exist. Even when present, their voices are rarely decisive in policy outcomes. Article 40 of the Constitution guarantees the rights of persons with disabilities, which is reflected in the Act Relating to Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2017. In practice, however, government agencies remain reluctant to provide meaningful and accessible spaces for their participation. Representation of people with disabilities remains low, not only within state institutions but also within civil society organisations (CSOs). Structural barriers—including inadequate resources, lack of accessible information, limited communication mechanisms, and insufficient support for participation in public forums—further restrict their civic engagement.

While quotas exist for women and certain ethnic groups, there is no legal provision for the political participation or representation of the LGBTIQ+ community. They remain invisible in the formal electoral framework. Despite constitutional guarantees, enabling laws are missing. For instance, specific legislation on Dalit Rights has not yet been formulated despite constitutional requirements. Although the Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act, 2011, criminalises all forms of caste-based discrimination, untouchability, and exclusion in both public and private spheres, its enforcement has been widely regarded as weak and ineffective. Furthermore, political parties exploit loopholes in election laws; in local elections, parties often form alliances to bypass the requirement of fielding candidates of different genders for key positions. As a result, women are overwhelmingly nominated for deputy mayor positions rather than the top executive roles, reinforcing gender hierarchies in local leadership.

As the elections progress, there is increasing debate on the misuse of the proportional representation (PR) system. The PR system is designed to ensure inclusion of marginalised communities but continues to be misused by political parties. Closed lists often favour party elites, relatives, or repeat officeholders rather than genuinely underrepresented groups, undermining the system's original intent. Experts and CSOs warn that such manipulation weakens diversity in governance and erodes public trust in the PR mechanism.

Some of the civil society sector itself reflects these societal biases. Representation of Dalits, persons with disabilities, and LGBTIQ+ individuals in CSO leadership roles is rare or absent, creating a disconnect between the sector's inclusive rhetoric and its internal composition, which hinders the civic engagement and participation of marginalised communities. There are concerning signs of backlash against inclusion policies. The National Inclusion Commission (*Samabeshi Aayog*) has recently recommended the review or dissolution of the quota system, which threatens to roll back the limited progress made in representation.

Public discourse on civil society in Nepal is contradictory. While CSOs are recognized as essential partners during crises and emergencies, they are simultaneously subjected to persistent political narratives that portray them as dollar-farming, foreign-influenced, and projectized. Civic engagement is further weakened by a growing generational and institutional trust gap. Marginalized and intersectional groups face additional barriers, while citizens' limited ability to influence entrenched bureaucratic systems fuels apathy toward formal civic channels. Despite constitutional commitments to inclusion, civic equality remains undermined by elite

capture, weak enforcement of inclusion laws, and the exclusion of groups such as persons with disability, women, youths and LGBTIQ+ communities from formal political representation. Quotas system are routinely circumvented, Dalit rights legislation remains unfulfilled, and proportional representation mechanisms often marginalize intended beneficiaries. These structural inequities are mirrored within the civil society sector itself, where leadership remains insufficiently representative, and recent calls to roll back quota systems signal a broader backlash against inclusion.

# PRINCIPLE SCORE

# 6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

*Score:*

1    2    **2.7**    3    4    **5**

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### 6.1 Digital Rights and Freedoms

Although the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, there is a distinct lack of legal provisions specifically designed to promote and protect digital rights. Conversely, the proposed Social Media Bill grants excessive discretionary powers to authorities to regulate content, threatening to criminalize online expression under vague definitions. There have been reports of increasing harassment and legal threats against journalists for critical social media posts, including the issuance of an arrest warrant against activist and photojournalist RK Adipta Giri and intimidation of journalists by administrative authorities and Press Council Nepal. The reported misuse of Section 47 of the Electronic Transactions Act further reflects a pattern of restrictive enforcement that threatens online freedom of expression and media independence.

The proposed Bill poses significant risks to digital civic space by granting broad powers for surveillance and platform regulation, potentially undermining freedom of expression, privacy, and online participation. Its vague provisions on content removal, data retention, and platform registration, combined with weak safeguards, limited judicial oversight, and the exclusion of civil society from the proposed regulatory body, risk enabling censorship, self-censorship, and political interference in online discourse. These concerns arise in a context where digital monitoring and enforcement are already expanding, including increased scrutiny of social media content, investigations under the Electronic Transactions Act, and growing use of cybercrime provisions against online critics. Rather than introducing robust safeguards, the draft law may formalise and widen existing surveillance practices. Meanwhile, the National AI Policy 2025 signals ambition to harness AI for governance and development, but its weak enforcement mechanisms, unclear accountability frameworks, and absence of strong data protection safeguards heighten concerns about AI-enabled surveillance, profiling, and misinformation, posing additional risks to freedom of expression and privacy. The government

demonstrates a preference for control over regulation. This was evident in the ban on TikTok in 2024 (enacted before any regulatory directives were even formulated) and the move to ban Telegram in July 2025. In September 2025, the government then issued a ban on 26 major social media platforms as they failed to register as per the national guideline. These actions indicate a trend of using blanket bans rather than transparent content moderation mechanisms.

