



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Lesotho
June 2026

Context

Period covered by this report: February 2026- June 2026

During the reporting period, Prime Minister Samuel Matekane's coalition government was characterised by intra-party [disputes](#) leading to [cabinet reshuffles](#) that reflected heightened [political contestation](#) rather than immediate instability.

The [dispute](#) between executive and autonomous offices like the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) threatened independence and autonomy of constitutional institutions. While the IEC dispute [ended](#) with its acting director appointed, a similar [Ombudsman](#) recruitment dispute escalated to courts, adding to the instability of these key institutions that work closely with CSOs and create an enabling environment for CSOs to hold power accountable and promote civic participation.

[Decline in revenues](#) and reduced external assistance led to several sectors [reporting](#) retrenchments and operational difficulties. The [closure](#) of Kao Mine affected the enabling environment as 750 workers were retrenched without unions being engaged to undertake their advocacy work in protection of the workers' rights. Unions [criticised](#) retrenchments, consultation processes, and questioned compliance with labour laws.

The large-scale infrastructure development, the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), continued [progressing](#) and remains a [controversial topic](#) in broader societal discourses. While CSOs like the Seinoli Legal Centre continued their advocacy regarding fair compensation, resettlement, procurement, and environmental management, extensive media reporting critical of [procurement decisions](#) relating to the LHWP's Polihali resettlement programme served as an indicator of an environment that enabled free speech and demands for accountability.

Reduced international funding increased financial pressure on many CSOs while simultaneously increasing demand for [advocacy](#) around health, governance and service delivery. Despite constraints, CSOs remained active in public [debates concerning](#) healthcare, [human rights](#), procurement, elections, labour rights and development projects.

Taken together, these developments created an environment in which civic actors remained active but increasingly focused on accountability, oversight and protecting civic participation amid economic and institutional pressures.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Lesotho generally maintained constitutional protections for the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Civil society organisations, trade unions, community organisations, churches, political parties and independent media continued to operate without systematic legal restrictions on their existence or activities.

Throughout the reporting period, CSOs enjoyed an enabling environment to function with significant labour union activity across different issues. Examples of an active trade union sector include [public challenges](#) to retrenchments in the textile industry and the [continuous advocacy](#) by ex-miners associations for faster and fairer

compensation, including through [regional advocacy](#). Similarly, the Lesotho Workers Association [pursued Labour Court proceedings](#) to enforce a court order requiring government to pay village health workers a statutory minimum wage, demonstrating an environment that allowed CSOs access to courts to protect rights. The most significant union-related development relates to the closure of Kao mine resulting in retrenchments of [750 workers](#) and increased union activity during the reporting period. Importantly, the Independent Democratic Union of Lesotho (IDUL) found that the law on consultation was not observed since the mine's management had failed to consult the union adequately before announcing the retrenchments. Despite this disregard for the law, IDUL was able to use [legal mechanisms](#) to pursue the matter further. Lastly, a [picket](#) by the Lesotho Nursing and Midwifery Organisation in April 2026 over government failure to pay nurses' salaries further indicates an environment that enables holding power accountable and exercising freedom of assembly.

Despite these examples of labour unions exercising union rights and freedom of assembly, a number of incidents highlighted concerns regarding the state's response to public protests and the protection of related civic freedoms. For example, residents of Semphetenyane in Maseru [staged protests](#) over deteriorating road infrastructure by blocking roads with burning tyres after disputing official claims that repairs had been completed. The subsequent police response resulted in the [arrest](#) of approximately 40 protesters, [criminal charges](#) against several residents, and the temporary confiscation of a journalist's mobile phone while reporting on the protest, [raising concerns](#) about the proportionality of law enforcement responses and the protection of media freedom during public assemblies. These incidents suggest that, while the legal space for assembly remains largely open, [tensions](#) increasingly arise around the policing of protests and the exercise of associated rights, rather than through formal prohibitions on assembly itself. Nevertheless, there have been individual instances where formal restrictions on freedom of assembly were imposed. A case in point is the [denial](#) of a permit for the Lesotho Police Staff Association to stage a [protest march](#) in demand for a salary hike to the Prime Minister.

