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Campaigners for Human Rights

STATE OF CIVIC SPACE IN ZIMBABWE

WATCH REPORT (2024-2025)



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

State of Civic Space in Zimbabwe

Watch Report (2024-2025)

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACHPR	African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
AIPPA	Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act
AML/CFT/PF	Anti-Money Laundering
AU	African Union
CBOs	Community-Based Organisations
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
DDC	District Development Coordinator
ENERGIZE	Action to Enhance
EU	European Union
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FBOs	Faith-Based Organisations
FGDs	Focused Group Discussions
FOI	Freedom of Information (Act)
HRDs	Human Rights Defenders
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
KII	Key Informant Interview
MOPO	Maintenance of Peace and Order (Act)
NANGO	National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisation
PVO	Private Voluntary Organisations
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government
ZELO	Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Organisation
ZLHR	Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights
ZimRights	Zimbabwe Human Rights Association

FOREWORD

Civil society in Zimbabwe continues to play a critical and irreplaceable role in service delivery, humanitarian response, democratic accountability, and community resilience. At a time of deep economic strain and institutional transition, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) remain essential partners in sustaining livelihoods, protecting vulnerable populations, amplifying citizen voices, and supporting national development objectives.

This Watch Report is produced at a moment of profound transformation for the sector. Legal and regulatory reforms, shifting donor priorities, economic volatility, and evolving global compliance regimes have converged to fundamentally reshape the operating environment for civil society. These dynamics have generated both heightened risk and new forms of adaptation, creating a complex landscape in which CSOs must navigate uncertainty while continuing to meet urgent community needs.

The 2025 edition of the State of Civic Space in Zimbabwe builds on previous assessments while responding to an unprecedented convergence of regulatory reform and administrative uncertainty following the enactment of the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Act. It documents how these reforms are being experienced in practice—across regions, thematic areas, and organisational types—and examines their implications for civic space, organisational sustainability, and democratic participation.

Grounded in evidence and informed by the lived realities of CSOs across the country, this Report seeks to inform constructive dialogue and policy engagement among government, civil society, and development partners. It is intended not only as a record of constraints and challenges, but as a tool for reflection, accountability, and reform. At this critical juncture, protecting and enabling civic space is essential for inclusive development, social cohesion, and Zimbabwe's long-term stability and democratic future.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The State of Civic Space in Zimbabwe – Watch Report 2025 provides an evidence-based assessment of the conditions under which CSOs operated between January and December 2025, a period marked by profound political, economic, legal, and institutional transition. Supported by the European Union Delegation to Zimbabwe (EU) through the Action to Empower NGOs for Effective and Inclusive Governance and Development in Zimbabwe (ENERGIZE) Project, and jointly produced by the National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (NANGO) and the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights), the Report captures how intersecting governance reforms, economic shocks, and global compliance regimes have reshaped civic space and civil society legitimacy in Zimbabwe.

In 2025, the civic space, both online and offline in Zimbabwe, remained under sustained pressure, driven by restrictive legal reforms, administrative paralysis, shrinking financial resources, and the increasing securitisation of civil society work. Central to this environment was the implementation of the PVO Amendment Act of 2025, enacted on 11 April 2025, following extensive national, regional, and international advocacy.

Despite its passage, the Act's implementation has been characterised by uncertainty, delay, and uneven application, generating widespread fear, self-censorship, and operational insecurity across the sector.

Nine months after enactment, the establishment of the Office of the PVO Registrar remained a work in progress, and the gazette of the regulations to accompany the Act is pending despite reported co-creation with civil society actors. Approximately 325 registration applications are awaiting approval by the PVO Board, many stalled at district-level vetting stages, with no applications publicly confirmed as approved by early 2026. The reconstitution of the PVO Board in terms of the new Act is also pending. This institutional incapacitation resulted in a de facto grace period following the expiry of the statutory transition period on 22 August 2025, prolonging uncertainty and amplifying anticipatory compliance driven more by fear than enforcement.

These regulatory uncertainties were compounded by the continued application of the Patriotic Act (2023) and other securitised laws, contributing to increased surveillance, bureaucratic obstruction, selective enforcement, and intimidation—particularly against organisations working on governance, human rights, elections, media freedom, and accountability related programming. The chilling effect of fear has already reshaped behaviour across the sector, often with greater impact than formal sanctions.

The operating environment in 2025 was further destabilised by an unprecedented funding shock following the abrupt withdrawal of major United States Government (USG) funding through USAID. In Zimbabwe, this translated into losses exceeding US\$388 million per year, including more than US\$90 million in HIV [funding](#). The impact was severe and immediate, resulting in programme closures and downsizing, retrenchment of thousands of CSO staff, weakened public health and community systems, and heightened organisational vulnerability.

While approximately 48% of organisations that participated in the data collection process for this report retained some alternative funding, most operated with significantly reduced resources, and many Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) were forced to rely entirely on volunteerism. Donor responses increasingly favoured short-term, conservative funding modalities, registered fiscal agents, and organisations perceived to pose lower regulatory or political risk. This risk aversion, when combined with domestic regulatory uncertainty, deepened the exclusion of advocacy-oriented CSOs and reinforced a differentiated civic space.

The Report documents a highly differentiated civic space, with uneven impacts across civil society sectors. Governance, democracy, and human rights organisations experienced the most severe repression, including arrests, disruption of meetings, surveillance, and denial of operational clearances. Media and media-support organisations were subjected to criminalisation under the Cyber and Data Protection Act (CDPA) of 2021, which is the primary legislation that has been used to regulate online activities, including media and media-support organisations. This law has been widely interpreted and implemented to criminalise freedom of expression and journalism under the guise of protecting cyber-security and personal data. Women's rights organisations faced a dual burden of patriarchal resistance and political suspicion, particularly when advancing structural reforms or accountability agendas.