There is a fundamental lack of clarity in government policy regarding the distinction between platform regulation and content regulation. Authorities are actively intervening to regulate public opinion and online trends, often blurring the lines between harmful content and legitimate dissent.

A dual pattern is observed among political leadership: politicians often champion digital freedom while in opposition, but pivot to restrictive control measures once in government. While the government has moved to tax big social media platforms (formalising their business presence), state actors themselves are reportedly involved in disseminating disinformation to manipulate public perception.

## 6.2 Digital Security and Privacy

Digital security risks are escalating rapidly, outpacing the state's ability to protect citizens and CSOs. The environment is characterised by unchecked cyber harassment, a lack of robust data protection, and a proliferation of unverifiable content.

CSOs and activists increasingly face cyberbullying, online harassment, threats, hacking, and privacy intrusions. Particularly, digital media platform users face threats and harassment and sometimes defamation on social media. The digital space has become a vector for harassment, with weak recourse mechanisms for victims. Despite the existence of some legal frameworks such as the Electronic Transactions Act and The Privacy Act 2018, practical mechanisms for data protection are lacking, leaving sensitive information vulnerable to both state and non-state actors.

A significant portion of the population now relies on social media platforms rather than mainstream media for news. This shift has amplified the impact of misinformation and disinformation. According to a study, political groups, celebrities, informal news portals and social media influencers are the primary sources of misinformation and disinformation, often spread for political propaganda or personal gain. Marginalised communities and ordinary citizens are disproportionately affected, as individuals and groups with greater social, political, or economic power possess the resources and reach to amplify misleading narratives through their platforms. This power imbalance limits the public's ability to critically assess information, leaving many with little alternative but to accept dominant narratives promoted by influential actors. The proliferation of fake advertisements and scams further erodes trust in the digital ecosystem.

The excessive and unregulated use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has made it increasingly difficult to validate information. Deepfakes and AI-generated content are being used to manipulate public opinion, creating a complex security challenge that the current legal framework is ill-equipped to handle.

## 6.3 Digital Accessibility

Internet penetration is increasing, but a significant [digital divide persists](), characterised by inequality in meaningful access, linguistic exclusion, and a shortage of technical expertise within the civil society sector. Digital exclusion is particularly acute for persons with disabilities, especially blind and visually impaired (BVI) individuals and CSOs led by them. These groups face persistent barriers due to the lack of assistive technologies, inaccessible digital platforms, and limited availability of disability-inclusive digital infrastructure. As a result, their participation in digital civic engagement, online advocacy, and information access remains severely constrained.

Access to digital resources in Nepal remains highly unequal. Despite expanding internet connectivity, a sharp urban–rural divide persists, with CSOs and communities in remote areas facing unreliable networks, slow speeds, and frequent service interruptions compared to Kathmandu-based organisations. Economic barriers further limit marginalised groups' ability to afford devices and data for consistent engagement. As a result, connectivity does not translate into meaningful usability, constraining participation in online consultations, advocacy, fundraising, and broader organisational performance.

Language is another significant barrier to effective internet use. Most digital platforms and tools are available primarily in English or standard Nepali, excluding many indigenous and marginalised communities who communicate in local languages such as Maithili and Bhojpuri. This linguistic exclusion limits the reach of digital civic engagement and advocacy efforts.

Capacity constraints further undermine effective digital engagement. The civil society sector struggles to attract and retain skilled ICT professionals, as CSOs are unable to compete with salaries offered by the private IT and outsourcing sectors. As a result, many CSOs lack the technical capacity to digitise their operations or adopt emerging technologies, including AI. Low levels of digital literacy—both among the public and within civil society—compound these challenges. Many users lack the skills to protect their data, identify phishing or online scams, or critically assess the credibility of digital information.

