



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment

Snapshot

South Africa

March 2026

Context

Period covered by this report: January 2026 – March 2026

The state of enabling environment for civil society in South Africa is governed by the [Constitution](#), [regulatory framework](#) and state institutions that safeguard civic freedoms and regulate the operation of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), [established](#) under the Constitution and the Human Rights Commission Act of 1994, is mandated to proactively monitor, investigate and address human rights violations, including through complaints brought before it and to seek appropriate redress for such violations.

Despite these protections, the killings of human rights defenders, community activists, and whistleblowers continue to represent a serious crisis due to persistent violence and impunity. CSOs, communities and families have [repeatedly](#) raised concerns about inadequate investigations, weak accountability, and failures by law enforcement [authorities](#) to respond effectively to threats and attacks against HRDs. Since 2005, members of Abahlali baseMjondolo - a shack dwellers' movement - have in recent years [faced](#) killings, threats, and intimidation from both state and non-state actors. To date, 26 members have reportedly been killed, with only two convictions secured. Although the South African Police Service [established](#) a task team in 2024 to investigate these assassinations and report regularly to the SAHRC, accountability efforts remain insufficient. The continued failure to prosecute perpetrators has further eroded public trust in the justice system.

South Africa's legal and regulatory framework for civil society remained broadly enabling, with the Nonprofit Organisations Act ([NPO Act](#)) guiding the registration and governance of CSOs. However, increasing compliance and reporting requirements [linked](#) to Financial Action Task Force reforms, including preparations for upcoming evaluations, continue to disproportionately affect small and rural organisations that often lack adequate administrative capacity. Thousands of organisations have been deregistered for non-compliance, raising concerns about the sustainability, operational capacity, and long-term viability of vulnerable community-based CSOs.

Attacks against migrants and refugees have continued to intensify. Anti-migrant groups such as Operation Dudula and the March and March Movement have [targeted](#) foreign nationals through protests, intimidation campaigns, and public threats, particularly in relation to access to schools, healthcare services, housing, and informal trading opportunities. During the reporting period, these groups [threatened](#) schools for admitting undocumented foreign children, despite [Section 29](#) of the Constitution guaranteeing the right to basic education for everyone, regardless of nationality or documentation status. Their actions also occurred despite a Gauteng High Court [interdict](#) prohibiting Operation Dudula from harassing, threatening, or intimidating migrants accessing public services. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) has consistently [condemned](#) these actions as discriminatory and unconstitutional.

The digital civic space remained open and widely used for mobilisation, advocacy, and information-sharing. However, this period also highlighted growing [threats](#) to digital security perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. CSOs, activists, and public institutions faced increasing [exposure](#) to cybercrimes, including phishing attacks, data breaches, and ransomware incidents, reflecting broader national vulnerabilities in cybersecurity.

The State and civil society relations remain active, with established mechanisms enabling participation in governance processes. Civil society actors continue to engage in policy discussions, legislative [review](#) processes, and national dialogue [platforms](#), reinforcing their important role in democratic governance, accountability, and service delivery.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

South Africa's civic space is protected under the [Constitution](#) of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which guarantees freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Despite this progressive legal framework, civic space in practice remains constrained and is currently rated as "[Obstructed](#)," reflecting growing concerns over violence, intimidation, and uneven protection of fundamental freedoms.

Freedom of association remains formally protected, but the environment for human rights defenders (HRDs) has become more dangerous. A pattern of targeted killings linked to activism, especially around land, housing, and local governance, continues to raise serious concerns. On 12 February 2026, Zweli Mkhize (known as "Khabazela"), treasurer of the eNkanini branch of Abahlali baseMjondolo, was [shot](#) and killed in what appears to have been a targeted assassination. Two assailants reportedly arrived in a vehicle and shot him at close range. In the weeks leading up to his death, Mkhize reportedly [received](#) repeated death threats, including a phone call on 20 January 2026 warning him to stop his activism or be killed. The caller allegedly offered to spare his life in exchange for R40,000 (€2,068) which Mkhize refused to pay. Following his killing, six members of the eNkanini branch reportedly went into [hiding](#) due to safety concerns. In a separate incident on 30 March 2026, a whistleblower linked to the Emfuleni Local Municipality was [shot](#) and killed in the Vaal. Reports indicate that she had been preparing to expose a R16 million (€828,406) fraud scheme involving debt manipulation within the municipality.

