



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment

Snapshot

South Africa

January 2026

Context

Reporting period: August 2025 – January 2026

South Africa's enabling environment for civil society remains dynamic but increasingly [constrained](#), with human rights defenders, environmental activists, and whistleblowers facing threats and killings, while journalists and activists experience intimidation, harassment, surveillance, and cyberbullying by state and non-state actors.

Under the Government of National Unity (GNU), South Africa continues to experience heightened [protest](#) and community unrest, driven by lack of service delivery, corruption, economic inequality and unemployment. These protests have at times been [met](#) with heavy-handed police responses, raising concerns about the excessive use of force and restrictions on peaceful assembly.

A notable moment for civic engagement emerged with Women for Change, where thousands of women-led gender justice organisations, youth organisations and community activists [joined](#) the G20 Women's Shutdown, a nationwide protest against Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBV-F). In November 2025, the protest included silent 15-minute lie-downs and a coordinated withdrawal from economic activity, with participants staying away from work and refraining from spending money. This protest helped pressure the government to officially [declare](#) gender-based violence and femicide a national disaster under Section 23 of the Disaster Management Act, highlighting the severity of the crisis and enabling urgent, coordinated national response measures.

At the same time, access to funding deteriorated sharply due to [reductions](#) and restructuring of international donor support, including USAID and PEPFAR-linked funding. Many organisations in the healthcare, HIV, GBV-F and migrant-support sectors were forced to scale down programmes, retrench staff or close down, weakening civil society's capacity to advocate, coordinate and participate effectively in public decision-making.

The trust deficit between the government and citizens, created by years of unmet promises, complicated efforts to build consensus. Against this backdrop, President Cyril Ramaphosa [launched](#) the First Convention of the National Dialogue as a people-driven initiative aimed at forging a shared national vision beyond 2030 and addressing the country's deep-rooted social and economic challenges.

International developments saw South Africa [being](#) the first on the African continent to host the Group of Twenty (G20) Summit, which created visible spaces for civil society engagement. The Civil 20 ([C20](#)) and [G20](#) Social Summit enabled thousands of organisations to participate in consultations, policy drafting, and advocacy. These platforms [allowed](#) grassroots voices to shape global policy discussions, demonstrating a degree of openness to civil society participation at both national and international levels.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

The [Constitution](#) safeguards freedom of expression, assembly and association under Sections 16, 17 and 18 of the Bill of Rights. These rights are reinforced by international human rights standards such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR](#)), providing legal basis for activists to defend their rights and those of their communities without fear of violence, harassment or retaliation. However, the CIVICUS Monitor currently rates South Africa's civic space as "[obstructed](#)," indicating significant challenges to the enjoyment of civic freedoms.

Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) play a vital role in exposing corruption, protecting the environment and holding the government accountable, yet they are being [killed](#) with impunity. Activists across sectors including whistleblowers, environmental defenders and community leaders have been subjected to threats, harassment and violence. For example, on 10 December 2025, whistleblower Marius van der Merwe (Witness D) was fatally [shot](#) outside his home in Brakpan after testifying before the Madlanga Commission of Inquiry about alleged police torture and cover-ups in the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Police Department. The Commission was established in July 2025 by the government to investigate criminality, political interference and corruption within South Africa's criminal justice system. Similarly, on 14 October 2025, Tebogo Shawn "Paps" Lethoko, a leader of the National Association of Artisanal Miners, was [shot](#) dead at his home after exposing criminal syndicates and confronting mining companies over displacement and environmental damage, highlighting [failures](#) in implementing the 2022 Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining Policy and protecting activists.

The Regulation of Gatherings Act facilitates [protest](#) through notification rather than permission and the Constitutional Court [recognises](#) protest as a key form of democratic participation. Yet, law enforcement has [repeatedly](#) used excessive force including stun grenades, tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannon to disperse protesters, undermining the right to peaceful assembly. On 14–15 July 2025, residents of the Wells Estate community in Rabie Village, Gqeberha, [staged](#) violent service delivery protests over persistent power outages and delays in electricity meter installations promised by the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality. After only 40 meters were allocated for nearly 1,000 households, protests escalated to road blockades, burning tyres and vehicles and attacks on officials' property. Police responded with rubber bullets and stun grenades, [arresting](#) one woman who was charged with public violence, arson, malicious damage to property and obstruction of traffic. On 13 August 2025, residents of Ritchie, Northern Cape, staged a service delivery [protest](#) over electricity services and other long-standing grievances. The protest disrupted transport, preventing many residents from travelling to work, forcing the closure of the local clinic and preventing pupils from attending school. Protesters alleged that they were protesting peacefully when police dispersed the crowd using rubber bullets, tear

