



SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# **Enabling Environment Baseline Snapshot**

**Namibia**

**September 2025**



## Context

Report period covered: August 2024 – September 2025

Namibia is regarded as one of Africa's more stable democracies, anchored by its [1990 Constitution](#), which guarantees fundamental rights, separation of powers, and multi-party politics. The country has consistently held competitive elections since independence, though the dominance of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) Party has raised questions about de facto one-party rule. Elections have been more competitive since 2019 when SWAPO's support [slumped from 80% to 65%](#). In the subsequent election in November 2024 SWAPO's support [dropped further](#) to 53%. In 2025, citizens mobilised through protests on issues such as [poor service delivery](#), [gender-based violence](#), and [corruption](#), which has eroded trust in political elites.

According to the 2024 [Afrobarometer survey](#), 74% of Namibians support elections as the best way to choose leaders, and 75% perceive the media as free, highlighting strong democratic values. Namibians do participate in national elections: [76% voted in the 2024 national elections](#), although turnout at 2025's regional and local elections [is expected to be much lower](#). However, [trust in elected politicians](#) remains low.

In June 2025, the banned United Democratic Party (UDP), which calls for the Zambezi region's independence, [held a demonstration](#) in Katima Mulilo. Police attempted to disperse the protest, briefly arresting three UDP members who were later released without charge. In April 2024 the University of Namibia [banned political activity](#) on its campuses and then allowed a ruling party event to take place later in the year.

In [November 2024, Namibia's general elections](#), although peaceful, were [marred by several issues](#) and were unsuccessfully challenged in court. A [lack of accountability and independence](#) on the part of the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) remains a concern.

## 1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

The [Namibian Constitution](#) guarantees key civil liberties, including “freedom of speech and expression” (Art. 21(1)(a)), “freedom of association” (Art. 21(1)(e)), and the “freedom to assemble peaceably and without arms” (Art. 21(1)(d)). These freedoms are largely respected, though events that unfolded in 2025 have raised concerns.

A large majority of Namibians said they feel free to say what they think and to join political organisations of their choice. According to the [Afrobarometer's](#) 2024 survey, 76% of respondents said they feel free to say what they think, while 87% said they can join any political organisation they want. But there are areas where Namibians feel they could face negative repercussions for what they say. According to the [latest Afrobarometer](#), 62% of respondents said they fear retaliation if they report corruption. Journalists are largely able [to work freely, but challenges persist](#). [Gaps in laws on cyber-harassment and data protection](#) leave them vulnerable, while worries about [government surveillance](#) continue to cast a shadow over press freedom and civil liberties.

According to [Reporters Without Borders](#), journalists in Namibia generally enjoy the freedom to operate without undue interference, though some have faced [suspension and dismissal](#) for expressing critical views. Media coverage of CSOs is sporadic, partly because CSOs lack clear communications strategies and, with a few exceptions, most organisations struggle to use social media effectively, further limiting their public visibility and influence.

The Constitution protects the freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and generally these rights are respected. Protests [have happened](#) without evidence of state repression. In 2024, [the Public Gatherings and Processions Bill](#) was introduced in parliament, drawing criticism from civil society and [opposition parties for being overly restrictive](#). The draft law includes a five-day police notification requirement for public assemblies and criminal penalties of up to a N\$5,000 fine or one year in prison. As of mid-2025, the bill had not been passed.

Arrests related to protests are rare. In 2023, activist Michael Amushelelo was [kept in jail for seven months](#) on alleged public order offences under the [Public Gathering Act of 1989](#) relating to a protest against unemployment before charges were dropped.

## 2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

The [rules governing civil society organisation \(CSO\) registration](#) in Namibia have remained unchanged for several years. CSOs may register with the Business and Intellectual Property Authority (BIPA) as not-for-gain Section 21 companies under the [Companies Act](#) of 2004 or with the Master of the High Court as trusts in terms of the [Trust Moneys Protection Act](#) of 1934. Some also choose to register as Welfare Organisations with the Ministry of Health and Social Services under the [National Welfare Act of 1965](#). CSOs can freely opt for the most appropriate legal format for their organisations.

