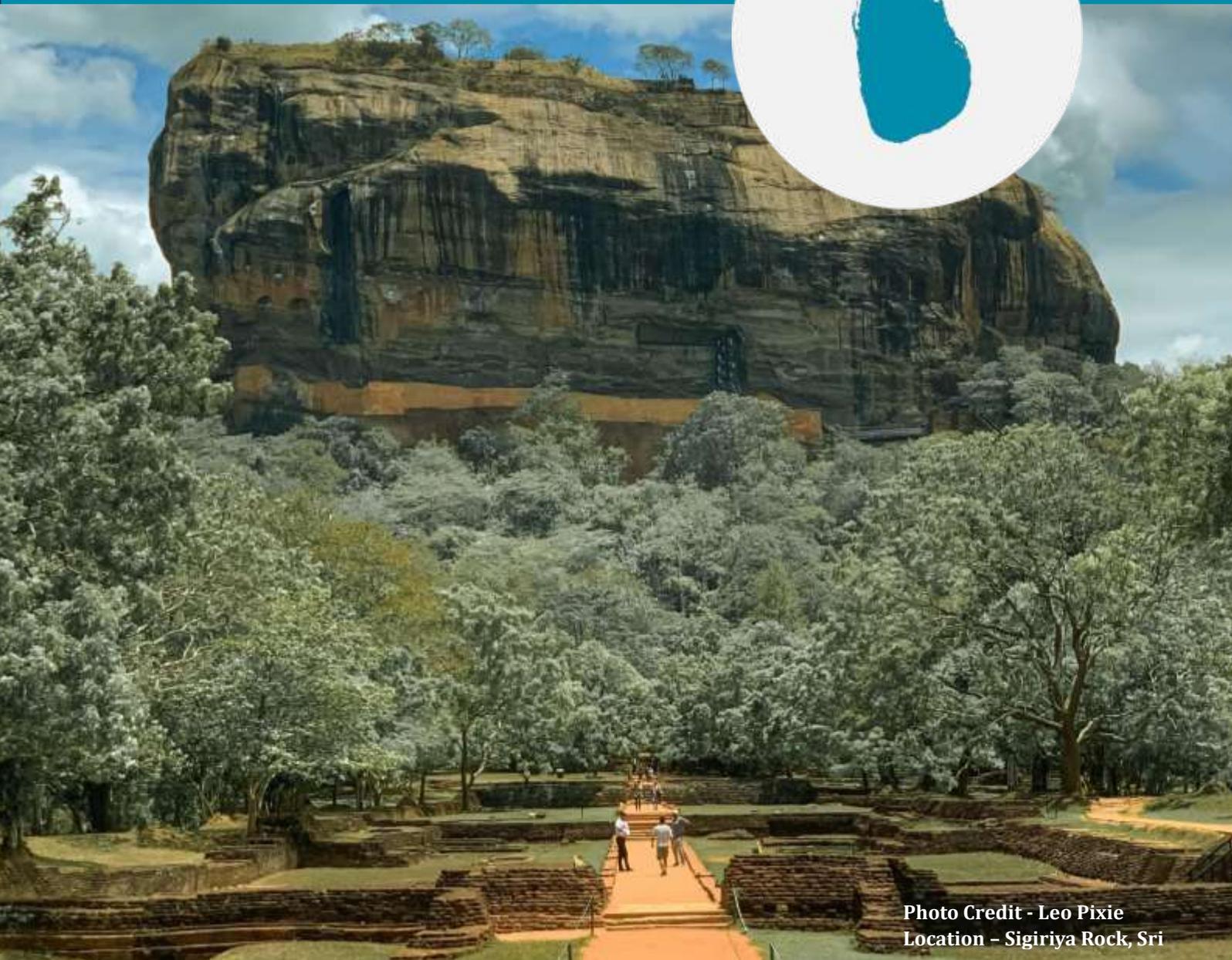# Sri Lanka

## Country Focus Report

## 2025

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# A) An Introduction to the Enabling Environment

What we understand by an Enabling Environment is the combination of laws, rules and social attitudes that support and promote the work of civil society. Within such an environment, civil society can engage in political and public life without fear of reprisals, openly express its views, and actively participate in shaping its context. This includes a supportive legal and regulatory framework for civil society, ensuring access to information and resources that are sustainable and flexible to pursue their goals unhindered, in safe physical and digital spaces. In an enabling environment, the state demonstrates openness and responsiveness in governance, promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making. Positive values, norms, attitudes, and practices towards civil society from state and non-state actors further underscore the supportive environment.

To capture the state of the Enabling Environment, we use the following six principles:

## SIX ENABLING PRINCIPLES

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms
2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework
3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources
4. Open and Responsive State
5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society
6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

In this Country Focus Report, each enabling principle is assessed with a quantitative score and complemented by an analysis and recommendations written by our Network Members. Rather than offering a singular index to rank countries, the report aims to measure the enabling environment for civil society across the 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. The report covers the research period of October 2024 to October 2025. 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

Sri Lanka is an old and established democracy. It has a long electoral democratic tradition, having introduced universal franchise as early as 1931, and a track record of peaceful changes of governments through the ballot since then. Post-independence Sri Lanka is shaped by war (1983 – 2009) and insurgencies (1971, 1987-89) and more recently a crippling economic and political crisis (2022). Understanding and assessing the enabling space for civil society in Sri Lanka today requires recognising and factoring in some of the key dynamics in the country, particularly the ethno-religious contestations among its main community groups of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims and the post-independence state-building process that seemingly entrenches Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism. These get superimposed on an unequal and patriarchal society. These deep drivers continue to influence state-civil relations and how they manifest in fundamental freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. They also play a role in how they are enjoyed by different segments of the population.

In 2022, the economic crisis precipitated by long periods of poor governance and a growing frustration with the political status quo triggered a massive people's uprising known as *Aragalaya/Struggle*. The *Aragalaya* resulted in the forced resignation of the then President, Prime Minister and the government. After an interim period (2022-2024) with a President elected by the parliament, a new President and government were elected with a significant mandate at the end of 2024. The *Aragalaya* of 2022 was unprecedented and was the largest show of civic activism in Sri Lanka. However, the *Aragalaya* was in turn met with the quick consolidation of interests by those in government, followed by repressive measures.

The newly elected National People's Power (NPP) government came to power in late 2024 with a supermajority and a clear mandate for a *'system change'* anchored in participation and transparency. In keeping with the mandate, the government is pursuing a multi-pronged anti-corruption agenda. This consists of long-delayed legal reforms, strengthening anti-corruption institutions, and measures to bring about a change in public culture.

The country is on an International Monetary Fund (IMF) prescribed economic recovery program with typical austerity measures that have far-reaching impacts on poorer segments of the population. Deep structural reforms like sustaining primary surplus, cutting down budget deficits, restructuring state-owned enterprises, increasing tax revenue, trade liberalisation and active investor promotion are at the top of the NPP government's programmes. The looming debt repayment burden to avoid another cycle of crisis has compelled the government to follow a narrow path recommended by the IMF. The new government has not yet commenced any

work on its promise to abolish the executive presidency or on constitutional reforms to address the national question of power sharing and reconciliation. When they do so, the relevant civil society actors expect to be involved in being heard and in shaping the outcomes. But the process and avenues for civil society's constructive engagement with this government on these issues remain unclear.

Over the course of 2025, while some positive changes, like the recent shifting of the NGO Secretariat from the Ministry of Public Security to the Ministry of Rural Development and Community Empowerment, have been noted, many other trends that adversely impact the free functioning of civil society have continued. The persistence of restrictive legal frameworks, draconian security laws, and systematic harassment and pervasive surveillance continued to characterise the operating environment for civil society. Groups working on rights and justice issues, especially in the war-affected north and east areas where Tamils and Muslims are predominant, faced heightened scrutiny and intimidation.

Despite the context, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) remain a crucial force in advocating for human rights, accountability, and inclusive development. The enabling space is thus a complex, highly contested, and often precarious arena that demands resilience and innovation from civil society actors to pursue their mandates within a shifting political landscape.
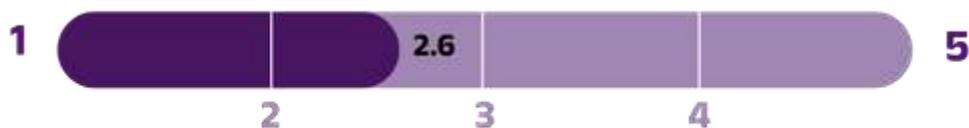
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# B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

## PRINCIPLE SCORE

## 1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

*Score: (Repressed)* [1]

| 1 | | 2.6 | | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2 | 3 | 4 | |

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The Sri Lankan Constitution of 1978 guarantees fundamental freedoms of speech, peaceful assembly and association, specifically in the fundamental rights chapter. However, these rights have been violated continuously, with the CIVICUS monitor downgrading Sri Lanka from 'obstructed' to 'repressed' in 2023. Even after the change of government in 2024, the state of fundamental freedoms has remained precarious – as underscored by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights during his visit to Sri Lanka in June 2025 and thereafter in his report to the Human Rights Council's 60th session in September of 2025. The CIVICUS score for 2025 is 40/100.

### 1.1 Freedom of Association

Article 14 of the Constitution provides that every citizen is entitled to the freedom of association, freedom to form and join a trade union, and freedom by himself or in association with others to enjoy and promote his own culture.