gas and stun grenades. The police arrested 19 people on charges of public violence. On 22 November 2025, during the G20 Summit, a [protest](#) by anti-migrant group Operation Dudula took place outside the Nasrec Expo Centre to highlight concerns about undocumented foreign nationals in the country. The protest began peacefully but escalated when protesters attempted to move closer to the venue. Police responded with tear gas and force, resulting in the arrest of two protesters.

Freedom of expression in South Africa has faced growing pressure, with journalists increasingly exposed to intimidation, harassment, physical assaults and surveillance. On 5 and 10 September 2025, Cape Town freelance journalist Sandiso Phaliso was [assaulted](#) by police and twice had his phone confiscated while reporting in Nyanga, despite presenting valid press credentials. At the time of writing, his phone remains unreturned. On 7–8 October 2025, KwaZulu-Natal Police Commissioner Lieutenant General Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi [appeared](#) before an ad hoc parliamentary committee probing political interference in the South African Police Service (SAPS). He urged the Standing Committee on Intelligence to authorise counterintelligence investigations into certain journalists, alleging they were used to spread misinformation, and called for punitive measures including dismissal and imprisonment. These remarks raised serious concerns about intimidation of the media. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) [warned](#) that such actions threaten constitutional media freedom and echo apartheid-era repression.

2. Supportive legal and regulatory framework

South Africa's legal framework for CSOs is primarily governed by the Nonprofit Organisations Act of 1997 ([NPO Act](#)), which establishes a voluntary registration system for voluntary associations, non-profit companies, and trusts under the Department of Social Development (DSD). To register, CSOs must submit prescribed application forms and comply with founding documents. Registered organisations are required to [submit](#) annual narrative reports, financial statements, accounting officer's report, and governance changes, within nine months of their financial year-end. Failure to comply can lead to deregistration. Once deregistered, CSOs can [apply](#) for reinstatement. If reinstatement is denied, they have 30 days to appeal to the Arbitration Tribunal.

The regulatory environment for CSOs has been significantly shaped by South Africa's engagement with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). In February 2023, South Africa was [placed](#) on the FATF greylist due to deficiencies in its anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing (AML/CFT) regime. On 24 October 2025, following the conclusion of its Plenary meeting in Paris, France, the FATF announced that South Africa had [exited](#) the greylist, formally known as the list of "Jurisdictions under Increased Monitoring". This followed extensive reforms to address the 22 action items agreed between South Africa and the FATF, as well as 32 months of engagement with FATF reviewers and an on-site assessment in July 2025, which confirmed the sustainability of the reforms.

During the 2024/25 financial year, as part of these reforms to strengthen compliance with the FATF recommendations, the DSD developed a Money Laundering and Terror Financing (ML/TF) Risk Framework for CSOs. This was accompanied by consultations

with key stakeholders and a national [awareness](#) campaign targeting CSOs, donors, government departments, private sector and financial institutions. The campaign aimed to raise awareness about the risks of terrorist financing and money laundering within the CSO sector and to promote risk mitigation without undermining legitimate civil society work. In March 2025, the DSD further [convened](#) a three-day multi-stakeholder engagement on the implementation of FATF Recommendation 8 to strengthen consultation and awareness across the sector

Despite these supportive intentions, the enforcement of the NPO Act has increasingly constrained CSO operations. The DSD intensified compliance monitoring, issuing [notices](#) of non-compliance and deregistering organisations that failed to submit outstanding reports. More than 15,650 CSOs have been deregistered, with an [estimated](#) 203,279 organisations at risk of being deregistered for failing to submit their mandatory annual reports. It is critical for organisations to prioritise compliance to maintain their legal status and continue serving their beneficiaries. Deregistration disproportionately affects small, community-based and grassroots organisations with limited administrative capacity. In August 2025, the DSD announced a phased [rollout](#) of an online CSO registration and compliance system to improve accessibility and service delivery. Although phase one, enabling online registration, became operational in late November 2025, further phases allowing online submission of reports and governance updates have been delayed. As a result, compliance challenges persist and timelines for full implementation remain unclear.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