Despite growing digital infrastructure, the broader environment for digital rights is becoming increasingly restrictive. Arbitrary internet shutdowns, proposed draconian legislation, and the absence of clear regulatory frameworks have narrowed digital civic space. There is no explicit legal recognition of digital civic space, while directives and proposed social media legislation include provisions that may restrict freedom of expression and the digital operations of CSOs. This restrictive environment undermines the potential of digital technologies to enhance civic participation and democratic engagement.

Nepal's digital civic space is increasingly constrained by weak legal protections and a growing state preference for control over rights-based regulation. The proposed social media Bill grants broad discretionary powers for surveillance, content control, and platform regulation, risking censorship, self-censorship, and political interference. Similarly, the National AI Policy 2025 reflects ambition but lacks clear accountability, enforcement mechanisms, and robust data protection safeguards. Digital security and privacy risks are escalating, with CSOs, journalists, and activists facing rising cyber harassment, hacking, defamation, and data breaches. Existing laws, such as the ETA and the Privacy Act, are poorly enforced, leaving limited remedies for victims. The rapid spread of misinformation, disinformation, deepfakes, and online scams, often amplified by political actors, influencers, and informal media, has further eroded trust in the digital ecosystem and disproportionately affected marginalized communities. Despite expanding internet infrastructure, meaningful digital access remains highly unequal. Urban–rural divides, high costs of devices and data, unreliable connectivity, linguistic exclusion, and low digital literacy limit effective participation in digital civic space. CSOs face acute capacity

gaps due to shortages of skilled ICT professionals and limited resources to adopt digital tools and emerging technologies. Together, these challenges undermine the potential of digital technologies to enhance civic participation, accountability, and democratic engagement in Nepal.

# C) Recommendations

**To the Government of Nepal (Federal, Provincial, and Local)**

- Immediately revise the draft Association Act through a transparent, consultative process led by a development-oriented ministry (MoWCSC), not a security-focused ministry.

- Establish a one-door mechanism with a digital CSO registration and renewal system, integrating DAO, SWC, tax offices, and local governments to reduce duplication and discretion.

- Decentralise SWC affiliation and renewal services to provincial offices, reducing cost and access barriers for CSOs outside Kathmandu.

- Introduce clear timelines and appeal mechanisms for registration, project approval, and monitoring decisions to minimise corruption.

- Implement the national guidelines on the use of force during protests, aligned with ICCPR standards, and ensure independent investigations and implementation into past violations (including September 2025 protests).

- Substantially revise the social media Bill to clearly distinguish platform regulation from content regulation, include judicial oversight for content takedowns and guarantee CSO and independent expert representation in regulatory bodies.

- Mandate that all government agencies, including local governments, publish written responses explaining how CSO inputs were accepted, modified, or rejected in policy processes.

- Strengthen public accountability mechanisms, including RTI implementation, by enforcing proactive disclosure requirements across all tiers of government.

- Issue clear directives to Nepal Rastra Bank and financial institutions to apply AML regulations proportionately to facilitate CSOs' operations.

- Formulate a Social Entrepreneurship Policy and implement the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) guidelines to allow non-profits to engage in income-generating activities and partner more easily with the private sector.

**b) Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)**

- Adopt minimum standards on governance, financial transparency, safeguarding, and project co-design, implementation and reporting.

- Establish or strengthen self-regulatory mechanisms through networks such as NFN to improve public trust and counter delegitimisation narratives.

- Increase representation of Dalits, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, youth, women, minorities, and LGBTIQ+ persons within CSOs.

- Prioritise promoting digital literacy, safety and governance, focusing on security, secure communication tools, and strategies for digital inclusion.

## c) Development Partners

- Co-create projects based on local needs assessments and increase the decision-making authority of local partners and beneficiaries in project design.

- Provide strategic, long-term funding specifically for CSOs' digital security, infrastructure, and resilience-building.

## d) Media and Digital Platforms

- Strengthen safety mechanisms and legal protections against harassment and judicial intimidation.

- Promote fact-checking initiatives and digital literacy programmes, particularly targeting youth and marginalised communities.

- Encourage collaboration between media, CSOs, and academia to counter misinformation and AI-generated content responsibly.

- Promote digital inclusion and accessibility among the minority and marginalised communities, including persons with disabilities.

## e) Private Sector and Financial Institutions

- Channel CSR funds through independent CSO partnerships rather than exclusively through corporate foundations.

- Adopt due diligence frameworks that recognise CSOs as social value partners.

- Support digital inclusion initiatives, including affordable data access and devices for women, marginalised and minority groups.

# 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 October 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.