Given past tensions between the army and police as well as violent army responses to police protest, sentiments of national security being threatened were used as an excuse to deny the permit. Freedom of expression continued to be generally respected with independent media reporting extensively on politically sensitive issues throughout the reporting period. For example, [Lesotho Times](#) investigated allegations surrounding the appointment of the Acting Director of Elections and the [dispute](#) between the executive and the Independent Electoral Commission regarding the designation of the Commission's Chief Accounting Officer. The newspaper published [detailed correspondence](#) involving the parties concerned without apparent interference, an indicator that independent media continued operating with considerable editorial freedom. Similarly, there was significant [media engagement](#) on the Lesotho Highlands Water project with [demands](#) for improved [compensation](#), livelihood restoration and greater transparency regarding resettlement processes.

Despite such active and uncensored media engagement, isolated incidents continued raising concerns regarding intimidation of civic actors, affecting freedom of expression. One notable example involved activist Teboho Mojaepela, leader of the Socialist Revolutionaries political party and Motete Constituency legislator, who was reportedly [questioned by police](#) after making public statements concerning corruption and governance. Mojaepela said the police told him "to stop talking about the high corruption". Earlier reports of police actions were also perceived by some observers as attempts to discourage public criticism of government institutions, as witnessed by

a Thaba-Tseka district-based youth activist, Moloki Mokotso, who was [detained overnight](#) at a police station for [criticising](#) the Prime Minister. Activist Mpheulane Mohale, known as Nyofane, was also called in for [questioning to police](#) headquarters over his criticism of the Prime Minister. In addition, Nyofane was [admonished](#) by the ruling party youth league. While these incidents did not amount to systematic suppression of dissent, they illustrate increasing concerns regarding the intervention of law enforcement agencies against outspoken civic actors.

The implementation of constitutional reforms also progressed during the reporting period. On 3 June 2026, the National Reforms Transitional Office convened [media stakeholders](#) to discuss implementation of the [Tenth Amendment to the Constitution Act, 2025](#), particularly provisions relating to the establishment of the [Media Council of Lesotho](#) and a media complaints mechanism. The engagement demonstrated continued efforts to operationalise constitutional reforms through stakeholder participation and represented an important opportunity to strengthen media governance and freedom of expression. However, another constitutional [court challenge](#) has been brought against the reforms accusing Parliament of having unlawfully altered the original reforms bill prepared by the defunct National Reforms Authority, which it also wants revived.

2. Supportive legal and regulatory framework

Lesotho's legal and regulatory framework remained broadly supportive of civil society in principle. There were no new laws enacted that directly curtailed the registration, operation or advocacy activities of CSOs, nor were there reports of organisations being arbitrarily deregistered or prevented from operating. However, the period exposed persistent concerns regarding the implementation of constitutional and legal guarantees. Institutional weaknesses manifested in concerns with the implementation of constitutional reforms as well as the [independence](#) of oversight institutions, such as the Ombudsman's office, which also affect civil society's operational freedom. This has implications for the regulatory environment for CSOs, as independent oversight institutions play a critical role in upholding the rule of law, protecting constitutional rights, and ensuring that civic freedoms and legal safeguards are applied impartially. Their functioning constitutes an important element of CSOs' operational environment as they maintain the legal and institutional framework CSOs refer to when conducting rights-based advocacy or holding the government accountable. When the state destabilises the Ombudsman's office, this also reduces opportunities for institutional avenues to hold government accountable and undermines the institutional framework at the basis of many CSOs' engagement.