The Nonprofit Organisations Act of 1997 ([NPO Act](#)) provides a generally enabling legal framework for CSOs to access funding from both domestic and international sources. There are no explicit legal restrictions or prohibitions on CSOs [accessing](#) foreign funding, and organisations are legally permitted to seek, secure, and utilise international grants in the same manner as locally sourced funding. CSOs may therefore access a diverse range of funding streams, including support from international donors, corporate social investment (CSI) programmes, philanthropic foundations, membership contributions and government grants.

However, South Africa's greylisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in 2023 has [introduced](#) stricter anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing (AML/CFT) measures, increasing compliance obligations for CSOs. Although greylisting did not prohibit foreign funding, it subjected [international](#) transactions to greater scrutiny, resulting in additional due diligence by financial institutions, delays in processing foreign donations and higher compliance costs, particularly for organisations dependent on international funding. Deregistered CSOs faced even greater challenges, as their lack of legal status made it more difficult to access banking services and demonstrate compliance with AML/CFT requirements. Non-compliance with the NPO Act or tax obligations can [result](#) in deregistration, not being able to open a bank account, loss of tax-exempt or Public Benefit Organisation (PBO) status, ineligibility for donor funding and foreign exchange complications. Heightened scrutiny by the South African Revenue Service (SARS) and the South African Reserve Bank

(SARB) over inward foreign transactions has [increased](#) reporting and compliance demands. While intended to protect financial integrity, these measures have raised the risk of audits, delayed disbursements, and reputational damage, which can undermine donor confidence

These pressures are likely to intensify under the draft General Laws (Anti-Money Laundering and Combating Terrorism Financing) Amendment Bill, 2025, [published](#) by the National Treasury in January 2026 for public comments. As an updated version of the 2024 draft, the Bill expands the scope of the AML/CFT regime ahead of South Africa's next FATF Mutual Evaluation in 2026–2027. The Bill [amends](#) the NPO Act to strengthen the powers of the NPO Directorate, including formal monitoring and enforcement powers, administrative sanctions, and increased penalties for offences. The Bill also expands appeal mechanisms relating to administrative sanctions, reinforcing oversight of the sector in response to concerns about abuse of NPO structures for illicit financing. These reforms may impose heavier administrative and compliance burdens, particularly on smaller, community-based organisations with limited capacity.

The financial pressures facing South Africa's civil society sector have also been intensified by shifting donor priorities, global economic uncertainty, shrinking government budgets, and reductions or suspensions in foreign assistance, including [USAID](#) and [PEPFAR](#)-funded programmes. The fifth Networking HIV and AIDS Community of Southern Africa (NACOSA) Network [survey](#) conducted in April and May 2025 found that many community-based organisations working on gender-based violence and HIV are facing a severe financial crisis as a result of US funding cuts and shrinking government budgets. A large number report having less than two months of funding remaining, alongside significant reductions or delays in partner disbursements. These pressures have forced organisations to restructure, scale back programmes, or lay off staff, directly undermining service delivery in critical areas such as healthcare, HIV services, and social support. Fundraising has emerged as the most significant challenge, with 88% of organisations struggling to secure adequate resources. In October 2025, the US government [approved](#) a \$115 million “PEPFAR Bridge Plan” for South Africa for six months from 1 October 2025 to 31 March 2026. The funding was intended only to sustain essential HIV services during the transition and did not restore previous funding levels or the broader scope of PEPFAR-supported programmes. Initiatives such as the Cape Care Fund offer potential opportunities for local resource mobilisation by [connecting](#) donors with vetted, compliant non-profit organisations. However, because it was only launched in June 2025, there is insufficient evidence to assess whether it will generate funding at a scale capable of offsetting declining public and international donor support.

4. Open and responsive state

Over the months, the relationship between civil society and the South African government has been mixed, featuring both meaningful engagement and notable gaps in responsiveness. A key example was the First National Convention of the National Dialogue, [held](#) on 15–16 August 2025. This citizen-led process brought together civil

society, labour, youth, business, and traditional leaders to “reimagine South Africa’s future.” It reflected government efforts to broaden consultation and promote inclusive engagement on critical issues such as inequality, unemployment, and social cohesion.