There are two key aspects to this right. First, those wishing to register a not-for-profit collective to pursue their lawful objectives have a plural set of options to choose from. They may register under the Voluntary Social Services Organisations (VSSO) Act of 1987, Societies Ordinance of 1891, Trusts Ordinance of 1917 or under any Foundation Act by way of a private members' bill passed in the parliament or under the Companies Act of 2007. Depending on their functions

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

and objectives, they may also register under the [Cooperative Societies Act of 1972](#) and the [Trade Unions Ordinance of 1935](#), as appropriate. Second, the constitutional provision on freedom of association also covers those who do not wish to register but wish to pursue their lawful activities. These include groups such as the [Movement for Plantation Peoples' Land Rights](#), a collective of individuals and organisations that focus on land issues affecting the particular community group, and the [March 12th Movement,](#) a collective of individuals and organisations that work to improve the integrity of political culture.

However, both these aspects of the constitutional guarantee are under stress in Sri Lanka. As elaborated in section 2.1 below, there are administrative and bureaucratic processes that make registration a hurdle for many who want to register. The security clearance required for registration causes undue delays and scrutiny, adversely impacting the association. The [Penal Code](#) provisions (Sections 365 and 365A) are interpreted by authorities to make registration as a not-for-profit virtually impossible for those focusing on working with the LGBTIQA+ community.

The [unpublished draft](#) of the proposed NGO (Registration and Supervision) bill [shared with the CSO/NGO Collective](#) by the Government in 2025 casts a wide net, defines Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in overly broad terms, and includes provisions for mandatory registration of NGOs and penalties for non-registration. If passed, this law will adversely affect the freedom of association of many collectives, movements, and civic groups that currently operate without such a legal requirement. Similarly, [the draft labour law](#) currently under review by an expert committee sets a higher threshold for the registration of Trade Unions.


## 1.2 Freedom of Assembly

Article 14(b) of the Constitution expressly guarantees every citizen the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. There is a long history of this freedom being tested in practice in Sri Lanka. The restrictions on Tamils enjoying this freedom in the north and east have been particularly severe and more systematic. Many cases against protesters from the *Aragalaya* period in 2022 are still being prosecuted in 2025. The draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) is not only still in the books but is also [used by the authorities](#) against citizens expressing fundamental freedoms. The protesters and Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) have [called upon the current government](#) to address the oppressive actions by the police and to bring to a speedy conclusion the prolonged judicial process.

There were routine restrictions on legitimate protest activities [in 2025](#) as documented by the INFORM - Human Rights Documentation Centre of Sri Lanka. In several instances, the police had used the provisions of Section 106(1) of the Code of Criminal Procedure Act (No. 15 of 1979) to restrict freedom of assembly. This included seeking court authorisation to obtain prohibition orders preventing victims and HRDs from holding protests in certain locations. This was the case in March 2025 when a [court order](#) was obtained against [protests](#) organised by the Unemployed Graduates' Association and university student unions. In June 2025, authorities filed [motions against protestors](#) demanding the removal of Tissa Viharaya. The same was done regarding the [memorialisation](#) events in the north in May 2025. In April 2025, courts, on application by the Police, issued orders restricting at least three peaceful protests, two organised by student activists in Colombo and one memorial event held in Batticaloa. The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) has also cautioned the Police against the misapplication of laws, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act, No. 56 of 2007, to stifle freedoms.

The police also disrupted and/or cracked down heavily on several protests during the period. These included the excessive and unlawful use of force to disperse protests against a [wind power project in Mannar](#) in September 2025, and the disruption of a remembrance and memorialisation event in May 2025 in Trincomalee in the east . The panellists were of the view that the lesson from *Aragalaya* was to stifle protests at the early stages with a show of force so as not to let them build into bigger struggles.

The [summoning and interrogations](#) of families of the disappeared and civil society activists working on different rights issues by the different units of the Police, including the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) and Counter Terrorism Investigation Department (CTID), continued unabated during this period. Families of the disappeared are a group known in the country for regular protests and gatherings for remembrance. As such, these summons and interrogations are considered as intimidatory tactics to stifle their public activism and freedom of assembly. This was on top of continuing surveillance of victims and activists working on issues like disappearance, land rights and environmental rights. For instance, in March 2025, the Colombo Crimes Division of the Police [interrogated Miflal Moulavi](#), a youth who had organised a protest to urge the release of a PTA detainee. The mothers who play a leadership role in the struggles by families of the forcibly disappeared, and HRDs working on minority rights, are frequently [contacted for inquiry and information](#) by the police, which also has an intimidatory effect. The government keeps renewing the [extraordinary gazette notification](#) under Section 12 of the [Public Security Ordinance](#). This gives the President the power to deploy armed forces in any part of the country for purposes that would otherwise be handled by the police. Given the past track record of the use of the Army in quelling protests, this is a cause for concern for civil society.

## 1.3 Freedom of Expression

[Article 14(1)(a) of the Constitution](#) states that every citizen is entitled to the freedom of speech and expression, including publication. The full enjoyment of this right continues to be threatened by the legislative framework and executive conduct and is disproportionately felt by numerical minorities and other marginalised groups.

Despite the change in administration, the legislative landscape remains a primary obstacle to free expression, particularly in the digital sphere. The widely criticised Online Safety Act (OSA), enacted in 2024, is yet to be repealed. This law criminalises a wide range of actions through broadly defined offences and was rushed through without fully taking on board [the recommendations of the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka.](#) The Supreme Court found that over thirty clauses of the Bill and certain omissions were [inconsistent with the Constitution](#) of Sri Lanka.

The OSA establishes a five-member, presidentially appointed commission with expansive powers to determine what constitutes "prohibited statements" and demand content removal. [Activists have highlighted](#) the potential for the Act's provisions to be misused to target political dissent and silence criticism, leading to self-censorship among journalists, activists, and content creators. The content of the law and the manner in which it was passed prompted [civil society representatives to withdraw](#) from engagement with the then-government on the Open Government Partnership (OGP). [The law remains on the books](#), despite civil society [pressure to repeal](#) or to make significant amendments.

The application of the PTA and abuse of the ICCPR Act by police also continue to stifle freedom of expression. The HRCSL has cautioned the police regarding the misapplication of

the ICCPR Act, for example, by seeking temporary court orders to block events in remembrance of wartime deaths in the north and east of the country, even though peaceful remembrance of the dead is a form of freedom of expression. Another instance was the arrest under the PTA of a Muslim youth for pasting stickers critical of Israel. This was criticised by the HRCSL, which conducted an inquiry into the issue.

There is also continued harassment and intimidation of journalists pursuing their profession. Journalists, especially those covering corruption, land disputes, and Tamil memorialization events in the north and east, face continued surveillance, intimidation, and interrogations by security and intelligence officials. This pattern of harassment persisted under the new administration, highlighting the institutional reluctance to fully embrace media freedom. Illustratively, Mr. Kumanan, a well-known Tamil photojournalist diligently covering the excavation of mass graves in Chemmani, was summoned by CTID in August 2025, without giving a reason, and was subjected to interrogation. Moreover, Mr. Subramaniyam Bhaskaran, another Tamil journalist, was assaulted by two individuals from Kilinochchi in January 2025, reportedly for his involvement in exposing corruption.

The government, while insisting on its support for media freedom, has also used its pulpit to admonish the media, emphasising the need for accountability and threatening to take action against media outlets that spread malicious news. The Reporters without Borders (RSF) country score for Sri Lanka in 2025 showed a marginal improvement when compared to 2024, but still remains a country where the conditions for practising journalism are considered 'difficult' or 'very serious'.

In conclusion, while the competitive elections of late 2024 led to an improvement in formal political rights scores, the actual lived experience of civil liberties, especially the fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, remained repressed, heavily constrained by new and existing legislation, and characterised by state monitoring and crackdowns on dissent.

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# PRINCIPLE SCORE

## 2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

*Score:*

| 1 | 2.0 | | | 5 |
|---|-----|---|---|---|
| | 2 | 3 | 4 | |
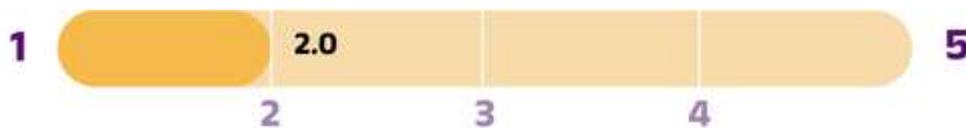
CSOs in Sri Lanka face a restrictive operational environment marked by onerous, opaque registration and reporting requirements and heavy government oversight. There is pervasive involvement of security actors, particularly affecting organisations working on rights issues and with numerical minority communities. The lack of accessible recourse mechanisms, pressure to self-censor, and the looming threat of a new NGO law further undermine CSO independence and the overall enabling environment.

### 2.1 Registration

Sri Lanka's current legal framework allows for multiple forms of registration. As listed earlier, CSOs can register under the VSSO Act, Societies Ordinance, Trusts Ordinance, Foundations and Companies Act. The Constitution guarantees freedom of association and expression, allowing collectives, groups, and movements to function even without registration. However, the framework is seriously hampered in practice in several ways.