Youth organisations and student movements operated under intensified surveillance due to the political significance of youth mobilisation. Humanitarian and FBOs retained limited operational space, but this tolerance remained conditional and was increasingly characterised by politicisation of aid and stringent oversight. Environmental defenders were exposed to elevated risks linked to powerful economic and extractive interests. Meanwhile, CBOs and disability-focused organisations, despite being deeply

embedded in communities, faced acute funding shortages, limited institutional capacity, and disproportionate compliance burdens.

Across all sectors, fear of reprisals, bureaucratic delays, inconsistent provincial practices, and shrinking financial support continued to erode operational certainty and civic participation.

Alongside external pressures, the Report identifies a growing crisis of legitimacy within civil society. Consultations revealed a widening disconnect between formal CSOs and the broader civic formations they claim to represent. Many CSOs were perceived as donor-facing rather than citizen-facing, increasingly detached from indigenous, faith-based, labour, and community organising traditions. [Afrobarometer Round 10 findings](#) reinforce this concern, showing declining public trust in CSOs—comparable to political parties—while traditional leaders, despite acknowledged flaws, retain greater legitimacy. This erosion of trust weakens social anchorage and compounds regulatory vulnerability.

Internal governance weaknesses, including founder-centric leadership, weak boards, limited succession planning, and donor-driven programming, further heightened organisational fragility during the funding crisis. Under the PVO Act framework, fear of personal liability has begun to reshape internal power dynamics, with boards becoming more interventionist, often constraining advocacy and autonomy.

Despite these constraints, civil society demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Key survival and protection strategies included strategic litigation to challenge restrictive laws; digital innovation for mobilisation and documentation; coalition-building through platforms such as NANGO regions and sectors; community-rooted programming that reduced political exposure; local resource mobilisation through social enterprise and community contributions; and strengthened physical and digital security protocols. These approaches enabled many organisations to continue delivering essential services and advancing rights despite elevated risks.

Relations between CSOs and the State remained inconsistent. While some constructive engagement occurred—particularly in local governance, agriculture, health, and humanitarian sectors—many organisations encountered hostility, censorship, and surveillance. Relations with development partners remained constructive but constrained by diminished funding flows and heightened risk management pressures. Inter-CSO collaboration strengthened in some areas but was undermined elsewhere by competition for shrinking resources. Communities continued to express strong support for CSOs, though participation in governance-related activities declined in politically sensitive areas due to fear of reprisals.

Zimbabwe's preparations for its third round of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Mutual Evaluation further shaped the operating environment. Concerns persist regarding the misapplication of AML/CFT/CPF standards, particularly FATF Recommendation 8, in ways that risk further securitising civic space. The absence of a national Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) risk assessment, coupled with limited civil society engagement, heightens the danger of blanket and disproportionate regulatory responses that undermine legitimate civic activity without improving financial integrity outcomes.

Across thematic areas and regions, CSOs identified a shared set of structural and operational challenges that defined Zimbabwe's civic space in 2025. Foremost among these were bureaucratic and unpredictable clearance processes, characterised by inconsistent requirements, prolonged delays, and opaque decision-making at district and provincial levels, which undermined planning and operational certainty. These administrative barriers were compounded by uncertainty and fear arising from restrictive legislation, particularly the PVO Amendment Act (2025) and the continued application of the Patriotic Act (2023), which heightened risks of surveillance, selective enforcement, intimidation, and reprisals.

The operating environment was further destabilised by a severe contraction in funding and entrenched donor dependency, driven by abrupt international funding withdrawals and increasingly risk-averse donor practices. This financial shock weakened organisational sustainability, constrained programming, and intensified competition across the sector. At the same time, organisations reported a deterioration in staff welfare, marked by burnout, psychosocial stress, and escalating physical and digital security threats to CSO personnel and human rights defenders. Finally, the politicisation of aid and local gatekeeping practices—involving traditional leaders, political actors, and local authorities—restricted access to communities, distorted humanitarian and development work, and eroded the neutrality and independence of civil society interventions.

Collectively, these challenges undermined operational certainty, reduced civic participation, and increased vulnerability across the sector—particularly for grassroots, advocacy-oriented, women-led, and youth-led organisations.

The Report calls for urgent, coordinated action by government, civil society, and international partners to halt the erosion of civic space and strengthen institutional resilience.

For the **Government of Zimbabwe**, the Report urges comprehensive reform of restrictive legal and regulatory frameworks, including the repeal or substantial amendment of the Patriotic Act and the reform of the PVO Amendment Act to ensure proportionate, transparent, and risk-based regulation aligned with constitutional and international human rights standards. It calls for an

end to the politicisation and securitisation of civic and humanitarian work, the protection of civil society organisations, journalists, and human rights defenders from intimidation and harassment, and the strengthening of accountability, due process, and judicial independence in the administration of civic-related laws.

For **CSOs**, the Report emphasises the need to strengthen internal governance, accountability, and leadership systems; deepen collaboration and public engagement to defend legitimacy; institutionalise organisational security and risk management; and diversify and localise funding models to reduce donor dependency and enhance sustainability.

For **International and Regional Actors**, the Report calls for flexible, long-term, and risk-tolerant funding approaches that prioritise core costs, staff welfare, and institutional resilience, particularly for grassroots and rural organisations. It urges expanded protection mechanisms for human rights defenders and stronger regional and international oversight, including through SADC, the African Union, and human rights mechanisms, to safeguard civic space and promote accountability.





1 INTRODUCTION: CIVIC SPACE AT A CRITICAL JUNCTURE

Supported by the EU through the ENERGIZE Programme, NANGO and ZimRights present the State of Civic Space in Zimbabwe – Watch Report 2025. This edition examines the dynamics that shaped Zimbabwe's civic space between January and December 2025, a period defined by heightened political contestation, economic volatility, regulatory change, and unprecedented funding shocks.