The legal challenge against the Law Society of Lesotho's decision to withdraw accreditation from WLSA Lesotho and refuse practising certificates to lawyers employed by NGOs remained before the High Court throughout the reporting period. By June 2026, no judgment had been issued, leaving the matter unresolved and prolonging uncertainty over the ability of NGO-employed lawyers to represent clients. While the [continued hearing of public interest](#) cases demonstrates that the courts remained an available avenue for accountability, the unresolved dispute highlights a continuing constraint on the operating environment for CSOs providing legal aid and public interest litigation. The case illustrates that access to the courts alone is insufficient where regulatory barriers may limit the ability of civil society organisations to provide legal representation and effectively exercise their mandate.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

The financial environment for CSOs in Lesotho became increasingly fragile during the reporting period due to [worsening economic conditions](#), uncertainty surrounding international development assistance and growing pressure on public services. There were no reports of deliberate government restrictions on CSOs' ability to access domestic or international funding. Rather, the principal challenge to civil society sustainability arose from [broader economic and fiscal pressures](#) affecting both state institutions and civic actors.

One of the most significant developments affecting the sustainability of civil society was growing uncertainty regarding the long-term financing and governance of externally funded development programmes, particularly in the health sector. During the reporting period, [civil society organisations called](#) for parliamentary scrutiny and constitutional compliance regarding a recently signed US\$364 million (approximately M6.2 billion) agreement between Lesotho and the United States concerning the funding and management of [foreign assistance for health programmes](#). The debate highlighted both the continued importance of external development assistance for public service delivery and concerns regarding transparency, accountability and the long-term sustainability of donor-supported programmes. While the agreement commits substantial funding to strengthen the national health system, it is primarily directed towards government health programmes and does not clarify whether civil society organisations will continue to receive direct financial support as implementing partners. This created uncertainty for health-focused CSOs that have historically relied on US-funded programmes for service delivery, advocacy and community-based interventions. Although the full implications were not yet clear by the end of the reporting period, the agreement signalled a potential shift in funding modalities that could affect the financial sustainability of CSOs in the health sector.

At the same time, development partners continued to provide important support opportunities for civil society. During the reporting period, the European Union-supported [Inclusive Lesotho programme](#), implemented by [International IDEA](#), launched a call for proposals aimed at strengthening democratic participation, electoral processes and democratic accountability. The initiative represented an important funding opportunity for civil society organisations working on governance and citizen participation. In addition, several [ongoing European Union-supported programmes](#) continued supporting civil society engagement in areas including human rights promotion, democratic accountability and inclusive governance.

Despite challenges of declining funding support, CSOs remained active throughout the reporting period. Trade unions continued representing [retrenched workers](#), organisations supporting former mineworkers maintained advocacy regarding [Tshiamiso compensation](#), disability organisations engaged government on inclusive census implementation, and community groups continued advocating on compensation, environmental justice and public service delivery issues. At the same time as support has generally declined, the demand for legal aid, humanitarian assistance, and labour rights advocacy has increased with the closure of [Kao Mine](#), resulting in the loss of 750 jobs, and textile sector retrenchments. Additionally, [rising public debt](#) affected government's ability to provide social services and increased reliance on community-based organisations and civil society actors.

Overall, the reporting period demonstrated that the principal constraint on civil society sustainability in Lesotho was declining resource availability and increasing socio-economic pressures, rather than regulatory barriers to accessing funding.

4. Open and responsive state

The reporting period presented a mixed picture regarding state openness and responsiveness. Government institutions continued engaging with CSOs, communities, professional associations and other stakeholders through parliamentary committees, public consultations, policy dialogues and constitutional reform processes. However, recurring concerns emerged regarding the quality of participation and the extent to which public input influenced decision-making.

Several positive developments demonstrated continued opportunities for civic participation. On 8 June 2026, the Lesotho [Law Reform Commission convened civil society organisations](#) and other stakeholders to review proposals to repeal and amend obsolete and discriminatory laws affecting [vulnerable groups](#). The process was welcomed by participating organisations, particularly representatives of persons with disabilities, as an important opportunity to influence ongoing legal reform processes. Similarly, the National Reforms Transitional Office [engaged media stakeholders](#) on the implementation of constitutional media reforms, including the establishment of the [Media Council of Lesotho](#) and related accountability mechanisms, demonstrating continued openness to stakeholder participation in the reform process.

The reporting period also saw continued implementation of the European Union-funded Inclusive Lesotho programme, implemented by International IDEA and partners. The programme [convened a broad range of stakeholders](#), including civil society organisations, political parties, media practitioners, electoral institutions and development partners, to contribute to the development of civic and voter education strategies and voter registration reforms. The initiative represented an important example of collaborative governance and efforts to strengthen inclusive political participation, particularly among women, youth and persons with disabilities.