Freedom of assembly, governed by the [Regulation of Gatherings Act](#), continues to be widely exercised. There has been sustained civic participation through protests related to service delivery, anti-migrant sentiment, gender-based violence, and student movements. However, concerns persist regarding the use of [force](#) by law enforcement officials during the dispersal of protests. Under both domestic and international standards, law enforcement officials are required to avoid the use of force when dispersing unlawful but non-violent protests or, where unavoidable, to restrict such force to the minimum extent necessary. On 14 January 2026, as schools reopened, groups of parents supported by anti-migrant movements such as Operation Dudula and individuals linked to the uMkhonto weSizwe Party [protested](#) outside Addington Primary School in Durban, alleging that foreign nationals were being prioritised in school placements. Tensions escalated on 21 January, resulting in [clashes](#) between South African and foreign national parents. Police [responded](#) with stun grenades and water cannon, and cases of public violence and incitement were opened. Prominent activist Jacinta Ngobese-Zuma from the March and March Movement later [surrendered](#) to police on 27 January 2026 to face charges related to the unrest. Student protests have also intensified. In March 2026, the Durban University of Technology suspended in-person learning following violent protests over unpaid allowances from the [National](#) Student Financial Aid Scheme, which affected nearly 600 students. Police intervened, and at least nine individuals were arrested in connection with public violence and vandalism.

Freedom of expression remains constitutionally protected, yet recent developments point to an increasing pattern of political intimidation and interference in media freedom. Significant criticism [emerged](#) following the decision by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) to scrap the TV programme Face the Nation, reportedly following complaints from African National Congress (ANC) and government officials. Civil society groups, including the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), have [raised](#) concerns about the erosion of editorial independence and the shrinking of democratic space aimed at suppressing dissenting voices and limiting accountability. Press freedom was further undermined on 18 February 2026, when journalist Shornel Bennie and photographer Moeketsi Mamane from The Witness were [assaulted](#), threatened, and robbed by the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU) while covering a protest in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. The South African National Editors' Forum condemned the attack and [called](#) on authorities to ensure accountability. Earlier, in January 2026, a dispute over artistic freedom emerged when the Minister of Sports, Arts and Culture, Gayton McKenzie, [blocked](#) artist Gabrielle Goliath from representing South Africa at the Venice Biennale, reportedly due to the political nature of her work addressing Israel's actions in Gaza. The artist challenged the decision in court, turning the matter into a broader test of artistic freedom and freedom of expression. CSOs and cultural institutions [warned](#) that such interventions amount to indirect censorship and risk normalising political interference in the creative sector.

2. Supportive legal and regulatory framework

South Africa's legal framework for civil society remains broadly enabling, with the Nonprofit Organisations Act ([NPO Act](#)) 71 of 1997 at its core. The NPO Act governs the registration, governance, and reporting of CSOs through a voluntary registration system administered by the Department of Social Development (DSD). Registration enhances credibility, transparency, and access to funding, and is often required by donors.

In practice, although the registration system is intended to promote transparency rather than restrict operations, compliance burdens continue to disproportionately affect small, rural, and volunteer-led organisations, many of which lack the necessary [administrative](#) capacity. This has contributed to the [deregistration](#) of more than 15,000 organisations for non-compliance, primarily due to the failure to submit annual reports. In addition, over 203,000 organisations remain at [risk](#) of deregistration for failing to meet reporting requirements, with Gauteng recording the highest levels of non-compliance, [affecting](#) more than 64,000 organisations. The DSD is implementing this deregistration process in phases, beginning with organisations that have not submitted reports since 1998, with subsequent phases targeting more recently non-compliant entities to improve the accuracy and integrity of the register.

At the same time, South Africa continues to strengthen its regulatory environment in response to international anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing (AML/CTF) standards. Although South Africa [exited](#) the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) greylist, scrutiny of the non-profit sector remains high. South Africa is preparing for its next evaluation by the FATF, expected to run from 2026 to 2027, where authorities must demonstrate that reforms are effective and sustained in practice. This

includes showing that oversight of the non-profit sector is risk-based and proportionate in line with FATF Recommendation 8 which [requires](#) monitoring of organisations vulnerable to abuse while safeguarding legitimate activities.

The international experience [shows](#) that self-regulation can effectively complement state oversight by strengthening governance, building public trust, and lowering compliance costs. The Financial Action Task Force also promotes self-regulatory approaches as part of a risk-based strategy to address money laundering and terrorist financing. Although South Africa has introduced voluntary initiatives such as the [Independent Code of Governance for CSOs](#), their adoption and enforcement have been limited. In response, the South African CSO Working Group has [highlighted](#) the need to renew efforts toward developing practical, affordable, and scalable self-regulatory mechanisms that are aligned with the current regulatory context and help protect civic space.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

The Nonprofit Organisations Act ([NPO Act](#)) enables CSOs to access a diverse range of funding sources, including private philanthropy, international donors, and corporate social investment. Public institutions such as the National Development Agency ([NDA](#)) and the National Lotteries Commission ([NLC](#)) continue to provide financial support to non-profit organisations working on poverty alleviation, social development, and community programmes.