CSOs remain a cornerstone of Zimbabwe's social, economic, and political life. They complement state functions by filling service delivery gaps, advancing public health and education, supporting livelihoods, promoting gender equality, protecting children's rights, and safeguarding the rights of vulnerable and marginalised groups. Their geographic reach—particularly in rural and underserved communities—contributes to inclusive development, while their advocacy and accountability roles strengthen democratic participation, transparency, and citizen engagement.

This Report provides a comprehensive assessment of the operating environment for civil society in Zimbabwe in 2025, analysing both the physical and digital civic space within which CSOs operate. It examines how legal, political, administrative, economic, and financial factors interact to shape civic action, organisational sustainability, and the safety of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs). Drawing on experiences from organisations working across humanitarian assistance, governance and democracy, gender equality, youth empowerment, environmental justice, media freedom, disability inclusion, and children's rights, the Report captures the diversity of civic engagement and the uneven impacts of restriction across sectors and regions.

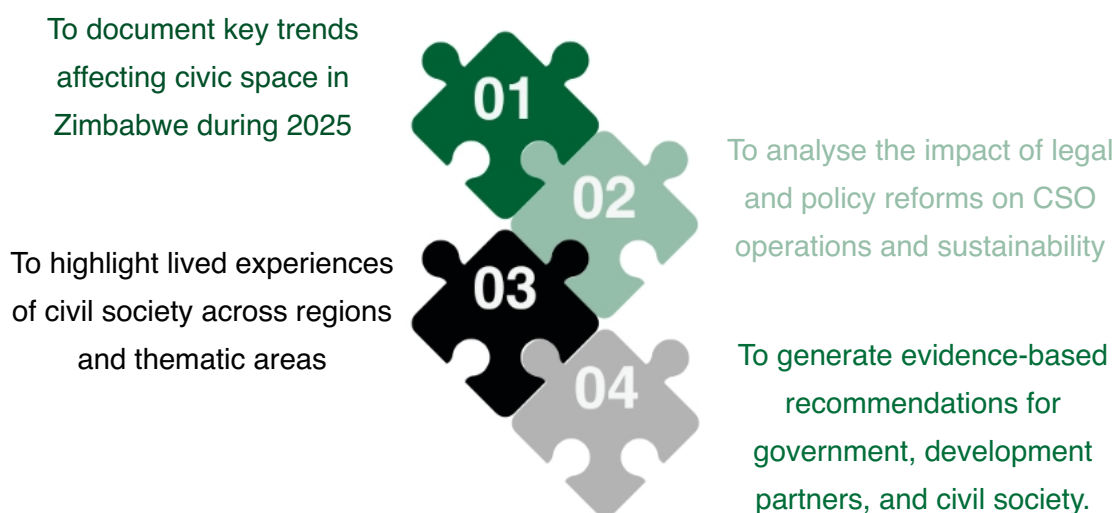
A central focus of this analysis is the evolving legal and policy landscape. In particular, the Report examines the implications of the PVO Amendment Act of 2025 and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Act of 2023—commonly referred to as the Patriotic Act. Together, these laws have significantly reshaped the regulatory environment for civil society,

contributing to heightened uncertainty, expanded surveillance, bureaucratic obstruction, and the securitisation of civic work, especially for organisations engaged in governance, human rights, elections, and accountability.

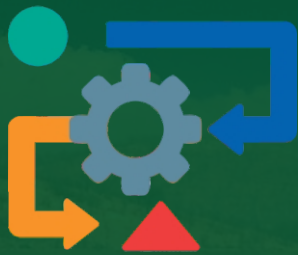
The period under review was further marked by an unprecedented contraction in donor funding, most notably following abrupt shifts in United States foreign assistance policy. This funding shock compounded existing pressures on CSOs already contending with arrests, harassment, intimidation, selective enforcement of regulations, and prolonged administrative delays. While humanitarian and social-sector organisations often retained limited space for engagement with authorities, they too faced politicisation of aid, inconsistent government relations, and escalating compliance and reporting burdens.

The withdrawal of major funding streams forced many organisations to suspend programmes, downsize staff, or close operations altogether. For communities reliant on CSO-provided services, the consequences were severe, including reduced humanitarian assistance, weakened health and social protection systems, and diminished access to legal aid and protection services. These developments underscore the interdependence between civic space, development effectiveness, and community well-being.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this Report is fourfold:



By documenting constraints, violations, adaptive strategies, and emerging opportunities, this Report offers an evidence-based portrait of Zimbabwe's civic landscape at a critical juncture. It aims to inform policymaking, guide development partner engagement, strengthen sector-wide advocacy, and support CSOs and human rights defenders as they continue to play a vital role in advancing inclusive development, accountability, and democratic governance under increasingly challenging conditions.



2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: A RAPID, INCLUSIVE, AND TRIANGULATED ASSESSMENT

This Report is informed by qualitative, participatory, and rapid appraisal research methods, designed to capture both sector-wide trends and lived experiences of CSOs operating in Zimbabwe during 2025. The assessment combines primary and secondary data sources, enabling a nuanced analysis of civic space conditions across legal, political, administrative, and financial dimensions.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data was collected through a mix of national and provincial CSO consultations, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), self-administered surveys, and a validation workshop convened by NANGO and partner organisations. Key engagement platforms included:

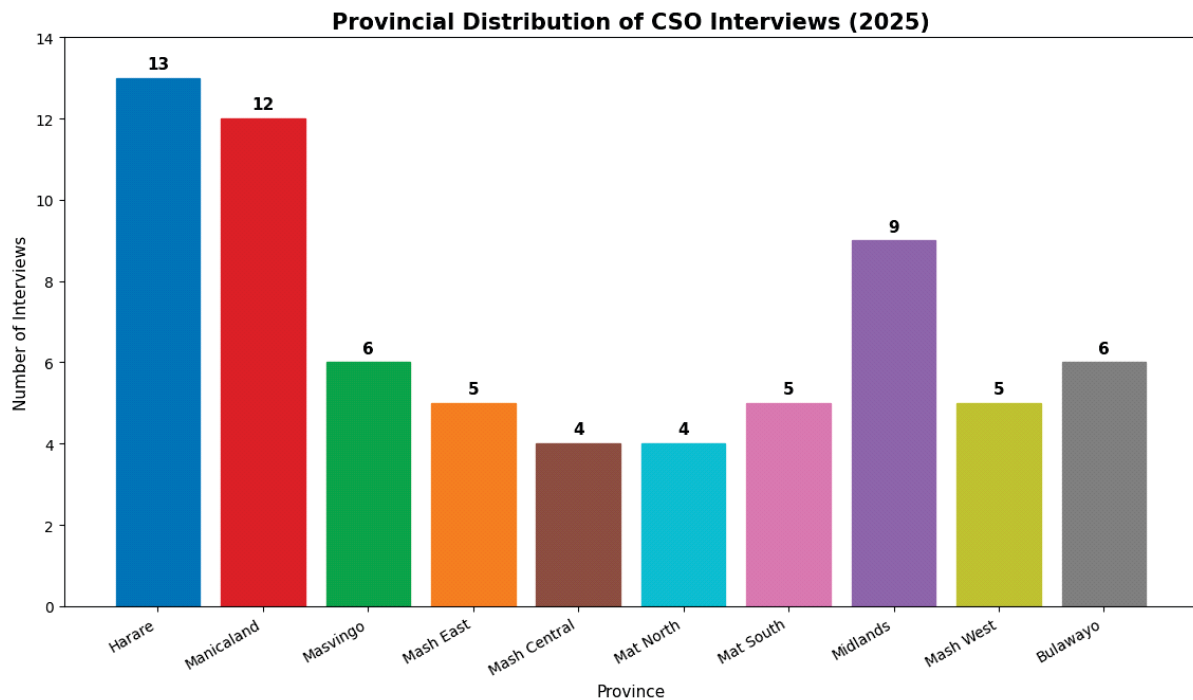
- The CSO Consultation on PVO Registration Experiences (November 2025);
- Provincial dialogues held across multiple regions; and
- The NGO Directors' Summer Retreat, which provided strategic and sector-wide reflections on civic space, governance, funding, and compliance challenges.

To complement these engagements, documentary analysis was undertaken, covering relevant legislation, policy instruments, court judgments, donor guidance, international standards, and prior civic space assessments. This included a review of the ZimRights State of Civic Space in Zimbabwe Report (2024), which served as a baseline for analysing shifts and emerging trends observed in 2025.

Sampling and Participation

The assessment employed a rapid appraisal methodology that integrated qualitative and quantitative research tools. A total of 69 CSO questionnaires were completed by organisations representing a broad range of thematic areas, including women's rights, humanitarian response, human rights and governance, environmental justice, children's rights, community

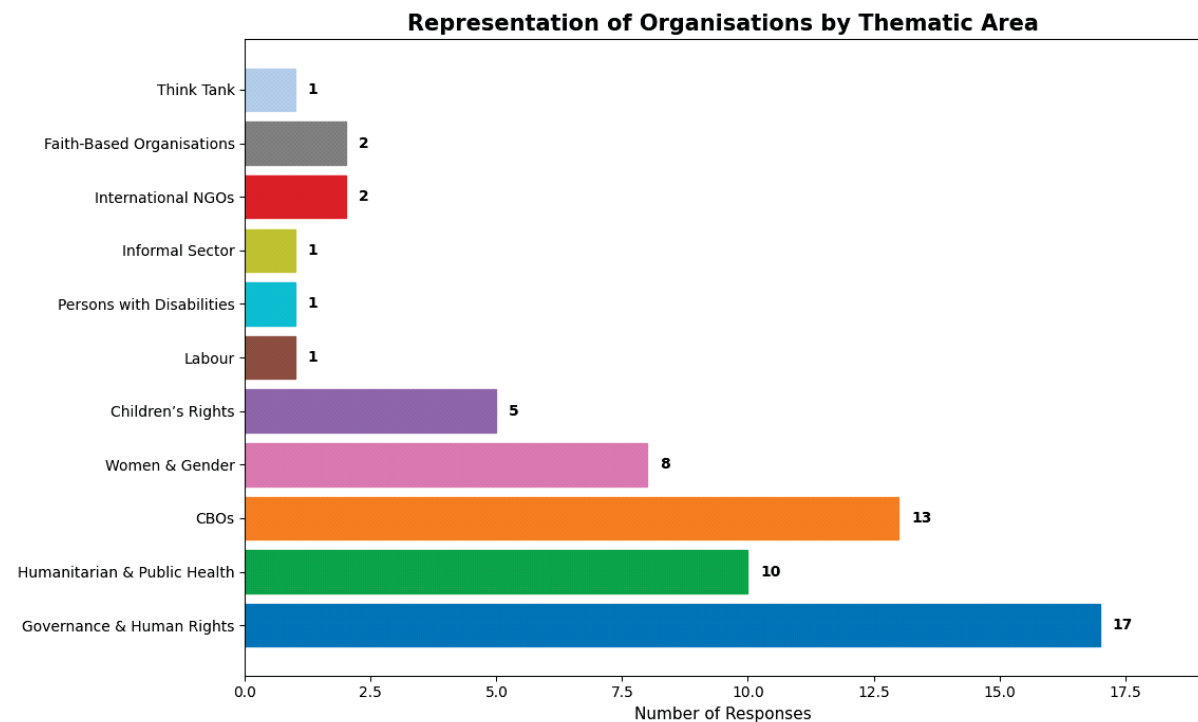
empowerment, disability inclusion, media freedom, faith-based work, and youth-focused programming.