Government further convened [new dialogue and accountability platforms](#), including the [National Leadership and Accountability Summit](#) and the [Public-Private Dialogue initiative](#), aimed at strengthening stakeholder engagement, including with civil society, and improving implementation of national development priorities. On the local level, it [launched](#) a three-day pilot dialogue in June 2026 aimed at placing citizens at the centre of governance by creating structured platforms for engagement between government, civil society, traditional leaders, youth, women and other stakeholders. Government stated that the initiative sought to improve public participation in policy formulation and strengthen responsive governance.

However, [questions](#) regarding meaningful participation in public policy-making also continued to arise. Organisations representing persons with disabilities, such as the Lesotho National Federation of Organisations of the Disabled (LNFOD), [criticised](#) the implementation of the 2026 Population and Housing Census, arguing that consultation had been inadequate and largely tokenistic. Following public criticism, the Bureau of Statistics engaged with LNFOD, acknowledged shortcomings in consultation, and supported limited corrective measures, including training of census teams on disability inclusion. While this represented a positive response, stakeholders argued that participation should have occurred during the planning stages rather than during implementation.

A positive development during the reporting period was the [signing of a partnership](#) between the Ministry of Law and Justice and the Women and Law in Southern Africa Research and Education Trust to strengthen legal awareness, human rights protection, access to justice and enhance legal protection for women and girls. The partnership formalises cooperation between government and a civil society organisation, recognising the role of CSOs in advancing legal reform, rights awareness and the protection of vulnerable groups.

Even where participatory spaces were created, concerns persisted regarding government responsiveness following consultation. Although communities affected by the Lesotho Highlands Water Project participated in consultations, they continued to report that concerns relating to [compensation](#), [resettlement](#) and [livelihood restoration](#) remained unresolved, suggesting that consultation did not consistently translate into meaningful government action or influence project decisions. Nevertheless, civil society organisations continued local consultations such as the public gatherings organised by the Seinoli Legal Centre for communities affected by the Polihali Dam under construction.

Overall, the reporting period demonstrated that opportunities for public participation remained broadly available in Lesotho. However, the principal challenge remained the responsiveness, effectiveness, and implementation of decisions following stakeholder engagement, rather than access to participation itself.

5. Supportive public culture and discourses on civil society

Public discourse during the reporting period remained vibrant and broadly supportive of civic participation and democratic accountability. Independent media, CSOs, trade unions, professional associations, oversight institutions and community representatives continued actively [contributing to national discussions](#) on the education sector plan (ESP) 2026-2026, governance, corruption, public service delivery and constitutional reform. There was little evidence of systematic attempts by state actors to delegitimise civil society organisations or portray independent civic actors as threats to national security or political stability.

Media reporting extensively covered alleged corruption and the [functioning of constitutional institutions](#). Public discussions surrounding the Royal Palace project, [compensation](#) and [procurement](#) processes [under](#) the LHWP, [public debt](#), and the performance of oversight institutions, such as the [Ombudsman](#) and [Auditor-General](#), reflected growing public demand for transparency and accountability. Civil society organisations played a prominent role in initiating and shaping these public debates on governance and accountability, with citizens increasingly engaging on these issues. Media coverage generally presented CSOs as credible champions of transparency and good governance, strengthening public recognition of their watchdog role.

Political discourse nevertheless became increasingly polarised during the reporting period. Public debate over constitutional and internal political [party disputes](#) became highly personalised, contributing to concerns about declining public confidence in democratic institutions.

The continuing [review of obsolete and archaic laws](#) presents an opportunity to strengthen the inclusive participation of all segments of society. By identifying laws

that undermine equality, human dignity and access to justice, and by conducting the review in consultation with organisations representing groups, such as organisations representing persons with disabilities or women, the reform process could help remove legal barriers that disproportionately affect these groups' access to participation, thereby contributing to a more inclusive legal environment.