Many smaller organisations operate as voluntary associations, which do not require formal registration. The rules for voluntary associations are not set out in any statute. Voluntary associations are regulated by the common law, which means the law developed over time through court cases. Voluntary organisations [are not required to register](#) with government.

While registration is not mandatory, CSOs that choose to register often encounter bureaucratic inefficiencies within the relevant administrative systems, and the lack of documentation for voluntary associations is occasionally a concern when such CSOs seek funding. There is no [general requirement for international NGOs to register in Namibia](#) although there could be situations where international NGOs must follow specific requirements contained in agreements between the Namibian government and the NGO.

In September 2023, the Financial Intelligence Centre (FIC), a division of Namibia's central bank, issued a directive requiring non-profits and faith-based organisations to furnish extensive donor, board, beneficiary and financial disclosures. While officials said the aim was to curb money laundering and terrorist financing, [critics warned that it threatened CSO autonomy](#). CSOs [protested](#) that the FIC regulations exposed them and their supporters to political risks and excessive oversight. In 2024, the FIC continued to seek compliance from non-profit organisations but adopted a less heavy-handed approach which sparked fewer complaints. The more conciliatory tone from the FIC was in part due [to the outcry from CSOs and politicians](#) in late 2023.

In January 2025, there was a report that [over 120 CSOs face deregistration](#) for not complying with the Ministry of Health and Social Services' requirement for annual reports and audited financial statements to be submitted. These requirements are set out in the [National Welfare Act of 1965](#).

While it may appear fragmented and complex, [Namibia's registration framework](#) for CSOs is generally seen as enabling and does not prescribe CSO agendas or funding sources. [CSOs have resisted suggestions](#) that Namibia have a unified NGO law for fear that it would be used to impose controls on funding and activities and potentially be used to shut down some CSOs.

In October 2023, the government [agreed in a court settlement](#) to amend the Research, Science and Technology Act, following a legal challenge by civil society organisations. The CSOs argued that the Act imposed unconstitutional controls on research, threatening academic freedom, civil society engagement, and media independence. Under the existing law, any person conducting research would have to apply for a permit for each research project and wait for permission to be granted before they could proceed. They would also have to demonstrate that the research was 'beneficial' for Namibia. However, the [government failed to meet the 12-month deadline](#) for implementing the agreed changes, leaving the restrictive legislation still in force.

### 3. Accessible and sustainable resources

The [long-standing decline](#) in funding availability worsened in early 2025 following the termination of US government grants, particularly [those supporting the health sector](#). As a result of the US government's January 2025 'stop-work' directive, several CSOs – including [Project Hope](#), [IntraHealth and Jhpiego](#) – were forced to close down or vastly downscale their programmes. The cuts threatened [hundreds of jobs](#) in the civil society sector.

Funding for CSOs' core operations remains limited, while the sluggish economic recovery from the COVID-19 downturn left the private sector largely unable to fill the gap. However, the European Union (EU) continued to provide strong support to civil society, [awarding €2 million in January 2025](#) to several CSOs focused on inclusive green growth initiatives.

In mid 2025, the [World Bank reclassified Namibia](#) from an upper-middle-income to a lower-middle-income country. The downgrade sparked hopes in some circles that the new status might improve Namibia's eligibility for increased development assistance whilst others noted that the World Bank decision [could make Namibia more aid dependent](#).

Commercial banks would normally require registration documents from CSOs before allowing them to set up bank accounts. [CSOs have to provide proof of legal personality](#) plus founding documents and a board resolution authorising signatories.

There are few non-financial resources available to CSOs. One example would be the [House of Democracy](#) where several CSOs have offices and share meeting and seminar rooms which can also be used by outside CSOs not based at the House. The [Franco-Namibian Cultural Centre](#) in Windhoek also provides space free of charge for civil society gatherings. One drawback is that the ecosystem of non-financial support for CSOs is concentrated in Windhoek. The Namibian Civil Society Non-state Actors Network ([Namnet](#)) is an organisation for different civil society umbrella bodies, while the Civil Society Information Centre ([CIVIC+264](#)) acts as an information and coordination hub for civil society. Both organise civil

society meetings and briefings, including with government, and provide resources to CSOs such as the [Guide to Setting Up CSOs in Namibia](#).