The provincial distribution of interviews reflects both the geographic reach of the study and the uneven operating conditions for civil society across Zimbabwe. Higher concentrations of interviews in Harare (13) and Manicaland (12) reflect greater CSO density, policy engagement, and monitoring intensity in these areas. Solid representation in Midlands (9), Bulawayo (6), Masvingo (6), and both Matabeleland provinces demonstrates intentional inclusion beyond the capital. Lower numbers in some Mashonaland provinces reflect access constraints, heightened gatekeeping, and civic space pressures rather than gaps in methodology. Overall, the distribution confirms a nationally grounded assessment shaped by differential civic space realities.

Sampling was intentionally designed to capture diverse organisational experiences, drawing responses from both urban and rural contexts and from national, provincial, and community-based organisations. Particular emphasis was placed on inclusion, with deliberate efforts to engage organisations working with persons with disabilities, children, youth, rural communities, and constituencies operating in humanitarian, governance, and rights-based spaces.

Additional qualitative insights were drawn from key informant interviews involving academic experts, media practitioners, civil society leaders, and staff from NANGO and ZimRights, as well as other relevant stakeholders with specialised knowledge or lived experience of civic space conditions.



Profile of Participating Organisations

The assessment drew participation from a diverse range of civil society actors across thematic areas, reflecting both the structure of Zimbabwe's civic ecosystem and differentiated access to civic space. As illustrated above, governance and human rights organisations constituted the largest share of respondents (17), followed by CBOs (13) and humanitarian and public health actors (10). This distribution reflects both the central role of these actors in civic accountability and service delivery and their heightened exposure to regulatory, political, and operational pressures.

Women and gender-focused organisations (8) and children's rights organisations (5) were also substantively represented, underscoring the intersection between civic space constraints and social justice work. FBOs and international NGOs accounted for two respondents each, while labour organisations, disability-focused organisations, informal sector actors, and think tanks were minimally represented.

The lower participation of labour, disability, informal economy, and policy research actors reflects structural access constraints, risk exposure, and differentiated engagement with civic space monitoring, rather than gaps in research design. Overall, the thematic spread strengthens the credibility of the assessment by grounding it in both advocacy-oriented and service delivery perspectives across the sector.

Modes of Engagement

Recognising uneven access to resources and connectivity, data collection utilised a

combination of in-person engagements, WhatsApp-based platforms, and virtual meetings. This flexible approach ensured broad participation while accommodating logistical, financial, and digital constraints faced by many organisations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved systematic comparison and triangulation of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Content, trend, and thematic analysis were used to identify recurring patterns, emerging risks, sectoral differences, and regional variations. Quantitative data provided an overview of broader trends across the sector, while qualitative data added depth, context, and explanatory insight.

The final Report synthesises these multiple data sources into a coherent narrative that reflects institutional challenges, structural constraints, adaptive strategies, and the lived realities of CSOs and HRDs as they navigate Zimbabwe's evolving civic landscape in 2025.

2.1 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

While this Report draws on diverse data sources and broad sectoral participation, several limitations should be acknowledged. The assessment relied primarily on self-reported data from CSOs, which may reflect subjective perceptions shaped by organisational positioning, risk exposure, and local operating contexts. In some instances, organisations were reluctant to fully disclose experiences of intimidation, surveillance, or non-compliance due to fear of reprisals, which may have resulted in underreporting of certain violations.

The fluid and rapidly evolving regulatory environment, particularly around the implementation of the PVO Amendment Act (2025), also constrained the ability to capture definitive outcomes, as many processes remained unresolved at the time of data collection. Additionally, the funding contraction and operational pressures facing many organisations limited their capacity to participate fully in surveys and consultations, particularly among smaller, under-resourced CBOs

Ethical considerations were central to the research design and implementation. All data collection prioritised the safety, confidentiality, and informed consent of participants. No information was attributed to individuals or organisations without explicit permission, and sensitive information was anonymised to minimise risk. Data was collected and stored in a manner that respected do-no-harm principles, particularly for human rights defenders and organisations operating in politically sensitive environments.

Despite these limitations, the triangulation of multiple data sources, regional and thematic diversity of participants, and validation processes strengthened the reliability of the findings.

The Report therefore presents a credible and evidence-based reflection of civic space conditions in Zimbabwe during 2025, while recognising the constraints inherent in researching civic space under conditions of heightened restriction and uncertainty.



3 UNDERSTANDING CIVIC SPACE AND CIVIL SOCIETY







3.1 Defining Civic Space

The definition of civic space is contested and varies across disciplines, contexts, and analytical traditions. For this study, civic space is understood as the public sphere in which individuals and groups are able to freely organise, associate, express themselves, communicate, mobilise, and participate in order to influence political, social, and economic outcomes. It encompasses both offline and online domains where civic participation occurs, including formal and informal spaces of engagement.

Within this framework, civic space includes the ability of citizens and organised groups to defend their interests, articulate values and identities, claim rights, influence public policy, and hold power holders to account. It is therefore central to democratic governance, accountability, social cohesion, and inclusive development.

For comparative grounding, this Report draws on established analytical frameworks, including the CIVICUS Civic Space Typology and the [HIVOS/EU](#) baseline snapshot for Zimbabwe. These frameworks situate Zimbabwe's experience within broader regional and global trends, characterised by regulatory tightening, selective enforcement against advocacy-oriented CSOs, donor risk recalibration, and the growing securitisation of civil society under the banner of AML/CFT/CPF and financial integrity.