*a) Administrative and regulatory measures*

The NGO Secretariat currently implements the registration process. It has been established to register and monitor NGOs and is not statutorily constituted under the VSSO Act in the manner it ideally should be. Registering a new entity is an onerous process with a string of requirements issued as regulations by the Secretariat and periodically updated. Documents not listed in the requirements are also requested during the registration process. Examples of this include additional activity information and police clearance reports for officials. The process remains uncertain, and some organisations involved in the expert panel discussion indicated that they had not received registration even after one year. There is also uncertainty around the process and a lack of a proper feedback mechanism to track progress and obtain

reasons for the delays. Those with personal contacts and linkages are able to track progress, while others are left in limbo without any feedback. When registration is denied or delayed due to a lack of security clearance, no reasons or details are provided to help remediate.

The NGO Secretariat was under the Ministry of Public Security until October 2025, and it was moved to the more appropriate Ministry of Rural Development and Community Empowerment. Theoretically, there is an appeal process to the Secretary to the Ministry under Section 6 of the VSSO Act, but its practical use for NGOs is doubtful, with no known reports of any appeal. The process is also susceptible to the vagaries of individuals who hold the position of Registrar or NGO Coordinators,and brings in additional uncertainties. There are also language barriers experienced by organisations from Tamil-speaking areas when dealing with the centralised national registration process, which is mostly conducted in Sinhala. The Registrar or Director General position, which remained vacant for over three months after the stepping down of the previous Director General in 2025, also caused a delay in the registration of new organisations during that period.

*b) Insisting and coaxing/coercing CSOs/NGOs to register or obtain secondary registration under the VSSO Act*:

Despite the availability of various forms of legal registrations or modes of incorporation, there is an active insistence on registration under the VSSO Act. For example, government authorities at the local level are reported to have refused to work with or collaborate with agencies not registered under the VSSO Act. When registering a not-for-profit entity under the Companies Act, another legally valid form of incorporation, there has, for some years now, been a de facto request to include a clause in the articles of association confirming that the entity concerned will also obtain a secondary registration with the NGO Secretariat.

Those who prefer to register under the Companies Act to avoid the onerous reporting requirements that follow registration under the VSSO Act now face higher costs of maintaining registrations. Those registering under the Companies Act will need to pay and retain a Company Secretary and incur charges for annual filing of returns and amendments. Registration under the Trust Ordinance, a valid form of incorporation in a country for not-for-profit work, is also increasingly inadequate, as some banks require secondary registration under the VSSO Act to operate bank accounts. Companies doing research and organisations providing psychosocial support services have also been told to register with the NGO Secretariat.

Thus, in practice, the requirement to register under the VSSO Act is no longer limited to social service organisations as per its original mandate. It is now used to coax a wide range of not-for-profit organisations into the Secretariat's monitoring and reporting ambit.

*c) The role of the security sector in vetting all the registration applications*:

There is an opaque but substantive vetting process for applications by the police and, at times, the security forces. The steps required include obtaining police clearance for founders, directors, and any key staff. These are time-consuming processes and remain outside the ambit of accountability of the NGO Secretariat, which only transfers the applicant's details for clearance to the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, respectively. The scope of this vetting is vague, broad and disproportionately impacts the Tamil and Muslim minority Community-Based Organisations (CBOs). For instance, in the north, east, and central regions where numerical minority communities are concentrated, this step also brings in security forces such as the Army or Navy, and affiliated intelligence units, into the process. They collect information to screen and assess suitability for recommending registration. The NGO Secretariat and the civil service officers have little to no control over these actors.

Organisations, including those represented on the expert panel, were affected by these vetting processes over the years. These initial vetting processes also lead to more intrusive information-gathering and surveillance measures subsequently.

### d) The threat of a new and more restrictive NGO law:

Over the years, the government has sought to enact a more restrictive NGO law. In 2025, the government shared a proposed draft with a selected group of CSOs. The draft, among other provisions, makes registration or secondary registration mandatory and non-registration an offence. The draft was not widely shared. The new law, under different pretexts, including the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) requirements, intends to bring all types of CSO/NGO activities under a one-size-fits-all law that will make supervision and control easier for the government. The law would give legal sanction to many overbearing practices that are currently being *de facto* practised. It has also been observed in the past that, at times, authorities acted on the basis that this law was already in place.

### e) Inability to register certain types of organisations:

The NGOs intending to work on the rights of LGBTIQA+ communities are often requested to rephrase their objectives (due to Sec 365 and 365 A of the current Penal Code, which can be interpreted as criminalising same sex relationships). Similarly, those organisations that plan to work on documenting or advocating on human rights violations related to wartime atrocities have their registrations heavily scrutinised, delayed or asked to dilute the language. An organisation working with commercial sex workers, as pointed out by a stakeholder engaged in this research, was also requested to reword their objectives into generic welfare language to suit local authority preferences.


## 2.2 Operational Environment

Sri Lankan laws relating to CSOs do not impose substantial limitations on what a CSO can and cannot do per se, and do not provide the government with authority to determine the objectives of CSOs. But the registration, reporting, supervision and surveillance activities that have evolved over the years make the operational environment for CSOs constrained and straight-jacketed by the government.

Government authorities have established a system of monitoring and reporting with the NGO Secretariat at the apex, supported by a decentralised structure consisting of officials at local levels and divisional level NGO Coordinators. The regulations provided for quarterly and annual reporting requirements are prescriptive and detailed. The reporting formats are extensive, and they require financial and project information at a granular level. They require both ex ante plans and estimates, as well as subsequent progress on implementation and organisational details. This is compounded by the need to get it countersigned by the local authority (Divisional Secretary/District Secretary) before it can be considered complete and submitted. Not getting this done can adversely impact the visas for expatriate staff and volunteers. But most importantly, filling this out and having to get it endorsed by the local authorities sets the stage for these local authorities to influence, request and instruct what CSOs should be doing. In addition to being a staff-intensive and time-consuming process beyond the capacity of many small CSOs, these inevitable interactions also create opportunities for the government to intervene, often linking the approval of project activities to these processes.

During these interactions, it is common for government authorities to interfere in the types of interventions (euphemistically called 'software/hardware'), the choice of geographic areas or

beneficiaries, the ratio of administrative costs to program costs, etc. A normalised regimen of interactions based on these reporting requirements has developed over the years. This goes beyond the requirement to share information to coordinate and collaborate, avoid duplication, ensure complementarity, and promote sustainability. According to experts engaged in this research, local authorities often transfer some of their responsibilities to these CSOs. This has resulted in some CSOs also becoming a vehicle for implementing government priorities rather than independently determining their objectives and interventions. Panellists noted that most CSOs often feel compelled to self-censor and modify their activities in response to external directives. Authorities often specify the percentage of resources that organisations are permitted to allocate to particular areas, further constraining operational flexibility. Pursuing one's objectives under these circumstances then becomes reliant on personal connections and familiarity with officials.

The operational space at the local level to collaborate with government authorities is circumscribed when not registered under the VSSO Act but under another legitimate law (for instance, the Trusts Ordinance). The local authorities either hold back on necessary collaboration, slow-walk approvals, or use these to coax registration under the VSSO Act. For example, according to a CSO that participated in the expert panel, evidence on the ground indicates that CSOs are refused a place in spaces like district Gender Based Violence (GBV) forums that deal with violence against women if they are not registered under the VSSO Act.

In parallel with the civilian authorities, there is a widespread system of military and police surveillance and monitoring processes that stifles the operating environment. Though this is present throughout the country, the sharp end of it is felt more acutely by the organisations in the north and east. There is regular use of anti-terror and other laws to question or interrogate HRDs. There is periodic information gathering and added scrutiny reported of 'sensitive work' (human rights documentation in the north, militarisation-related issues, working with families of the disappeared, working on mass graves issue, etc.). There are also certain types of organisations (e.g. 'Muslim' organisations in some parts) that are said to draw additional scrutiny and attention. So, in addition to more formal restrictions on certain activities (e.g. commemoration of wartime deaths, protest marches), there is also a climate of intimidation that discourages certain interventions by CSOs. This environment also forces many CSOs to self-censor or to seek alternative strategies and tactics to advance their objectives. Over the assessment period, panellists observed that authorities began treating certain subject areas as sensitive, citing 'national security' or 'cultural values' as reasons. The organisations that end up doing these activities (e.g., documenting wartime violations, supporting families of victims of disappearance, and issues of militarisation) do so with the expectation that this will entail a lot of questioning and scrutiny during and after implementation. As detailed earlier, there have also been instances of local authorities seeking court intervention to prohibit certain activities (e.g. protest marches).

The most pressing concern raised by many NGOs relates to the increasingly restrictive banking processes. The general suspicion of foreign funding and the need for control led the government to impose additional requirements on NGOs during wartime through the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL). Recently, the FATF recommendations and the Anti-Money Laundering and Countering Terrorist Financing laws have been used to further tighten these restrictions. The CBSL appears to classify the entire sector as 'high risk', thereby necessitating additional safeguards. So, banks have been instructed to ask CSOs to register with the NGO Secretariat under the VSSO Act to open bank accounts and continue transactions. Banks have also been asked to enhance their due diligence and to seek detailed project information regarding the receipt of any foreign funds. Some NGOs have been able to withstand this due to longstanding relationships with their respective banks and/or personal connections, but many others haven't been able to and have had to accede to requests from banks. As a result,

in the last 12-month period, many CSOs have had to respond to additional questions and suffered delays and withholding of funds. According to the panellist, there have also been instances of bank accounts being frozen or requested to be closed by the bank concerned, particularly when linked to diaspora funding. The request for project information by banks has obviously proven to be problematic in some instances, where organisations working with vulnerable beneficiaries or on sensitive issues cannot disclose certain details to banks due to confidentiality and security concerns. The banks and telecommunications agencies in Sri Lanka have readily shared information with security forces and law enforcement officers, sans adherence to due process. Participants in the research also reported that organisations returned the funds to those who remitted them because they were unable to fulfil all the due diligence requirements of the bank.