## 4. State openness and responsiveness

Government consultations with civil society tend to be [haphazard and sporadic](#). Civil society is often overlooked – and at times deliberately excluded – from key policy processes. For example, in September 2024, [CSOs were only invited at the last minute](#) to the Green Hydrogen Summit in Windhoek, despite their advocacy for community rights and transparency in Namibia’s green hydrogen agenda.

The National Planning Commission (NPC) does host a civil society help desk which at least acts as a contact point for CSOs. According to the [Namibia-EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society](#), the Help Desk for Civil Society was established within NPC to coordinate the implementation of the Civic Organisations Partnership Policy (COPP). Meanwhile the EU-funded [Enhancing Participatory Democracy in Namibia](#) (EPDN) programme has sought to build links between civil society and parliament. The programme has funded several CSOs, particularly in the environmental sector, and has organised occasional meetings between civil society, parliamentary staff, and MPs.

However, civil society often raises concerns about inconsistent and superficial consultation. In the case of the Sixth National Development Plan (NDP 6), for instance, civil society actors were asked to [contribute a chapter](#) only at the very end of the drafting process – and under unrealistic time constraints.

While public consultations are held for [some draft bills](#) – such as the [Namibia Investment Promotion and Facilitation Bill](#) – others, like the [Public Gatherings and Processions Bill](#), have reached Parliament without any prior stakeholder engagement. One area where government consultation has notably improved in recent years is the national budget process, with dedicated [meetings involving civil society](#) and regional consultations conducted to discuss spending priorities.

Some state institutions do engage with civil society on key initiatives – for example, the Anti-Corruption Commission regards CSOs as stakeholders in its [National Anti-Corruption Strategy and Action Plan](#). Civil society is also represented on the Governing Council of the [African Peer Review Mechanism](#) alongside government and the private sector.

Parliament passed an [Access to Information law](#) in 2022. However, as of mid-2025, the law is not operational. Government is slowly [moving towards appointing](#) an Access to Information Commissioner. Once implemented the law would require ‘public entities’ to proactively publish a range of government licences, contracts, reports and documents. Members of the public can also approach the office of the Commissioner to gain access to official information.

Civil society actors have [championed a universal Basic Income Grant](#), which they have successfully placed at the centre of national political discourse. However, even effective campaigns can take years to bear fruit. The [decade-long push for an Access to Information law](#) finally succeeded with the legislation’s passage in 2022 – yet, three years later, it remains unimplemented.

Environmental CSOs have played a key role in mobilising both national and international concern over extractive activities. Their activism has contributed to a ban on offshore

phosphate mining, raised global awareness of [oil drilling in the Kavango Basin](#), and resisted [uranium exploration in eastern Namibia](#).

A Government–Civil Society Partnership Policy has been under discussion for several years. While some stakeholders have expressed concern that it might lead to a restrictive registration system for CSOs, the current draft – [under review by the National Planning Commission](#) – does not contain draconian provisions.

## 5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Government policy documents and speeches often acknowledge civil society’s role without being specific. However, ruling party politicians’ comments sometimes frame CSOs as ‘foreign-backed’ or having ‘hidden agendas’. The result is that government comes across as ambivalent or even schizophrenic in its views on civil society.

Since the new government came in on 21 March 2025, there have been some worrying pronouncements from senior figures in government indicating a lack of tolerance. Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, speaking in her capacity as leader of the SWAPO Party at the Liberation Movements Summit in Johannesburg, [issued a strong criticism](#) of foreign-funded civil society organisations. Addressing representatives from former liberation movements across southern Africa, she linked CSOs and opposition parties to foreign efforts aimed at regime change, grouping them with economic warfare tactics such as sanctions and tariffs.