However, one of the most significant challenges affecting CSOs is the continued tightening of international funding flows and the reprioritisation of donor aid. Several European donors, [including](#) traditionally reliable Scandinavian countries, have reportedly reduced funding commitments amid rising defence spending and increasingly inward-focused political priorities. Shifting donor priorities has also led to the termination of many projects [funded](#) by the United States Agency for International Development and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), beginning in February 2025 and continuing into 2026. This reportedly resulted in an estimated loss of R7.4 billion (€388.8 million) in US federal funding. The abrupt cessation of foreign assistance [continues](#) to undermine organisations working in HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis, health systems strengthening, early childhood development and other essential services. Many organisations faced immediate financial uncertainty and were forced to scale back programmes, reduce staffing, or suspend critical services, particularly in vulnerable and underserved communities.

Administrative and compliance requirements also present a substantial barrier. Many donors [require](#) strong governance structures, detailed reporting, and full regulatory compliance, which can be difficult for under-resourced organisations to maintain. While these requirements are not inherently restrictive, in practice they can exclude small or rural organisations or divert already limited resources away from programme implementation. Additionally, funding is typically project-based and short-term, making it difficult for organisations to secure sustainable, long-term operational support.

Despite these challenges, there are emerging opportunities. CSOs are [encouraged](#) to adopt partnerships, innovation, and diversified funding models, including digital engagement, crowdfunding and mobile giving. At the same time, new funding calls and grant opportunities continue to be [published](#), indicating ongoing investment in the

sector. These shifts suggest that while traditional funding streams may be tightening, CSOs that can adapt to evolving funding modalities and demonstrate measurable impact may still find viable pathways to sustain their work.

4. Open and responsive state

South Africa has a strong constitutional and legal framework that protects civil society freedoms, including the rights to association, expression, and participation. These protections are rooted in the [Constitution](#) of South Africa, which explicitly requires public involvement in legislative and policy processes. This framework creates an enabling environment for CSOs, advocacy groups, and community organisations to operate and engage with the state.

In practice, the government often presents civil society as an important partner in development and democratic governance. Government-led initiatives, including [national dialogue processes](#), have been designed to bring together a broad range of stakeholders, including civil society actors, faith-based organisations, labour, business, and community representatives, to deliberate on national priorities and policy reforms. South Africa is currently preparing for a second National Dialogue Convention, following the initial first National Dialogue Convention held in August 2025. The second National Dialogue Convention aims to [consolidate](#) outcomes from ongoing public, municipal, and electoral dialogues into a 30-year national action plan and a new social compact. CSOs also [participated](#) in the election of 32 sector and 6 sub-sector [representatives](#) to serve on the National Dialogue Management Committee responsible for overseeing the process and driving the implementation of the programme of action.

Collaboration is particularly visible in sectors such as social development, health, and community services. The Department of Social Development ([DSD](#)) frequently [partners](#) with CSOs in service delivery, meaning that civil society not only contributes to policy discussions but also plays a direct role in implementation.

CSOs were also formally able to engage in legislative processes. Cabinet statements and parliamentary procedures indicate that draft laws were routinely [published](#) for public comment, with deadlines sometimes extended in response to stakeholder feedback. For example, the National Treasury [extended](#) the deadline for public comment on the General Laws (Anti-Money Laundering and Combating Terrorism Financing) Amendment Bill from 15 January 2026 to March 2026 following calls for additional time to allow broader input.

However, the presence of formal consultation mechanisms does not necessarily mean that engagement is always meaningful or effective. A key example is the National Health Insurance Act, which is [facing](#) a major Constitutional Court challenge brought by the Board of Healthcare Funders and the Premier of the Western Cape. CSOs and applicants argued that public participation was not meaningful, citing issues such as insufficient information, lack of responsiveness from lawmakers, and failure to properly consider inputs. Provincial stakeholders also claimed that their [submissions](#) were

ignored or not fully considered. Notably, despite hundreds of thousands of submissions, very few changes were made to the final law, raising concerns about whether participation influenced outcomes

5. Supportive public culture and discourses on civil society

The government and political leaders frame civil society actors (CSOs) as important partners in governance and development. President Cyril Ramaphosa, during the State of the Nation Address 2026, [emphasised](#) the importance of collaboration, highlighting “meaningful partnerships” between government, business, labour, and CSOs to address national challenges. This reflects a formal recognition of CSOs as key contributors to democratic participation, service delivery, and social cohesion. However, CSOs publicly [criticised](#) the State of the Nation Address for failing to address key issues such as electoral reform, illustrating an adversarial dimension to the relationship. In such instances, CSOs may be indirectly framed as confrontational or oppositional, especially when their advocacy challenges government priorities.