At the same time, government continued implementing initiatives aimed at strengthening the inclusion of persons with disabilities and gender diverse people. The People's Matrix, a LGBTIQ+ rights organisation, [commended the government](#) for incorporating more inclusive gender diverse questions into the 2026 Population and Housing Census, describing the changes as an important step towards improving data for evidence-based planning and the protection of the rights of all persons regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Overall, public discourse in Lesotho continued to promote civic participation and accountability. The principal trend during the reporting period was not the shrinking of civic space, but increasing public scrutiny of government performance and growing expectations regarding transparency, responsiveness and institutional accountability. These growing expectations also strengthened the enabling environment for civil society, as increased public demand for transparency and accountability reinforced public support for CSOs performing watchdog, advocacy and accountability functions.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

The digital environment remained broadly open during the reporting period. There were no reported incidents of nationwide internet shutdowns, government blocking of social media platforms, or systematic restrictions on online civic expression during the reporting period.

Digital platforms continued to play an important role in facilitating public participation and access to information. [Government institutions](#), Parliament, oversight bodies, political parties and [civil society organisations](#) increasingly relied on [websites](#) and [social media platforms](#) to communicate with the public, [disseminate information](#) and [promote public engagement](#). Independent media organisations also continued publishing online alongside print and broadcast platforms, expanding public access to information relating to governance, corruption, constitutional reform and public service delivery.

However, increased reliance on digital platforms also highlighted persistent inequalities in access to the digital environment. Limited internet connectivity, affordability constraints and varying levels of digital literacy, particularly in rural and underserved communities, meant that not all citizens could participate equally in online civic engagement. This underscored the continued importance of complementing digital engagement with accessible offline communication and participation mechanisms.

The reporting period also saw continued implementation of [digital public administration initiatives](#) aimed at improving service delivery and administrative efficiency. One notable initiative involved efforts to [modernise passport services](#) through [digital systems](#) designed to address long-standing application backlogs and improve administrative efficiency. Although these reforms primarily concerned administrative efficiency and reduced delays experienced by citizens, they also have implications for civic participation because access to identity documents enables citizens to exercise

a range of civil and political rights, including voting, accessing government services, and freedom of movement.

No evidence emerged during the reporting period of systematic digital surveillance, cyberattacks, online censorship or arrests specifically linked to peaceful online expression. Similarly, there were no reports of government introducing legislation aimed at restricting online civic participation or digital advocacy by civil society organisations.

Overall, the digital environment in Lesotho remained largely open and supportive of civic participation. However, continued investment in digital inclusion, cybersecurity, data protection and institutional capacity will be important to ensure that digital transformation strengthens, rather than limits, civic participation and access to information.

Challenges and Opportunities

The main challenge affecting the enabling environment during the reporting period remained the gap between constitutional protections and their effective implementation. While legal and institutional frameworks supporting [civic participation](#) remained largely intact, delays in implementing constitutional reforms, operationalising oversight institutions and responding to public concerns continued to affect public confidence in democratic governance. Although opportunities for consultation existed, communities and civil society organisations increasingly questioned whether their participation influenced decision-making, particularly regarding the [Lesotho Highlands Water Project](#), decentralisation reforms and implementation of the 2026 Population and Housing [Census](#). Economic pressures, including retrenchments, fiscal constraints and uncertainty surrounding external development assistance, continued to affect the sustainability of civil society organisations and increase demand for civic and social support services.

Strengthening implementation of constitutional reforms, improving government responsiveness and enhancing the effectiveness of public participation mechanisms remain key opportunities for improving the enabling environment for civil society. Key priority is establishment of the constitutional amendments implementing body with a clear legal mandate and sufficient authority to oversee and coordinate implementation of the reforms. The process should be transparent and inclusive, ensuring that civil society organisations participate meaningfully in its design and operational framework. The body should institutionalise structured engagement with CSOs, enabling them to contribute to monitoring implementation, providing independent oversight and informing ongoing reform processes. Such an approach would strengthen accountability, promote public trust and ensure that constitutional reforms translate into tangible improvements for civic space and democratic governance.

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