On 28 July 2025, at the 15th Summit of Women Speakers of Parliament in Geneva, National Assembly Speaker Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila [criticised](#) direct donor funding to CSOs, arguing that such organisations lack democratic legitimacy and may not represent broader societal interests. These remarks, delivered on prominent international platforms, reflect a growing narrative that delegitimises civil society and questions its role in governance and development. The framing of CSOs as undemocratic or externally manipulated introduces reputational risks and may undermine public trust. It also signals potential policy shifts that could restrict funding channels, impose regulatory constraints, or limit civic engagement. The cumulative effect of these statements risks delegitimising civil society organisations, with implications for advocacy, service delivery, and democratic accountability. International donors and local actors should monitor developments closely, engage in dialogue with government counterparts, and assess risk exposure for CSOs operating in Namibia. Strategic responses may be needed to safeguard civil society’s role and ensure continued support for inclusive governance.

In contrast, the [Government–Civil Society Partnership & Engagement \(CSPE\) Policy \(2024\)](#), still to be adopted by Cabinet, explicitly recognises CSOs’ role and proposes structured engagement mechanisms and an implementation plan – signalling a more enabling stance when operationalised. Furthermore, the President launched Namibia’s [Sixth National Development Plan](#) (NDP6) in July 2025. The document included a short section on civil society, which was described as a “key driver of national progress” and called for renewed partnership.

Public perceptions of LGBTQI+ organisations experienced a significant positive shift following the [High Court’s decision](#) to invalidate the country’s colonial-era sodomy and “unnatural sexual

offences” laws, a ruling [widely regarded as a landmark expansion of civic space](#) and rights for LGBTQI+ groups. This judgment, delivered on 21 June 2024 in [Dausab v Minister of Justice](#), formally declared these laws unconstitutional on the grounds that they amounted to unfair discrimination and lacked any legitimate purpose. The decision was [celebrated by activists](#) as a historic step forward in dismantling colonial legal legacies and affirming constitutional protections for equality, dignity, and privacy. However, in July 2024, the Namibian government [lodged an appeal to the Supreme Court](#) challenging the High Court’s ruling, supported by [Anti-gay rights groups](#) such as Hossamina, thereby creating renewed uncertainty about the durability of the legal gains achieved. The pending Supreme Court appeal not only reopens legal contestation but may also catalyse a resurgence of social and political hostility toward LGBTQI+ activists, particularly in a context where religious and conservative actors have already mobilised against the judgement. This evolving legal landscape underscores the fragility of recent progress and highlights the ongoing need for vigilance and advocacy to safeguard the rights and security of LGBTQI+ communities in Namibia.

While there is limited quantitative data directly measuring public trust in CSOs, indirect evidence, such as strong attendance at [civil society events](#), points to a broadly favourable public perception. The media are keen to cover civil society and to use CSO representatives as commentators on political events. However, not many CSOs take up these opportunities, perhaps due to self-censorship and not wanting to be seen as opposing government.

Civic education exists in the formal system, but is [inconsistent across schools and regions](#). Instances include the Social Studies/Life Skills curriculum in primary and secondary schools, and governance/public administration courses at tertiary level. Civic education by CSOs partially fills this gap yet coverage is uneven and project-funding cycles disrupt continuity. CSOs such as the Namibia Institute for Democracy complain that the young people they educate through programmes like [Namibia Needs Me](#) often say they received scant education on the Constitution and human rights.

One of civil society’s most notable successes has been the campaign for 50:50 gender-balanced political representation. Originating within the CSO sector, the movement has helped Namibia achieve one of the highest proportions of women in parliament globally, alongside a gender-balanced cabinet and the historic election of both [a female president](#) and vice president. However, gender-based violence [remains pervasive](#). Many environmental and social issues still receive little sustained advocacy. Direct engagements with legislators and policymakers are limited.

A rise in hate speech and homophobic incidents followed two liberal court rulings – beginning in May 2023 when the Supreme Court [recognised same-sex marriages](#) conducted abroad. In June 2024, the [High Court declared](#) colonial-era ‘sodomy’ laws unconstitutional. In reaction, [politicians pushed for legislation](#) outlawing same-sex marriage. In January 2025, President [Nangolo Mbumba signed the Marriage Act](#), which defines marriage as between opposite-sex partners and bans the recognition of same-sex unions, even if couples are legally married in another country. In May 2024, it was [reported](#) that six members of the LGBTQI+ community had been murdered in the previous 12 months in apparent hate crimes related to the upsurge in homophobic rhetoric.