Over the past two decades, civic space globally has undergone a marked process of shrinking, shifting, and differentiation. This contraction has been driven by the actions of both state and non-state actors, employing a range of legal, political, administrative, and extra-legal strategies. These include restrictive legislation, bureaucratic obstruction, surveillance, criminalisation of dissent, monopolisation of public spaces, and systematic efforts to stigmatise or delegitimise civil society actors. In many contexts, these strategies are reinforced by economic pressures, funding conditionalities, and security-driven narratives. Van der Borgh and Terwindt identify five major actions or policy tools commonly used to restrict civil society operations. These are summarised below:

CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS	
ACTION / POLICY	EXAMPLES OR CASES
<p>1. PHYSICAL HARASSMENT</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threats, injuries, killings, violence, assaults, impunity, and lack of state protection. 	<p>4 STIGMATISATION & NEGATIVE LABELLING</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social or criminal stigmatisation; public vilification; character assassination of CSOs or activists
<p>2. CRIMINALISATION</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prosecution and investigations; use of anti-terrorism lists and taskforces; punitive legal actions intended to intimidate or persecute 	<p>5 SPACE CAPTURE</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-optation of civil society spaces; state-led substitution of independent voices; closure or manipulation of participatory platforms
<p>3. ADMINISTRATIVE RESTRICTIONS</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restrictive NGO laws; complex or opaque registration 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-optation of civil society spaces: state-led substitution of independent voices; closure or manipulation platforms

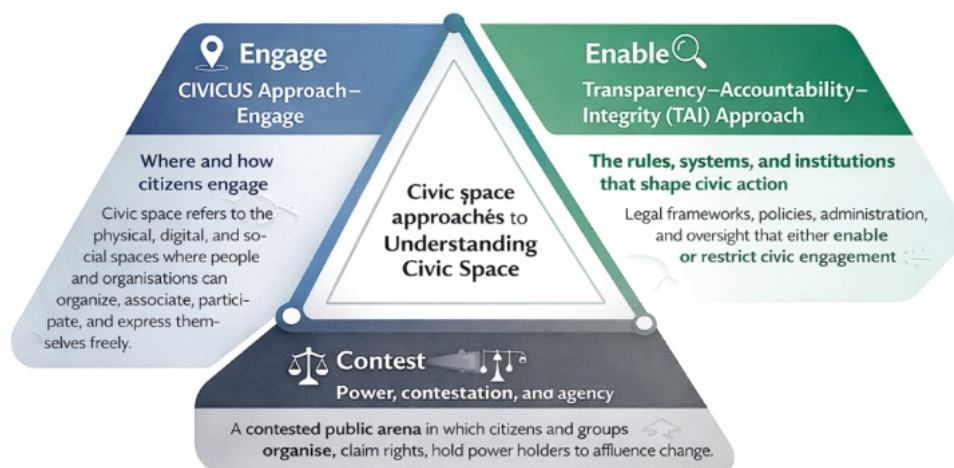
Civic space in this Report is therefore analysed through **two interrelated conceptual dimensions**. The first concerns the existence of formal guarantees—constitutional provisions, laws, policies, and institutional frameworks—that recognise and protect fundamental freedoms such as association, expression, and peaceful assembly. The second dimension concerns the actual enjoyment and exercise of these freedoms in practice, shaped by political culture, power relations, enforcement practices, administrative behaviour, and the lived experiences of citizens, CSOs, and human rights defenders.

It is the interaction between these two dimensions—formal legal guarantees on the one hand, and practical realities on the other—that provides the most reliable basis for assessing the state of civic space. Laws that appear protective on paper may be rendered ineffective through selective enforcement, intimidation, or administrative obstruction, while civic space may persist or adapt in constrained contexts through resilience, innovation, and community legitimacy.

By adopting this dual lens, the Report moves beyond a purely legalistic or event-based analysis and instead captures the dynamic, contested, and evolving nature of civic space in Zimbabwe, grounded in both structural conditions and lived realities. The diagram below summarises these dominant conceptual approaches to understanding civic space.

Three Complementary Approaches to Understanding Civic Space

Civic space can be understood through three interrelated and mutually reinforcing approaches. Together, they provide a comprehensive lens for analysing how civic participation is enabled, constrained, or reshaped in practice. ~ • •



Integrated Analytical Lens

Taken together, these three approaches allow civic space to be assessed not only by the existence of formal freedoms, but by the **lived reality** of participation, the **conditions that enable or constrain action**, and the **power dynamics** that shape who is heard and who is excluded.

3.2. The Role of Civil Society: Democratic Anchor, Social Innovator, and Accountability Guardian

For this Report, civil society refers to the broad range of formal and informal organisations, networks, and movements that operate independently of the State and the private sector, through which citizens organise to advance shared interests, provide services, express values, defend rights, and hold power to account. It encompasses a wide array of actors, including FBOs, advocacy groups, humanitarian organisations, professional associations, cooperatives, residents' associations, and grassroots community-based groups. These institutions are driven by public interest rather than profit, and they play an indispensable role in strengthening democratic governance and social resilience.

At its core, civil society serves as a watchdog over public power. Organisations monitor government behaviour, expose corruption, investigate human rights violations, and demand accountability from public institutions and private actors alike. Entities such as Transparency International Zimbabwe (TI Z) and the Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Organisation (ZELO) have played critical roles in illuminating governance failures and environmental abuses, helping to protect the rule of law.

CSOs also act as advocates for structural reform. They amplify the voices of marginalised groups—women, youth, persons with disabilities, rural communities—and shape public policy through research, litigation, civic education, and public mobilisation. Their interventions have influenced legislative changes in gender justice, disability rights, electoral reform, and environmental protection.

Beyond advocacy, CSOs are key service providers, filling persistent gaps in governance systems. They deliver healthcare, humanitarian assistance, education support, disaster relief, livelihoods programming, and protection services, particularly in areas where government presence is limited. Their proximity to communities enables adaptive, people-centred interventions that respond to local realities.

Civil society further contributes to civic empowerment. Through voter education, participatory platforms, leadership training, and constitutional literacy programmes, CSOs strengthen democratic culture and equip citizens with the knowledge and confidence to participate meaningfully in public affairs. Additionally, CSOs foster social cohesion and peacebuilding. In contexts marked by inequality, conflict, or political polarisation, organisations provide neutral spaces for dialogue, mediation, and reconciliation. Groups like Heal Zimbabwe and other peacebuilding actors help rebuild trust and address historical and contemporary grievances.