There are also suspicions/reservations among the state authorities about the motives of the diaspora (particularly the Tamil diaspora). Due to historical reasons, diaspora funding is crucial for supporting many families in war-torn areas. But local CSOs see it as risky to use these funds for purposes beyond basic relief or subsistence support, given the potential for heightened scrutiny. During inquiries, bank statements and funding sources are typically the first aspects to be queried. As a result, many CSOs are cautious about accessing these funds and usually do so only for limited purposes and with strict discretion.

## 2.3 Protection from Interference

There is a concerning lack of protection from undue state interference for the CSOs operating in Sri Lanka. While some of the interference stems from extant legal provisions, some emanates from the security apparatus. Protection from either of these is very tenuous for CSOs, given the absence of concrete, accessible legal provisions for redress and the power dynamics shaping the operational environment.

The VSSO Act, under Section 10, provides for government interference in the event of an allegation of fraud or mismanagement. In such instances, it allows the Minister, at his discretion, to appoint an interim board until issues are resolved and to pursue action (Section 11). This provision has not been used recently. But there are instances of inquiries into complaints regarding CSOs that the Director General (DG) of the NGO Secretariat deemed to have some merit. The provisions of the Act have also been used by the DG and the NGO coordinators to inspect the financial and program-related books, reports, bank statements, Human Resource (HR) manual, and management practices in CSOs. While there had been several such announced and unannounced visits to CSO in the past, such instances were not reported in 2025.  But given the experience, it remains a threat hanging above the CSOs. The current law (the VSSO Act) does not provide for the forcible dissolution of an NGO or the suspension of its registration.

The NGO Coordinators, based at the Divisional Secretariat offices, continue to review progress and annual reports and engage in monitoring. Though it varies across divisions, there is at times a negative/antagonistic perception about organisations working on human rights and advocacy. Currently, there are no legal protections against the above intrusions except perhaps by way of a fundamental rights application in the Supreme Court or a writ petition in the Court of Appeal. These avenues are hardly used by CSOs, given the power dynamics and the cost and effort involved. Other CSO entities, such as co-operatives, operate under the direct supervision of government-appointed officials, and certain CBOs, clubs, and societies are subject to the direct involvement of local-level government officials.

The CSOs are also concerned about the provisions in the draft Non-Government Organisations (Registration and Supervision) Bill shared with a group of CSOs early this year, which include more intrusive provisions on monitoring and supervision. It proposes introducing a renewable registration process at the discretion of the DG. This will make CSOs more vulnerable to government intervention and influence. The draft was also said to contain provisions for the suspension of registration and the dissolution of a registered NGO.

There is also a pervasive system of surveillance by a variety of security actors, ranging from officials in the military, CID, CTID, National Intelligence Bureau (NIB), as well as local police. They use pretexts like vetting for registration purposes, PTA, Anti-Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing-related laws (AML/TF) and other legal provisions, as well as take cover under the general pretext of national security, public order, etc. Once a file is open on a particular CSO, it remains open for a long time, leading to repeated information requests. These officials also occasionally impose their presence at community events.

In the past, the police have reportedly accessed bank statements and communication data without obtaining necessary warrants or judicial sanction. Security sector interference continues, with organisations having little recourse to question the reasons for it or to refuse to cooperate. Practically, given the power dynamics and the overriding interest in continuing to work in the area, it has been difficult for organisations to challenge such intrusions. When faced with such an intrusion, there is not much by way of protection for CSOs. Recourse to the HRCSL and activation of personal networks and connections and seeking support from other CSOs seem to be the responses adopted. As is only to be expected, intrusion and protection work differently based on the CSO's ethnic or geographic attributes. There is less trust between the state and some segments of the population, so seeking protection is seen by some organisations as exposing them to more state surveillance.

# PRINCIPLE SCORE

## 3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

*Score:*

| 1 | 2.3 | 5 |
|---|-----|---|
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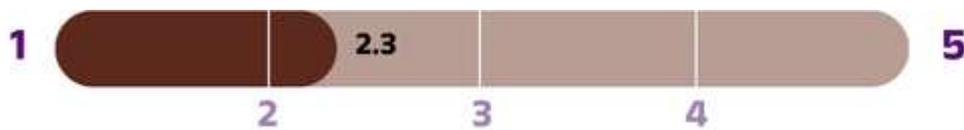
Sri Lankan CSOs face acute financial pressure due to major donor funding shifts, particularly the withdrawal of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funding, which severely reduced resources, especially for smaller and less diversified organisations. This has been compounded by declining support from other traditional donors and unequal access to knowledge about alternative funding sources, disproportionately affecting CSOs at the grassroots level. At the same time, increasing state control through restrictive regulations, burdensome banking procedures, and an unusual NGO tax regime has further constrained the sector.

### 3.1 Accessibility of Resources

2025 saw a drastic negative impact on Sri Lanka's funding situation, with negligible domestic funding sources for most categories of CSO activities. The local funding sources are very scarce. Generous community giving is witnessed for orphanages, elders' homes and during times of natural disasters, but little is available in any sustained manner. There are limited private philanthropic funds. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is mostly focused on service delivery areas, such as education, health, infrastructure for water and sanitation and environmental initiatives. Except during the 2022 public uprising, local funders are not known to support human rights, peace and reconciliation or governance-related initiatives. Support for these areas has predominantly come from foreign donor funds.

The abrupt and haphazard exit of USAID in early 2025 had a drastic impact on the funding situation in Sri Lanka. By some estimates, USAID accounted for about 50% of all donor funding to NGOs. Their contribution over the years was more pronounced in the areas of CSO support, democracy, human rights, women's rights, minority rights and governance work, as well as youth employment and Small and Medium Enterprises' (SMEs) economic development. They were a significant donor to LGBTIQA+ related work. This negatively

[affected CSOs](#) in Sri Lanka, particularly medium- to small-scale CSOs with less diversified funding bases. It also coincided with reductions in funding from other donors. While some bilateral donors and private philanthropies did step in with some flexibility, the sheer gap left by USAID is unlikely to be bridged in the short run. According to an expert working with detainees and victims of the Easter Sunday terror attack, little funding has been available to continue the work, with donor funding restricted and/or frozen and no resources available from the government.

With less funding available, demand from CSOs for the limited funding opportunities available has gone up and has resulted in stiff competition. More established NGOs with strong fundraising capacity tend to succeed in grant applications, while many others in the districts struggle to survive. Knowledge about funding sources and pipelines is very uneven, to the detriment of local-level organisations. Similarly, language barriers impede access for many local-level organisations. The channelling of assistance through a cascade of agencies by some donors means very little; it percolates down to the grassroots level at the end (most major donors appear to be taking this route, channelling funds through private for-profit contractors, UN agencies, or through a consortium of large NGOs). CSOs now also have reduced or limited training and capacity development resources, given the constrained funding environment.

The government bureaucracy is keen on greater control over foreign funding that reaches CSOs. The hurdles posed by strict reporting and banking restrictions were considered by the panellists as discouraging some donors. Sri Lanka charges an NGO Tax (considering 3% of the foreign fund receipts as [assessable income](#) and applying [30% tax rate](#) to give an effective tax rate of 0.9% of total receipts, subject to any allowable exemptions) on donor funding. With most bilateral donors considering this an ineligible cost, local organisations are compelled to raise resources separately to pay this tax. This is a huge burden for smaller grassroots organisations that have limited or no other sources of revenue. Except in a very limited and negligible instance, there isn't any systematic tax concession that benefits the CSO sector. There are no provisions for tax deductions for donations to the vast majority of CSOs in practice, even if they are working on relief, poverty reduction, etc.

The new draft law proposes mandatory registration with the NGO Secretariat and regular reporting to operate bank accounts. In a situation where the sector is primarily dependent on foreign funding, these administrative requirements pose a big challenge. The CSO groups are working to understand this dynamic and advocate for a more enlightened banking process that provides a level playing field for CSOs.

## 3.2 Effectiveness

Traditional donors broadly align with local priorities and share an emphasis on effectiveness, enabling some collaboration. However, rigid reporting requirements, limited funding flexibility, and eligibility criteria often pose challenges for smaller CSOs, while the lack of multi-year and core funding forces organisations into constant, resource-intensive fundraising. Only some donors accommodate local language in their call for proposals and reporting.