As a result of the overall unstructured approach and civil society’s lack of coordination, minority and marginalised groups are often excluded from meaningful participation. Persistent systemic concerns include ongoing discrimination against women, the LGBTQI+ community, and ethnic minorities such as the San people.

## 6. Access to a secure digital environment

Civil society [generally has unrestricted access to the internet](#) and is free to share information online. There have been no instances of internet shutdowns or systematic censorship reported in the past year. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X are used freely by CSOs for public engagement. However, there are occasional [concerns about state surveillance](#), although there is little evidence of direct interference in civil society activities.

In the past year, there were no major cyberattacks targeting CSOs. However, online harassment, including disinformation campaigns and targeted trolling, has become more visible – [particularly against LGBTQI+ activists](#).

Namibia does not yet have [comprehensive data protection legislation](#) in force, though a Data Protection Bill has been in development for several years. This legislative gap leaves internet users, including CSOs, vulnerable to privacy violations and unclear recourse mechanisms in the event of breaches. The [latest draft of the bill](#) has been [criticised by civil society organisations](#) for falling short of international standards, with concerns about weak enforcement mechanisms and insufficient protections for individual privacy. Overall, while Namibia offers a comparatively open digital space, gaps in cybersecurity, legal protections, and digital literacy pose ongoing risks for civil society actors.

A total of [2.67 million cellular mobile connections](#) were active in Namibia in early 2025, or 87% of the population. This does not necessarily mean access to the Internet as some are only used for voice or other data uses. Namibia was home to [754,000 social media user identities](#) in January 2025, or 25% of the population. There were 1.97 million internet users in Namibia in January 2025 or 66% of the population. Internet access in Namibia is relatively strong in urban areas, with 4G coverage exceeding 80 percent in most towns. The Namibia Statistics Agency [reports that 50% of households in urban areas had mobile internet connectivity versus only 16% in rural areas](#). However, this connectivity drops sharply in peripheral regions such as Kunene, [where only about half the population](#) is covered. CSOs based in Windhoek and other major centres can therefore make good use of online tools for coordination, advocacy, and outreach, while their counterparts in rural areas are not so fortunate. The divide limits equal participation in policy debates and reduces the visibility of voices from poorer, remote areas.

Civil society is at the early adoption phase for AI. A handful of Windhoek-based CSOs are experimenting with social-media scheduling and document summarisation. Most small or rural CSOs have little hands-on AI experience and as yet there is very little training or capacity support on offer to assist them.

## Challenges and Opportunities

The approach of the new president, in office since 21 March 2025, remains unclear. While she has avoided the confrontational tone toward civil society sometimes seen [during the Geingob administration](#), there is concern that in her drive for rapid development – particularly job creation – civil society's role may be sidelined. This transitional period offers CSOs a chance to set clear priorities and initiate engagement with new ministers and senior officials. Proactive outreach will be key to securing space for civic participation.

Over the next four months, civil society will continue to face declines in funding. The effects of the US cuts will continue to disrupt civil society's efforts to provide community services.

Social contracting mechanisms for CSOs to provide crucial services on behalf of government are still being piloted under the Ministry of Health and Social Services. They are envisioned to cover other sectors such as education and environmental protection. However, this will require proactive follow-ups and advocacy efforts from CSOs in these respective sectors.

The pending Supreme Court appeal against the repeal of colonial-era anti-sodomy laws may also trigger renewed hostility toward LGBTQI+ activists.

CSOs have opportunities to push for progress. The president's anti-corruption stance can be used to demand implementation of the Access to Information Act and to advocate for Namibia's membership of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative.

Little immediate progress is expected concerning talks with Germany over [reparations in relation to the 1904-08 genocide](#). Civil society can monitor developments, especially regarding the participation of the affected communities.



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