Innovation is another hallmark of the sector. Unencumbered by bureaucratic constraints, CSOs

often pioneer new approaches—especially in gender-responsive policymaking, youth empowerment, and climate resilience—that are later adopted or scaled by the government.

At the grassroots, CBOs form the bedrock of civic life, offering deep local knowledge and democratic legitimacy. Their volunteer-driven structures nurture leadership skills, strengthen collective agency, and anchor national civic efforts within local realities.

Together, these diverse roles demonstrate that civil society is indispensable for democratic governance, inclusive development, and social justice. In Zimbabwe's increasingly complex political and economic environment, CSOs remain essential actors—holding power to account, supporting vulnerable populations, and sustaining democratic aspirations.



4 CONTEXTUAL DYNAMICS SHAPING CIVIC SPACE IN ZIMBABWE

The operating landscape for CSOs in Zimbabwe has shifted markedly in recent years, driven by political, economic, and legislative developments that have tightened state control and reduced operational autonomy. The simultaneous introduction of restrictive laws, particularly the PVO Amendment Act (2025), and the abrupt contraction of international donor funding have produced a dual crisis: diminishing financial sustainability alongside escalating regulatory pressure. Many CSOs interpret this combination not as coincidental but as part of a broader strategy to limit independent civic action at a moment of deepening national strain.

Zimbabwean civil society has long navigated a complex relationship with the state, oscillating between cooperation during national emergencies and confrontation when working on governance, human rights, or democracy issues. Humanitarian organisations—especially those addressing food insecurity, public health, and disaster response—have at times found opportunities for collaboration, as seen during Cyclone Idai and the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, rights-based organisations regularly face raids, office surveillance, disruptions of activities, public vilification, and targeted arrests.

These dynamics have influenced donor behaviour. While some development partners continue to fund humanitarian and service-delivery initiatives where state cooperation is feasible, many have scaled back support for governance and accountability programming due to the heightened political risk. The result is a sector increasingly skewed toward non-political programming, leaving democratic governance organisations disproportionately vulnerable.

Government rhetoric often frames CSOs—especially those working with international partners—as threats to national security or agents of foreign interference. This is reinforced by the Patriotic Act, whose broad and ambiguous provisions criminalise conduct deemed to harm national interests. Advocacy organisations engaging in international solidarity work or reporting violations to global bodies are particularly vulnerable to criminalisation under this law.

The experiences of CSOs vary significantly by theme, geography, and scale. National

organisations working on governance and elections encounter overt repression, while CBOs face subtler constraints from local authorities, traditional leaders, or politically aligned structures. Humanitarian organisations navigate politicised aid distribution, and women's rights groups confront patriarchal resistance alongside state suspicion. Environmental defenders face pressure from actors with economic and political power, while media CSOs bear the brunt of surveillance, arrests, and smear campaigns.

Crisis of Legitimacy and the Disconnect Between CSOs and Society

A growing concern emerging from consultations is the widening disconnect between formal CSOs and the broader civil society they purport to represent. Several respondents argued that CSOs have increasingly ceased to reflect the lived realities, organising traditions, and trust networks of ordinary citizens in Zimbabwe.

Civil society in Zimbabwe has historically been organised through multiple and overlapping forms, including faith-based institutions, residents' associations, traditional leadership structures, savings groups, labour formations, and other community-based platforms. However, many CSOs have struggled to pivot toward these indigenous and socially embedded forms of organising. Instead, they have adopted institutional models heavily influenced by Western NGO frameworks, where donors become a central determinant of organisational priorities, language, and survival.

As one respondent observed:

“CSOs have become donor-facing organisations rather than citizen-facing organisations. We now speak the language of donors better than the language of our own communities.”

This disconnect has had measurable consequences for public trust. [Afrobarometer Round 10](#) findings indicate that CSOs are among the least trusted public institutions, ranking alongside political parties. Notably, citizens reported higher levels of trust in traditional leaders—**“corrupt as they are”**, as one participant phrased it—than in CSOs. This erosion of legitimacy reflects a broader perception that CSOs are increasingly elite-driven, urban-centred, and detached from everyday struggles.

Another participant stated bluntly:

“CSOs are now competing with political parties for the position of least trusted institutions in the country. That should worry us deeply.”

The consequence is a civic sector that, while legally constituted and donor-recognised, is socially weakened. Rebuilding legitimacy will require CSOs to re-imagine their relationship

with communities, re-anchor their work in local accountability, and engage more meaningfully with non-formal and traditional civic platforms.

Despite these challenges, civil society remains active, adaptive, and innovative. Yet the combined weight of economic decline, shrinking funding, and restrictive legislation has created a tense, unpredictable, and often hostile operating environment that demands constant recalibration by CSOs.



5 LEGAL AND POLICY ENVIRONMENT: EXPANDING CONTROL AND CONSTRAINED FREEDOMS

CSOs in Zimbabwe operate within a complex legal and political environment shaped by constitutional guarantees, statutory regulation, international human rights obligations, and evolving state practice. While regulation of civil society is not inherently problematic, international norms require that such regulation be lawful, proportionate, transparent, and protective of fundamental freedoms.

In Zimbabwe, however, the current operating environment reflects a growing tension between legitimate regulatory objectives and measures that increasingly constrain civic space. This chapter synthesises national legislation, international standards, and the lived experiences of CSOs to present a coherent picture of the legal and normative ecosystem governing civil society operations in 2025.

5.1 Constitutional Guarantees and Limitations

The 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe establishes foundational rights essential for CSO operations, including freedoms of association, assembly, expression, and peaceful demonstration. These rights underpin civil society's ability to organise communities, mobilise public participation, advocate for reform, and contribute to national development and democratic governance.