According to the experts engaged in this research, while donors do have their agenda and priorities, CSOs can also select donors that align with their organisational priorities. All donors have their foreign policy priorities, and they instrumentalise foreign aid to achieve those objectives. In this regard, sufficient opportunities within the limited quantum of funds tend to be available to CSOs to pursue their priorities. During 2025, the themes/areas of interest for the traditional donors were generally broad enough to accommodate the local priorities. However, this was not always the case, and there are misalignments as well that local CSOs

had to carefully navigate. This is further compounded by the Sri Lankan government's priorities and preferences. Some donors showed flexibility as the sector was affected by the withdrawal of USAID funding. The bilateral agreements through which Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) is delivered mean that some of the sensitive/risky interventions that may not find favour with the Sri Lankan government may need to be outside of this mechanism. The sector has witnessed flexibility on the donors' front as well. There is no pressure or intrusion into the governance aspects of local CSOs by donors. They generally review these prior to the award of assistance and often recommend capacity-building initiatives to address shortcomings. Once awarded, the focus areas remain locked and become less flexible.

While some donors take security issues into consideration, it is not the case with others. Though security is prioritised, there are varying degrees of concern for partner and beneficiary safety. Security concerns are sometimes acknowledged by the donor, but practical support to mitigate risks has not kept pace with the need in a timely manner.

A number of areas requiring improvement were noted during the expert panel discussion. The size and prerequisites of certain funding opportunities preclude smaller organisations from applying (e.g., the recent EU call for proposals). Some are earmarked for those registered as NGOs, leaving out other forms of registered organisations (e.g., those registered under the Companies Act). This forces organisations to register as an NGO, which creates challenges. There is rigidity in reporting requirements, which are becoming increasingly onerous for smaller organisations. The donor's expectations regarding what is feasible in terms of outcomes should be more realistic to avoid incentivising inflated reporting of achievements. Lack of multi-year funding, lack of core funding, and limited allocation to reserve funds force CSOs to chase funds almost on an annual/half-yearly basis. Panellists also suggested that there is a shift in donor approach to investments in CSO networks and collectives, but this is currently often incorporated as an afterthought and not adequately resourced. It was also noted that funding opportunities are uneven across the Island and that a more concerted effort is needed to balance them. Improved mapping of needs and actors is also required to inform these interventions.

However, it is worth noting that donors have attempted to address some of the rigidities and conditionalities. There were some calls for proposals and solicitations accommodating local languages. Some outreach work, for example, regional briefings in Tamil and Sinhala separately about upcoming funding opportunities, has been conducted by selected donors in different parts of the country. And there are small grants now available for smaller organisations to apply for, including from the Australian, UK and Canadian embassies in the country. The two-stage process for solicitation, with a concept note followed by a full technical proposal, helps many resource-strapped organisations save significant time. Some flexibility within limits was visible. There is an acknowledgement that the reporting responsibilities are, in fact, crowding out skilled time away from advocacy/program work. However, there is still a need for more support for smaller organisations to ensure their funding portfolios are diversified.

## 3.3 Sustainability

The current funding model is unsustainable and fails to provide long-term stability for CSOs in Sri Lanka. As the country reverts to a typical middle-income status, traditional donor support has declined significantly, with Sri Lanka no longer a priority for many donors and limited scope for self-reliance or private philanthropy. This constrained resource environment weakens organisational resilience and threatens the continuity of CSO programmes.

NGOs in Sri Lanka are primarily dependent on foreign funding with very limited local fundraising possibilities. It has been virtually impossible to raise any significant local funds for sensitive issues such as human rights, peace and reconciliation or governance. Most of the local funds are for relief, service delivery and basic infrastructure. Most CSOs do not have a diverse mix of funding sources and grow to rely on one or two donors. The USAID withdrawal demonstrated how reliant the sector had become on a single source of funding. Funding is mostly project-based, with very little core funding that is unattached. Sustainability in this context is challenging. More severely affected are those in the periphery who have less access to funding sources. For example, advocacy efforts by CSOs aimed at multi-year reforms such as constitutional changes, peace and reconciliation, human rights, anti-corruption, and women's rights require long-term commitment. However, these initiatives cannot deliver results within the limited timeframes of short funding cycles. Multi-year funding is rare, especially during crises such as the one occasioned by the USAID funding stoppage. Knowledge of global private philanthropy is limited and needs development.

Over the years, other forms of CSOs (e.g., trade unions, media organisations) have also become somewhat reliant on NGO funding and face sustainability issues. The sector is no longer able to attract and retain young talent, as evidenced by staff turnover in the organisations that the expert panellists were from. It is evident that the CSO sector will have to shrink and restructure accordingly. Many organisations have already shed staff, with the rural-based organisations most impacted.

The successful People's Uprising of 2022 drew in vast numbers of civic collectives and individuals who were not reliant on the NGO system. The individuals in these CSOs and collectives were engaged in other professions while also committed to bringing about change in the system of governance in Sri Lanka. Many private actors were willing to fund these initiatives. This opened up the possibility of considering actors embedded in other walks of life and organically linked to society as actors to be mobilised for change in the future. There is a need to revitalise volunteerism to support the sustainability of initiatives and institutions that have taken a back seat over the last couple of decades due to the funded nature of interventions. It is considered imperative to develop local funding sources and to work on accessing diaspora funding in a more structured and open manner.

# 4. Open and Responsive State

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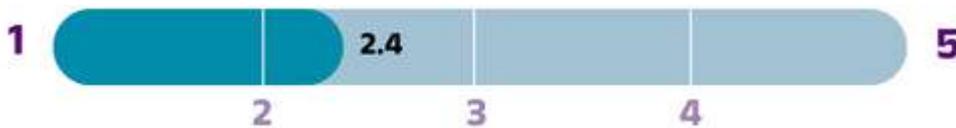


Sri Lanka has a strong Right to Information (RTI) Act and a widely respected commission. But information sharing by public authorities remains lagging. Formal mechanisms for continuous dialogue and cooperation between CSOs and the Sri Lankan government are largely lacking, inconsistent, and predominantly reactive. While certain government agencies do engage CSOs on an *ad hoc* basis, this interaction is characterised by informality, lack of transparency and a defined purpose. Crucially, dialogue is rarely structured to include genuine consultation on policy-making or legislative reform, and less inclusive of CSOs that are critical of the government's policies, leaving the overall relationship generally tense and mistrustful rather than collaborative.

## 4.1 Transparency

According to the Global Right to Information rating, Sri Lanka has one of the best Right to Information laws in the region. The RTI Act, passed in 2016, has many salient features. It has a wide and inclusive interpretation of public authority and casts a strict obligation on them by specifying that 'every citizen shall have a right of access to information which is in the possession, custody or control of a public authority' (Sec.3). The Act also places the legal burden on the government to organise its records so that they can be released (Sec.8). The reasons that can be invoked for the exception to the general obligation to release are specific and narrowly defined, covering areas such as protection of personal privacy, national security and international relations, economic prejudice and commercial confidentiality, judicial integrity, parliamentary privilege (Sec.5). Even in such instances there are safeguards in the form of overarching public interest, 10-year sunset clause and severability to ensure citizens' right to information. It has an independent and well-regarded Right to Information Commission appointed by the constitutional council. The commission has demonstrated an admirable streak of independence, issuing bold determinations for a new institution and a practice that

was going against the ingrained culture of how things worked. The Act has made significant inroads. The Governance Diagnostic Report of the IMF commends it for fostering an 'embryonic culture of transparency'. The commission has made several bold decisions that have forced public authorities to share critical information. In the last few years, this included copies of asset/liabilities declaration of key individuals, foreign loan deals entered into by the government, draft fact-finding reports on ethnic riots, Presidential Commission report on Easter Sunday attacks, key pandemic procurement information and social security payments. Most importantly, many citizens are using it to make government more accountable at the local level. There are journalists who specialise in RTIs to improve their reporting on issues, and the Sri Lankan media industry has a dedicated award for the best journalist using RTI for a feature.

According to the panellists, there is trust in the process built over the last few years. But the implementation is inconsistent and still has a long way to go in a country like Sri Lanka. Awareness of the use of this mechanism needs to be considerably improved. More socialisation of the appeal process and support for accessing the long, drawn-out appeal process are necessary. There are segments of the population where the usage is limited due to language barriers. The RTI commission is under-resourced and is yet to fill its full cadre or undertake more training of its officers or required outreach activities.

In practice, government and civil service maintain some opaqueness. As a general practice, public access to relevant government information remains limited, and the onus falls on interested citizens to request it. The draft laws and development initiatives come to public knowledge only when they are at an advanced stage, and without any meaningful engagement in shaping them. For example, the draft NGO Bill of 2025 or the draft Labour law of 2024 have not yet been publicly shared.

The proactive disclosure requirement of the RTI Act, contained in Sections 8, 9, and 10 of the Act and in Regulation Number 20, has not taken hold in the public sector. Basic information on laws being drafted, budgets, procurement, etc., is still hard to obtain. Similarly, data that may be considered controversial are also denied in the first instance and obtaining that information becomes a time-consuming exercise, as in the case of information pertaining to child marriages. Experience of CSOs who participated in the panel indicates that the public authorities have a very uneven adherence to the timelines prescribed in the Act, and there is frequent and arbitrary invoking of exemptions to refrain from giving information. These include citing national security, business or price sensitivity, foreign policy implications, etc. An example is the recent denial of information on the President's local travel costs by the Presidential Secretariat, citing security sensitivities in October of 2025. The government currently lacks an open data policy in place.