Migrants and refugees continue to be [scapegoated](#) for the country's deep-seated socio-economic challenges, including high unemployment, crime, and strained public services. This environment has created intense, sometimes violent, tensions where anti-migrant groups, such as Operation Dudula and the March and March Movement, actively target foreign nationals and demand stricter immigration controls, and CSOs defending their rights are often [drawn](#) into contentious debates.

Similarly, CSOs supporting LGBTQI+ rights operate in a context of persistent discrimination. Nearly two decades after the legalisation of same-sex marriage, opposition remained strong, as seen during public hearings on the proposed Marriage Bill in Thohoyandou, where community and religious leaders [called](#) for the exclusion of same-sex unions. Activists, including Zaheeda Munyai, challenged these views, highlighting ongoing prejudice. At the same time, the National Prosecuting Authority [declined](#) to prosecute former radio host Ngizwe Mchunu over his anti-LGBTQIA+ remarks and actions, prompting anger from LGBTQI+ advocacy groups.

Media coverage played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of civil society. It [highlighted](#) the active and constructive role of CSOs in public life, including [mobilisation](#) around migration, climate justice, governance, and social accountability. Reporting on protests, campaigns, and advocacy initiatives [reinforced](#) the visibility and relevance of civil society, while also, at times, amplifying the contentious and polarised environments in which these organisations operate.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

CSOs operate in a relatively open digital environment, with no routine internet shutdowns and continued access to online platforms for advocacy, mobilisation, and information sharing. [Constitutional](#) protections for freedom of expression and access to information enable activists, journalists, and organisations to engage in key issues such as governance, corruption, and gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF).

However, disinformation has emerged as a major concern, particularly [ahead](#) of South Africa's 2026 local government elections. Government institutions, the Electoral

Commission, and media organisations have [warned](#) about the increasing use of AI-generated misinformation, deepfakes, fake election websites, and coordinated online manipulation campaigns designed to influence public opinion and undermine trust in democratic institutions.

At the same time, cybercrimes have also become a growing [threat](#) as increasing reliance on digital systems has exposed CSOs to ransomware, phishing, and data breaches. In particular, ransomware attacks where attackers encrypt organisational data and [demand](#) payment for its release have increasingly targeted both public and private institutions. According to cybersecurity reports, South Africa accounts for over 40% of [ransomware attacks](#) in Africa, costing the economy more than R2.2 billion (€115.8 million) annually. Furthermore, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) [warned](#) in its 2026 Data Privacy Day statement that data breaches, identity theft, unlawful surveillance, and the reckless sharing of personal information continue to occur frequently, while enforcement of data protection laws remains inconsistent. It is imperative that organisations [adopt](#) a multilayered approach that combines technological safeguards, user education (awareness), proactive monitoring of system environments and improved governance to protect critical data.

CSOs and international bodies have further [raised](#) concerns about online harassment, hate speech, and gender-based digital violence targeting activists, journalists, women, and marginalised groups. In response, organisations such as UNESCO have partnered with South African CSOs and academic institutions to strengthen digital literacy, combat online harms, and promote rights-based approaches to freedom of expression and information integrity.

Challenges and Opportunities

Over the next four months, CSOs are likely to face continued financial, regulatory, and security challenges. Funding pressures remain a major concern following reductions in international donor support, particularly from USAID and PEPFAR, which have affected CSOs working in health, early childhood development, governance, and community services. Smaller and rural organisations are expected to be disproportionately affected due to limited financial and administrative capacity.

Increasing compliance and reporting obligations associated with Financial Action Task Force (FATF) reforms and CSO regulations may place additional strain on under-resourced organisations, exacerbating their vulnerability to operational risks including deregistration. Human rights defenders, whistleblowers, journalists, and migrant-rights organisations are also likely to continue facing threats, intimidation, and killings amid ongoing xenophobic mobilisation and persistent impunity.

Despite these challenges, opportunities remain for improving the enabling environment. National dialogue initiatives and public participation processes continue to provide platforms for civic engagement and policy influence. CSOs are also increasingly exploring diversified funding models, partnerships, digital fundraising, and social enterprise approaches to improve sustainability. In addition, CSOs continue to advocate for stronger legal protections, including the advancement of the Whistleblower Protection Bill and the adoption of a model law to safeguard human rights defenders.

To respond effectively, civil society requires flexible and long-term funding, stronger digital security and compliance capacity, and improved protection mechanisms for

activists, journalists, and whistleblowers. Meaningful state–civil society engagement will remain essential to safeguarding civic space and democratic participation.

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