Similarly, in November 2025, The Civil 20 ([C20](#)), the official civil society engagement group of the G20, enabled more than 3,000 organisations to engage in policy discussions on social justice, inclusion, and sustainable development. This process [culminated](#) in the submission of a Political Declaration and Communiqué to G20 leaders calling for solidarity, equality, and sustainability as the foundations of a just global order. At the [G20 Social Summit](#), a Social Summit Declaration representing youth, women, persons with disabilities, and vulnerable communities was [presented](#) to President Cyril Ramaphosa. These processes amplified grassroots voices, influencing global policy discussions and reaffirming commitments to participatory governance.

Despite these engagements, CSOs have expressed growing [frustration](#) with limited government responsiveness and slow implementation of commitments to address Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (GBV-F). Although President Cyril Ramaphosa’s [declaration](#) of GBV-F as a national disaster ahead of the November 2025 G20 Leaders’ Summit signalled political urgency, progress has remained uneven. The GBV-F Council, a statutory multi-sectoral body whose Board includes representatives from civil society, is still [underfunded](#) and has not yet become fully operational, despite enabling legislation and repeated assurances. CSOs argue that consultation processes must be matched by concrete action and adequate budget allocations. On 5 December 2025, the National Assembly’s Portfolio Committee on Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities [shortlisted](#) 18 candidates from 403 applications to serve on the National Council on GBV-F. The shortlisted names and CVs were published for public comments with submissions closing on 31 January 2026 to promote transparency and civic participation.

Civil society also engaged in key legislative processes. On 28 November 2025, the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development [invited](#) public comments on the draft Regulations under the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Act, 2023, with submissions open until 28 January 2026. Civil society responses have already emerged. For example, the Foundation for Rights of Expression and Equality ([Free SA](#)) argued that the draft Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Act could enable overly broad surveillance, invasive data collection, and threats to privacy and freedom of expression and called for inclusive public consultation before any regulations are finalised. In September 2025, the Children’s Amendment Bill was [published](#) for public comment, opening a platform for civil society to propose reforms to strengthen child protection. [CSOs](#) submitted detailed recommendations to improve care and protection measures, disability inclusion, and access to justice. While these engagement opportunities demonstrate a degree of state willingness to consult, civil society continues to call for more consistent and meaningful participation, improved implementation of commitments, and stronger accountability from government.

5. Supportive public culture and discourses on civil society

The public framing of civil society actors has been mixed, reflecting both recognition of their contributions and persistent negative narratives by state and non-state actors. This was particularly evident during preparations for and implementation of the First National Convention of the [National Dialogue](#) and South Africa's G20 process, where civil society participation was formally embedded through engagement platforms such as the [C20](#) and the [G20 Social Summit](#). Senior government leaders, including President Cyril Ramaphosa, explicitly [recognised](#) the contributions of grassroots organisations, women-led gender justice organisations, and community groups in shaping outcomes and reinforcing South Africa's leadership on social justice and inequality.

Alongside this recognition, however, public vilification of civil society was evident, particularly in political opposition to the First National Convention of the National Dialogue initiative. Some political parties and leaders [criticised](#) CSOs involved in or defending the First National Convention, portraying them as part of an elite consensus disconnected from the realities of ordinary citizens. Furthermore, several CSOs [withdrew](#) from or declined to participate in the First National Convention due to concerns about its design and credibility. Key reasons included perceptions that the process lacked genuine independence from the executive, insufficient clarity on how outcomes would influence policy or accountability, limited space for dissenting or marginalised voices, and fears that participation would legitimise a process seen as symbolic rather than transformative.

Hostile narratives were especially pronounced among anti-migrant movements against CSOs working on migrant and refugee rights. Anti-migrant groups such as Operation Dudula openly [targeted](#) migrant-rights organisations and legal advocacy groups, including the Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI) and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), accusing them of defending "illegal foreigners" and branding civil society lawyers and activists as "unpatriotic" or anti-national, contributing to a broader climate of hostility toward rights-based advocacy. These tensions reached a legal flashpoint when CSOs took Operation Dudula to the Johannesburg High Court. On 4 November 2025, the [Court](#) interdicted and restrained the anti-migrant group and its leaders from intimidating, harassing or assaulting foreign nationals, from interfering with access to healthcare or education and from engaging in hate speech in public or on social media.