## 4.2 Participation

There is a general reluctance among public authorities to engage civil society representatives as stakeholders. They seem to place less value on the perspectives that civil society actors may bring to policy deliberations and decision-making, as evidenced by a lack of a structured approach to engaging civil society. While they may recognise the role of civil society to draw attention to issues, often CSOs are not seen as partners in deliberating on alternatives and developing solutions. The state-civil society relationship seems to be generally framed around watch dog or shedding light functions (for example, Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) highlighting the mal-practices in health sector procurement in 2024), critical and often confrontational engagement on rights and governance issues (for example, protests by unemployed graduates, in March 2025) and gap filling in service delivery (for example,

complementing government's work in development, rights and humanitarian field). A more collaborative approach will require a paradigm shift in government attitude towards CSOs. There is a sense among some panellists that this government comes with an attitude of 'we have the mandate, and we know best', foreclosing real interaction. At a more basic transactional level, occasionally, there is space for selected CSOs to engage in processes like District or Divisional Development Committees. But these too are by invitation and are limited to one or two agencies in the area and are personality dependent.

There were notable instances of participation of CSOs in 2025 – this included the inclusion of a women's organisation/Trade Union in the National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC), inclusion of TISL on committees developing anti-corruption laws and action plans, consultation with election monitoring organisations on electoral reforms, etc. There were also some consultations on the drafting of a new counter-terrorism law, drafting of an amendment to the OSA and the proposed NGO Act in 2025. However, these interactions were exceptions rather than the norm and are illustrative of the problems in how participation is done. In nearly all of the aforementioned cases, the civil society groups concerned had to lobby and pressure hard to avail such an opportunity. There is no structured mechanism through which CSOs can contribute to the process. The Open Government Partnership process (OGP), the Open Parliament Caucus, parliamentary oversight committees, the white paper system of consultations on policy development and structured dialogues with concerned CSOs on issues are still to take effect under this new government. Regarding OGP, despite some initial interest in restarting the stalled OGP process, the government did not follow through by the May 2025 deadline, resulting in Sri Lanka losing its OGP membership.

CSOs contended that the government's actions were central to the continued weakness of consultative governance. In such a situation, who gets consulted is also very arbitrary and is often determined by personal connections and proximity to power rather than through a systematic process. This adds a layer of gatekeeping which is not conducive to broader-based engagement. According to the panellists in the discussion, the CSOs in the periphery, particularly those from the numerical minority groups in north and east, are often left out. The language barrier also plays a role in screening out/tuning out, since most deliberations take place in Sinhala. The CSO consultations that the NGO Secretariat facilitates, or the dialogues and consultations that arise from donor insistence, are limited in their reach and depth. Many of these consultations are organised at the last minute and are often tokenistic.

The CSOs played an important role in a number of areas: for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020/2021), the economic crisis (2022), etc., in coordination with the government, particularly at local levels. This support is acknowledged and appreciated in meetings, but beyond that, the state does not seem to value any design and policy inputs from CSOs. Some CSOs are critical of the government's economic recovery programme developed within the confines of IMF conditionalities and policy prescriptions of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), but have very little interaction with the government on these issues. One expert panellist observed that as long as CSOs' views are aligned with those of the government on a particular issue, the government is willing to listen, but not otherwise. At times, consultations tend to include stakeholders whose views fall within the government's comfort zone, while more critical or dissenting voices are less frequently engaged. On reforms to laws and regulations, therefore, the CSOs have had to appeal to the courts to be heard, but given the short timelines and absence of judicial review, the efficacy of this approach is also very limited. The CSOs on the panel also cautioned about the risk of co-option by the government, which affects participation.

Sri Lanka currently has a government formed by a party that is holding such power for the first time. As such, naturally, the government is cautious in its engagement with other stakeholders.

This is also the first time Sri Lanka has had a tight knit, cadre-based, left-leaning political party in power. Unlike at any time in the past, the party hierarchy is also a de facto power centre, alongside the more formal decision structures in the government. Even the CSOs are yet to map out strategies of engaging and participating with this type of government that is heavily beholden to a political party's machinery in its decision-making process.

## 4.3 Accountability

There are limited consultations and an absence of meaningful feedback from the government. Often, CSOs have observed that key decision-makers in the government are not in the meetings. The effect of the limited participation of CSOs in government consultations/decision-making process is unclear due to the absence of feedback. There are occasional verbal rejections of suggestions and verbal responses to persistent enquiries regarding feedback, but there isn't a system for recording the consultation process and providing feedback on the inputs provided. For example, in the case of submissions by selected CSOs on PTA reforms to the Minister of Justice, it is the CSOs concerned who put out a record of the engagement. Since CSO participation is not anchored in any written-down policy or process, there is no structured feedback either. The committee appointed to review PTA law and draft a new law sought public input in May 2025 over a narrow two-week period. Many CSOs responded with written submissions, but have not received any feedback and remain unclear about whether or how their inputs will be incorporated. After initial reluctance, the government became receptive to civil society feedback on the Proceeds of Crimes Act (POCA) in 2025, following extensive engagement and advocacy, and on the Amendment to the Companies Act of 2007 to include beneficial ownership provisions. But beyond the interactions, the CSOs had to wait for the bills to come out to see if their perspectives had been incorporated. There also seems to be a reluctance to publicly acknowledge the integration of feedback from CSOs. For example, despite sustained engagement and feedback by Muslim women's groups on the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA) reforms, the government went back on reform commitments without acknowledging past interactions and agreements.

However, some government feedback has also been noted during 2025, particularly to trade unions given their political affiliations and mobilisation capacity. Feedback is provided to unions affected by certain policies. For example, some of the key trade unions, which were also part of the National Labour Advisory Committee (NLAC), were involved in the discussions around the labour law reform since 2023 and were kept abreast of the progress. Once the new Government came into power, after initial deliberations, the Minister then appointed a 19-member committee in August 2025 to review the draft before deciding on the next steps. This was done in part in response to the views expressed by trade unions on the earlier draft.

# PRINCIPLE SCORE

# 5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society

*Score:*

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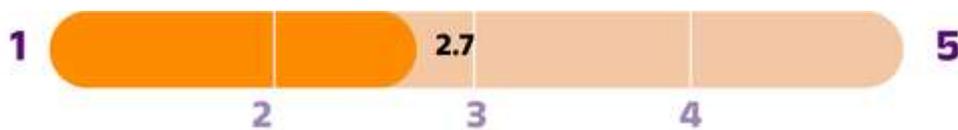
CSOs are kept in the periphery by the current government, with limited institutional inclusion, despite some official acknowledgement of their positive contributions in certain areas. Persistent anti-NGO sentiments within segments of political circles and negative portrayals in mainstream media continue to undermine civic actors. Structural barriers such as patriarchy, majoritarianism, and a conflict-laden history further constrain the inclusion of women, youth, and marginalised communities.

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

Public discourse around civil society has become relatively moderate in recent years, compared to the 2019-2021 period. This has been a function of changes seen in the government's rhetoric, media representation, and public perceptions. The '*Aragalaya*' or people's uprising in 2022 has reinvigorated confidence in civic activism. This, in turn, has had a positive effect on how CSOs are viewed. However, the change is fragile and easily reversible and it is tested often, particularly when dealing with security and cultural issues. This environment, though improved, still limits the ability of CSOs, especially minority-led or rights-based organisations, to engage in constructive and respectful public discourse.

When compared to some of the previous governments that ruled Sri Lanka and were openly hostile and actively fomented anti-NGO sentiments (e.g., in 2005-2015, 2019 – 2022, 2021),the current government considers civil society as a peripheral player. While the main party in the ruling formation (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna - JVP, aka People's Liberation Front) did not have a pro-NGO stance in the past, its position since then seems to have evolved. The ruling alliance consists of individuals who have had a productive working relationship with civil society, and some of them have been part of CSOs in the past and recognise the role they could play. The CSOs have seen some of them reach out for support.

The government recognises that it benefited from the role that civic activism played in the 'Aragalaya'. But there remains a small but vociferous minority in politics who are willing and ready to stoke anti-NGO sentiments. This is more to advance their interests and less as a mean of substantive critique of CSOs. Of particular note is the demand in February 2025 by a prominent opposition politician for a Parliamentary Committee to investigate the role of USAID-funded CSOs in the regime change that took place in 2022 due to the people's uprising. A politician aligned with that faction has also written a book taking a critical look at US government's and USAID's role in intervening in domestic 'regime change' politics. However, such sentiments do not find much resonance with the larger public. Despite provocations, the government and main opposition political parties have not altered their approach/narrative on CSOs. Despite some lingering mistrust, there hasn't been any public airing of opposition to CSO work by either the government or the main opposition parties. The Foreign Minister kept to his pledge at the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) in September 2025 to shift the NGO Secretariat from under the Ministry of Public Security to the Ministry of Rural Development and Community Empowerment.

The media landscape, too, recognises the change post-Aragalaya and is seen as less strident and less anti-NGO when compared to earlier years. While there aren't any over-the-top headlines as seen a few years ago against the CSOs, the underlying partisan perception informed by distrust, suspicion and antagonism hasn't changed, particularly in Sinhala media (print and electronic). This is particularly evident in relation to organisations working on rights of numerical minorities, human rights, LGBTIQA+ and women's rights issues. The accusations of CSOs being 'anti-national/separatist', 'wasteful and profligate', 'foreign agents', 'purveyors of western influence' still lurk below the surface. This was evidenced in the coverage around the excavation of mass graves in Chemmani, as well as other memorial events in the north, by the Sinhala media. There continues to be greater suspicion when it comes to work supported by the (Tamil) diaspora community. The general tone when covering the government's proposed NGO Act or the CBSL's measures to enhance scrutiny, has been one of the need for greater control of the sector. The trade unions are portrayed as disruptive, and this is in line with the government's narrative. The Tamil media space is generally more accepting and legitimising of the role of CSOs in democracy.

## 5.2 Perception of Civil Society and Civic Engagement

Post-Aragalaya, there is a greater confidence in civic activism as a way of influencing change among a large section of the Sri Lankan population. Citizen support and engagement manifest in different ways. It is strongest at the grassroot level when they have a direct link with a trusted CSO whose positive work they are familiar with. Influence at this level is directed at local decision-makers. Protests at local and national levels to influence decisions are a widely used mode of civic activism to bring about change. While most often consisting of directly affected populations, occasionally these attract a wider audience, such as the protest against wind farms and sand mining in Mannar in November 2025. Cutting across ethnic lines to show solidarity on wartime accountability issues and minority rights issues is minimal. Where they exist, it is confined to a small group crossing over conventional communal boundaries to support. The ethnic dimension remains a polarising factor. The perception of CSOs as anti-national during the war years still permeates the thinking of members of the public, as stated by the expert panel participant.

The people do still consider CSOs as legitimate interlocutors with the state, so they reach out to accompany them to government mechanisms like HRCSL, Office of Missing Persons (OMP), etc. But on some cultural and nationalist issues (e.g. on issues pertaining to the

LGBTIQA+ community, reconciliation/accountability for wartime atrocities, etc.), there is often a disconnect between the public and the civil society actors given distinct ideologies and approaches. Civil society has not been able to convince the masses nor convert the traditional and conventional ideologies of the public and influential figures like religious leaders.

When it comes to influencing change at the national level, the CSOs from the marginalised Tamil areas in the north and east seem to have a trust deficit with the actors in Colombo, as evidenced by a lack of coordination on critical issues of advocacy. National civil society actors are viewed with suspicion by some north/east civic actors, and perceptions of their effectiveness vary, affecting legitimacy and trust. Traditional centres of power, including religious authorities, rarely highlight or support civic engagement, sometimes reinforcing scepticism. Citizens feel they have little influence over political decisions, as noted in this study, and citizens' participation in the public budget process and participation in community or civic initiatives is low. Civic education is limited, with schools and local programs offering minimal awareness of political rights and responsibilities, or of the importance of active engagement. On the other hand, Sri Lankans have always reposed faith in elections and turn out in large numbers. Election as an exercise of basic civic duty is still a strong sentiment. This is reflected in a respectable turnout of over 62% even in the third election held in a short span of time in early 2025.

The legitimacy of CSOs to advocate on issues is derived from their public acceptance. There is a tendency to portray the changes sought by some CSO actors in a negative light as 'un-Sri Lankan' and thereby delegitimise the effort. Over the last few years, this trend has been evident in the context of crucial reforms to Muslim personal law, decriminalisation of abortion, Penal Code amendments to strengthen LGBTIQA+ rights, a tourism promotion campaign that is inclusive, etc. The public narratives on these issues are shaped by influential and conservative segments of society. For example, by the religious leaders of the All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulema (ACJU) on MMDA reforms in July 2025, and by the Maha Sangha of the Buddhist order on decriminalising homosexuality in October 2025. The CSOs working on these issues will have to contend with this.

CSOs are also observing a trend whereby the NPP government is consolidating its power at the local level, which at times results in the politicisation of local-level civic bodies. The approach is seen at the village level societies and committees, where there is a trend to place people from the ruling Party as key office-bearers. In 2025, this phenomenon was noted in youth clubs and Public Safety committees in Karapitiya. This level of politicisation may become problematic for CSOs that are expected to maintain independence in a fiercely partisan political environment, as found in Sri Lanka.

Social media space is much more eclectic. While amplifying the negatives, the democratic nature of the space has also allowed CSOs to articulate their positions and communicate with the larger society via this medium. In a backdrop of civil society narratives and voices being drowned out and not reaching the masses via traditional media, social media has provided a necessary avenue and some degree of exposure.


## 5.3 Civic Equality and Inclusion

There are legal guarantees for equality in the Constitution, enshrined in Article 12 (1) and 12(2) of the Fundamental Rights Chapter. But the participation and inclusivity of marginalised groups and the numerical minorities' ability to fully engage in civic activism and influence change are limited by a number of factors. The long history of war has led to a proliferation of CSOs in the

north and east of the country relative to the rest of the country. The challenges for the inclusion of different groups are described below.

In Sri Lanka, entrenched patriarchal structures significantly influence gender dynamics, where women, despite their active participation in the public sphere and various economic sectors, remain markedly underrepresented in leadership roles. Similarly, the LGBTIQA+ community continues to encounter substantial legal and social barriers to equality. Provisions within the Penal Code, such as Section 365 and 365A, remain in the books, effectively criminalising consensual same-sex acts and contributing to broader socio-economic marginalisation. While the *Aragalaya* protest movement initially provided a space for more open participation, subsequent pushbacks, including the government's distancing itself from inclusive tourism initiatives and stagnant Penal Code reforms highlight the persistent influence of conservative religious and societal views that delegitimise these communities.

Ethnic and religious minorities face a distinct set of challenges rooted in a predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarian state outlook. In the Northern and Eastern provinces, the Sri Lankan Tamil community often feels unable to influence national-level governance due to factors such as heavy regional militarisation, language barriers, and a lack of proximity to centralised power in Colombo. Advocacy for key issues, including disappearances, land rights, and wartime accountability is frequently viewed through a national security lens, placing activists at risk of surveillance or detention under laws such as the PTA. This environment of heightened scrutiny also extends to the Muslim community, where deep-rooted prejudices intensified following the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, often subjecting Muslim-led NGOs and HRDs to excessive administrative monitoring and societal suspicion.

The Malaiyaha Tamil community, though having obtained citizenship rights in recent decades, continues to struggle for full structural integration and access to essential government services. Many remain geographically and economically marginalised within plantation estates, performing poorly across human development indicators such as education and healthcare. Their struggle for land rights often attracts less national priority than other ethnic issues, further exacerbated by a lack of political representation in non-plantation districts. Furthermore, internal social stratifications, such as caste, continue to divide communities and are occasionally mirrored within CSOs, impacting how leadership is formed and how resources are distributed.

These systemic divisions are often reinforced by mutual distrust and historical grievances, hindering collective civic efforts. Certain issues, such as personal law reform or the constitutional status of Buddhism, are frequently treated as sensitive or exclusive domains of specific communities, making broad cross-ethnic collaboration difficult. Even major citizen mobilisations like the *Aragalaya*, which successfully brought together diverse groups across ethnic lines, were noted for having "blind spots" in adequately articulating and addressing the specific, varied demands of Sri Lanka's many marginalised communities.

# PRINCIPLE SCORE

# 6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

*Score:*

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|---|---|---|---|---|
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Although digital access in Sri Lanka is relatively high, the digital space for CSOs is constrained by surveillance, security risks, and privacy violations. State monitoring, the OSA, and the continued misuse of the PTA severely restrict online freedom of expression despite the absence of any recent internet shutdowns. Ongoing harassment, especially targeting women, continues to undermine a safe and enabling digital environment.

## 6.1 Digital Rights and Freedoms

There has not been an internet shutdown since 2022, when it was carried out to constrain civil society from mobilising against the government. However, no one has yet been held accountable for this breach of citizens' rights.

The widely condemned OSA with draconian provisions, remains on the books. There have already been complaints and investigations under that law including injunction orders against YouTubers/social media content creators as well as arrests and cases filed. In future, these could easily be weaponised against CSOs. This, as many have pointed out, could have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and expression of dissent. The PTA has also been used to detain a person for a social media post critiquing Israel.

The government is said to continue monitoring and surveillance of the online activity of journalists and activists. The investigation by CTID in August 2025 of a prominent Tamil journalist who was diligently covering the progress on the excavation of Chemmani mass graves is a case in point. The panel member in the CSO meeting reported that CID asked a group working with Rohingya refugees to remove a social media post as it was claimed to be not in the best interest of the country. There had also been instances of coercion to have posts taken down. A clear case in point is the pressure placed on a photojournalist in May 2025, by the President's Media Unit, to remove an unflattering photograph of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake from his account. These measures have prompted journalists and activists to be

extra cautious and have led to self-censorship/self-imposed curtailment.

Global social media platforms often miss the local nuance. During elections, their response to take down posts including on allegations of hate speech, misinformation, fake news and use of children in propaganda was slow, and in many instances no action was taken. This was the case not only for CSOs initiating requests but also for complaints and requests filed by formal bodies such as the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL).

## 6.2 Digital Security and Privacy

There have been some recent positive developments in digital security and privacy. The Personal Data Protection (Amendment) Act was passed in October 2025, bringing to a close a long process of operationalising the original law. This is expected to address the privacy concerns expressed by civil society actors. Its effectiveness is yet to be seen. Cybersecurity law is also in the process of being enacted.