Media coverage played a decisive role in shaping public perceptions of civil society. Media outlets frequently [highlighted](#) CSO participation in the First National Convention of the National Dialogue, the C20 process, and the G20 Social Summit, portraying civil society as credible advocates for marginalised communities and inclusive policy making. Media coverage was particularly influential during the Women's Shutdown protests alongside the G20 in November 2025, which were widely depicted as powerful interventions that [brought](#) gender-based violence and femicide back into public debate. This coverage heightened public pressure on the government and contributed to President Cyril Ramaphosa [declaring](#) Gender-Based Violence-Femicide a national disaster under Section 23 of the Disaster Management Act,

underscoring civil society's capacity to shape public discourse and influence policy outcomes.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

CSOs are able to access and share online information freely, without facing government-imposed internet or social media shutdowns. Freedom House [classified](#) South Africa as “Free” in its Freedom on the Net 2025 report, reflecting the absence of state-mandated network disruptions and systematic online censorship. Civil society organisations, journalists, and activists were therefore able to use digital platforms to organise, advocate, and disseminate information during politically sensitive periods, including the First National Convention of the [National Dialogue](#), [C20](#) engagement and the [G20](#) Social Summit, enabling public debate, mobilisation and scrutiny of government actions.

However, while access to the internet remained largely unrestricted, the digital environment was not without risks. Concerns persisted regarding surveillance, cybersecurity and the protection of personal data. South Africa's legal framework provides constitutional protections for privacy and freedom of expression, but oversight of digital surveillance practices remains weak. A 2025 analysis by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) [highlighted](#) ongoing concerns about the use of interception technologies and limited transparency around state surveillance capabilities, which may have a chilling effect on online civic engagement, particularly for activists, journalists, and human rights defenders.

The security of the digital environment was further undermined by an increase in cybercrime and data breaches. In 2025, South Africa [experienced](#) a sharp rise in reported cyberattacks, including ransomware incidents and unauthorised access to personal and institutional data. The Information Regulator confirmed a growing number of data breach notifications, underscoring vulnerabilities in data protection and the uneven implementation of the Protection of Personal Information Act ([POPIA](#)). These breaches posed risks not only to individuals but also to CSOs that rely on digital tools to manage sensitive information.

Compounding these pressures, digital violence against individuals and activists defending vulnerable groups has intensified. LGBTIQ+ communities [faced](#) online homophobic attacks and insults, prompting the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) to register complaints after offensive remarks circulated on social media targeting queer people. Women journalists were also [targeted](#) with online harassment and technology-facilitated gender-based violence; the South African National Editors' Forum [highlighted](#) direct threats and doxing including the online publication of their home addresses and other personal information. This gendered and identity-based digital abuse functions as a form of repression, deterring participation and silencing critical voices, even without direct state intervention.

Challenges and Opportunities

In the next four months, the ongoing implementation of stricter Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing (AML/CFT) measures, along with proposed amendments in the 2025 AML/CFT Bill, will increase compliance burdens, particularly for smaller, community-based organisations. CSOs may also face funding uncertainty due to shifting donor priorities and continued reductions or suspensions of foreign aid. This could result in programme cutbacks and reduced service delivery in critical areas such as healthcare, gender-based violence, and social protection.

Despite these challenges, opportunities exist to improve the enabling environment. Ongoing national processes such as the National Dialogue, as well as follow-up engagements linked to South Africa's G20 Summit outcomes, provide platforms for civil society to influence public debate, governance reform, and social justice agendas. Increased public awareness of crises such as GBV-F, corruption, and inequality also creates space for renewed civic mobilisation and coalition-building.

To address these challenges and seize opportunities, three conditions are essential: predictable and diversified funding; meaningful, responsive state engagement beyond mere consultation; and stronger protections for civic freedoms, including freedom of association through the adoption of a model law, the Whistleblower Protection Bill, the right to peaceful assembly, digital safety, and freedom of expression. Investment in organisational resilience, compliance support, and digital security will also be crucial to sustaining effective civic action in the months ahead.

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