However, there are many cases of the targeting of women politicians and activists. For example, as experienced by a Muslim woman HRD panellist, social media sites of women activists working on personal law reforms were visited, photos downloaded and disparaging comments left. Many instances of women political leaders being subject to sexist remarks have been sadly noted. According to a recent study by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), online harassment of women and marginalised groups like the LGBTIQA+ community remains an ongoing concern, with hate speech against them a regular feature in their social media timelines. According to an LGBTIQA+ activist in the panel, there is widespread use of anonymous accounts to target activists and others working on critical rights issues. As observed by experts in the panel, closer to any legitimate protests that are organised, there is usually increased online activity in an organised manner opposing that and vilifying the organisers.

Many CSOs use WhatsApp as a main mode of communication. It remains vulnerable to hacking/phishing, and there have been several instances of civil society actors' accounts being hacked or compromised in the past year. Generally in the civil society space, people who lack digital literacy or tech savviness are susceptible to scams, etc. There is inadequate cybersecurity awareness beyond a limited number of CSOs.

The government's plans on introducing an E-National Identity Card have raised concerns regarding surveillance, control and privacy with the Cyber Security Bill currently in the works. A five-year cybersecurity strategy is in place. But the national digital infrastructure and government sites have proven to be vulnerable and have been subjected to hacking. Government water board systems were hacked, and 16,000 records were exposed. Recently, the Health Ministry site was hacked, and nearly 400,000 records, including personal information, were exposed. In October 2025, a technical failure affecting the Lanka Government Cloud (LGC) has rendered sites of many critical services inoperative for days, including the Registrar General's Department, the Department of Motor Traffic and Sri Lanka Police. As the government moves ahead with digital ID and centralisation of personal data, such breaches raise concerns about privacy for CSO activists and citizens alike.

## 6.3 Digital Accessibility

Sri Lanka, while having made some progress, still has a long way to go to ensure satisfactory digital accessibility for its citizens. Internet usage had gradually increased from 48% in 2022

to 55% in 2024 at the national level, while significant disparities exist between urban (67%), rural (53%) and estate sectors (38%) as per the [government's survey data](). Digital literacy similarly shows distinct variations between urban (76%), rural (64%) and estate sectors (45%) in that order. A similar trend is also seen in internet use in the urban (66%), rural (49%) and estate (31%) sectors. This also impacts the use of digital means to engage with these populations by CSO actors. The estate sector comprising the Malaiyaha Tamil community is the most disadvantaged on this front as well.

[Sri Lanka's digital landscape]() is characterised by high mobile connectivity and a growing internet user base. The total population stands at 23.3 million, with nearly 80 per cent residing in rural areas. Mobile connectivity is particularly robust, with 30.3 million active cellular connections, equivalent to 130 per cent of the total population. While mobile use is nearly universal, internet penetration is more moderate but expanding rapidly; there are 13.9 million internet users, representing a 59.7 per cent penetration rate following a significant 12 per cent annual growth in adoption. Social media usage is also on the rise, with 9.00 million active user identities, or 38.7 per cent of the population. Facebook and YouTube remain the dominant platforms, each reaching approximately 9 million and 8.82 million users, respectively. Emerging platforms like TikTok have seen explosive growth, increasing by over 25 per cent year-on-year to reach 6.79 million adults. Infrastructure has also improved significantly, with median mobile internet speeds jumping 141 per cent to reach 45.64 Mbps, providing a faster foundation for the country's evolving digital behaviours.

Fixed-line broadband coverage is very low in several rural parts of Sri Lanka, which predominantly rely on mobile 4G coverage for internet access. The quality is frequently hampered by weather, proximity to the tower and congestion during peak time, making access an issue. According to a World Bank study published in 2022, Sri Lanka is one of the few South Asian countries to meet the UN Broadband Commission's target by providing fixed broadband (5GB) at or below 2% of monthly GNI per capita. However, high-speed connectivity remains largely out of reach for many, as an [entry-level 30 Mbps connection can consume up to 15% of annual GNI per capita](), making advanced digital services unaffordable for a significant portion of the population.

According to the CSO experts who participated in the discussion, the lower skill levels of the target community and CSO staff mean very slow adoption of security measures. This also means a dearth of skills, such as discernment of disinformation and misinformation and the use of AI among significant segments of the population. As a result, the CSO actors still rely heavily on face-to-face meetings and phone calls in their engagement strategy with target communities.

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# C) Recommendations

**To the Government of Sri Lanka**

- **Refrain** from any new law that imposes mandatory registration on CSOs or encodes expanded surveillance and control over the sector. Retain the plural means and voluntary nature of registration of CSOs.

- **Codify** a voluntary, user-friendly registration process that gives full effect to the fundamental rights guaranteed in the Constitution of Sri Lanka and is developed with civil society input.

- **Eliminate security sector intervention in civil society registration** and clarify that this is not provided for under existing law. Requests for input from security or intelligence officials and special police clearance reports should not be part of the routine registration process.

- **Confirm and communicate** that a secondary registration under the Voluntary Social Service Organisations (VSSO) Act is voluntary under current law and that provisions of the VSSO Act and the resultant obligations apply only to the entities registered under the Act. The NGO Secretariat, in coordination with the Ministry of Public Administration and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL), should proactively communicate these positions to relevant officials in the public and banking sectors.

- **Simplify and reduce** the frequency of the onerous reporting requirements currently prescribed by the NGO Secretariat for organisations registered under the VSSO Act. Eliminate the need for approval of routine plans and regular reports by the NGO Coordinator/Divisional Secretary/District Secretary.

- **Develop** a policy framework on 'State-CSO relations' that provides a mutually agreed set of principles and guidelines for engagement between the sector and the government, via a participatory process led by the Ministry of Rural Development and Community Empowerment, with a steering team that includes CSO representatives.

- **Ensure** that the 'State-CSO relations' policy envisions the sector as an independent, constructive partner in relief and development and a critical stakeholder in a democratic society by setting out the positive role that government could play and the negative measures it should refrain from in order to provide an enabling environment.

- **Take cognisance** of the updated FATF recommendation pertaining to the not-for-profit sector. Accordingly, the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) at the CBSL should not unduly single out the not-for-profit sector with additional burdensome requirements when receiving foreign funds. This is particularly pertinent given the FATF review of Sri Lanka due to take place in 2026.

- **Put in place** forums and processes for transparent and structured participation and consultation with relevant CSOs on policies, laws, and projects/interventions on different subject areas at the district, province and national levels.

- **Give space** for the NGOs at district level coordination committee meetings, parliamentary oversight committee meetings and other consultative forums with decision makers.

- **Establish a process** for participatory law-making and governance with a system of white paper, technical consultations, public consultations and feedback loops on key issue areas.

- **Re-engage** with the Open Government Partnership (OGP).

- **Dismantle** the permissive legal framework and institutional practices that enable military and security sector surveillance and intrusion into civil society activities. To achieve this:
    - Repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and announce a moratorium on its use until it is repealed. Any anti-terror law shall be within the ordinary law framework.
    - Reform the Online Safety Act (OSA) in line with the recommendations made by the Supreme Court, demands of the civil society and international best practice.
    - Reform Penal Code Sections 365 and 365A.
    - Stop the abuse and misapplication of laws like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act, the PTA and the Public Security Ordinance (PSO) by the Police.
    - Ensure strict application of judicial oversight in obtaining banking and telecommunication details of CSOs and HRDs.

- **Ensure** diligent application of data privacy.

- **Abolish** the NGO Tax. Revise and update the law providing for tax exemptions for donations to charitable institutions by expanding the list of eligible organisations.

- **Provide** adequate resources and strengthen the Right to Information (RTI) Commission. Improve awareness and accessibility of the RTI Commission for people at the district level.

## To the Civil Society in Sri Lanka

- **Adopt** a code of conduct for the CBO/NGO sector and establish a self-regulation mechanism to enhance good governance, transparency and accountability.

- **Institute** a system of tracking and documenting violations of fundamental freedoms faced by CSOs and HRDs with a view to compiling and disseminating periodic reports,

responding to any incident/crisis situation and informing advocacy for an enabling environment.

- **Establish** inclusive and representative civil society platforms that:
  - o Encourage dialogues across different communities on critical issues.
  - o Help in strategic dialogues/engagement and advocacy with the government on critical issues of interest, including laws, regulations and conduct of government authorities impacting the enabling environment for CSOs.
  - o Coordinate issue-based collective advocacy with the government.
  - o Promote volunteerism as well as private sector and individual philanthropic outreach at district and national levels.

- **Develop** issue-based and organisation-based plans to diversify funding sources by actively pursuing global, regional, non-traditional and private sector funding.

- **Build** the capacity among CSOs for data-driven advocacy, better communication approaches, digital literacy and security.

- **Conduct** individual, organisational and collective community and media outreach programs based on one's work to enhance civic awareness and build a constituency of support for the work that CSOs are doing.

## To the Donors of CSOs in Sri Lanka

- **Provide** funding tailored to the country context:
  - o Continue support to the CSOs of all sizes and in an equitable manner to all regions in Sri Lanka.
  - o Ensure a larger proportion of core, flexible and multi-year funding support.
  - o Make funding accessible to more CSOs by having different grant sizes and accepting submissions in all three languages.
  - o Promote localisation in all interventions.
  - o Have special allocations for funding marginalised groups, including LGBTIQA+ communities. Support collective and networked CSO initiatives.

- **Support** pilot and exploratory initiatives on social enterprise and leveraging public and private sector fundraising.

- **Continue** investing a proportion of the support in capacity building of CSOs.

- **Support** in bolstering digital literacy, digital communication and digital security.

# 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.