However, Section 86 of the Constitution permits limitations on these rights where such limitations are deemed reasonable, necessary, and justifiable in a democratic society. In practice, this provision has frequently been invoked to justify restrictive laws and administrative interventions. As a result, constitutional protections often exist in principle, while their application is constrained in practice, creating a contested and uncertain legal terrain for civic action.

5.2 Statutory Frameworks Regulating CSOs

The PVO Act and the 2025 Amendment

The PVO Act remains the principal statute governing the registration, administration, and oversight of CSOs. The PVO Amendment Act of 2025 significantly expands the State's regulatory authority over civil society, including:

- Mandatory registration of trusts and universities.
- An expanded definition of PVOs and beneficial ownership requirements; and
- Enhanced powers for the Registrar to suspend, cancel, or intervene in organisational affairs.

While the Amendment has been justified by the government as a measure to strengthen accountability and align with international standards on AML/CFT/CPF, many of its provisions introduce risks of administrative overreach, political interference, and suppression of independent civic activity.

Implementation Gaps and Institutional Uncertainty

Despite its enactment on the 11 April 2025, the implementation of the PVO Amendment Act has been marked by institutional paralysis, unclear administrative arrangements, and a lack of guidance. The Director of Social Development and Disability Affairs department serves as the Registrar of PVOs until the establishment of the Office of the Registrar of PVOs in line with the new Act. Establishment of the Registrar and supporting officers, subject to Public Service Commission (PSC) processes, has reportedly been a work in progress, raising concerns about the Ministry's capacity to operationalise the Act.

Although regulations were reportedly drafted through consultations involving CSOs representatives and other key stakeholders such as the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), the gazette of these regulations has not been published. Consequently, CSOs continue to operate without clarity on compliance requirements, timelines, appeal mechanisms, or enforcement thresholds.

Fear, Self-Censorship, and the Chilling Effect of the PVO Framework

One of the most pervasive impacts of the PVO Amendment Act has been self-censorship driven not by enforcement, but by fear. Respondents repeatedly noted that the anticipatory fear surrounding the Act has already reshaped behaviour across the sector—often more profoundly than formal implementation itself.

As articulated by one of the respondents:

“The fear of the PVO will have more impact than the PVO itself.”

Organisations reported scaling down advocacy, avoiding sensitive language, suspending community engagements, and retreating from public platforms in anticipation of regulatory retaliation. Several participants suggested that if there were a way to systematically measure the operational slowdown caused by fear, the findings would reveal a far greater impact than enforcement statistics alone.

This climate of fear extends beyond staff to boards and governance structures. Under the PVO framework, board members face potential personal liability, which is already reshaping internal power dynamics. Boards are becoming more interventionist, often under the pretext of risk management, but with the unintended effect of constraining programming, advocacy, and organisational autonomy.

One respondent warned:

“Board members are going to become more powerful under the PVO—not because governance is improving, but because fear is shifting control upward.”

Corruption Risks and Regulatory Ambiguity

The registration and post-registration processes under the PVO regime were widely identified as emerging sites of corruption and abuse of discretion. Respondents reported informal payments to expedite police fingerprinting, inconsistent vetting requirements, and opaque administrative procedures.

Together, these dynamics point to a civic space that is not only shrinking through law and enforcement, but also hollowing out from within—through fear, loss of legitimacy, donor dependency, and regulatory ambiguity. Reclaiming civic space will require both structural reform and a fundamental re-imagining of how civil society relates to citizens, power, and purpose.

The Patriotic Act (2023)

The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Act (2023)—commonly referred to as the Patriotic Act—further constrains civic space. Section 22A criminalises conduct deemed to undermine Zimbabwe's sovereignty, using broad and vague language that grants authorities wide discretion. This has heightened risks for human rights defenders, governance CSOs, journalists, and activists who engage international mechanisms, conduct advocacy, or criticise government actions.

Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA) and Freedom of Information Act (FIA)

Although the MOPA and FIA were enacted as reform measures to replace more overtly repressive laws, evidence from civic actors suggests that restrictive practices persist in

implementation. Under MOPA, public gatherings require prior police notification, which in practice functions as a clearance regime, with approvals frequently withheld on discretionary or politically sensitive grounds. CSOs working on governance and human rights report that proposed meetings are often deemed potentially non-compliant with MOPA or related legislation or denied on administrative grounds, such as alleged lack of police capacity. This pattern contributes to uncertainty and self-censorship, particularly among organisations engaged in accountability-focused work. Similarly, while the FIA formally provides for access to information, broad exemptions and procedural barriers continue to limit timely disclosure, constraining transparency. Collectively, these dynamics indicate that legal reform has not substantively expanded civic space, as implementation practices continue to restrict assembly and access to information.

5.3 Operational Realities and State Practices

Beyond formal legal frameworks, CSOs face significant operational challenges stemming from inconsistent interpretation of the law, selective enforcement, and informal state practices. Bureaucratic obstacles, surveillance, infiltration, disruption of meetings, arbitrary arrests, and prolonged pre-trial detention remain persistent features of the operating environment.

As of the end of 2025, approximately 325 PVO registration applications were reported to be lodged with the MoPSSLW, Office of the PVO Registrar. Many applications remained stalled at district-level vetting stages, with some reportedly misplaced or repeatedly returned for additional information. To date, no applications have been publicly confirmed as approved.

District-level officials have reportedly prioritised applications from organisations implementing so-called “software programming”, including humanitarian assistance, childcare, livelihoods, and social protection. In contrast, CSOs working on governance, human rights, elections, media freedom, and accountability reported heightened scrutiny, de-prioritisation, or informal discouragement.

The Act provided for a 90-day transitional period, which effectively expired on 22 August 2025 after the MoPSSLW released a press statement advising that the transitional period did not include public holidays and weekends. However, the absence of formal communication from the MoPSSLW and the lack of enforcement directives resulted in an implicit grace period, during which CSOs continued operating. While this avoided immediate sector-wide operations disruption, it entrenched uncertainty and increased vulnerability to selective enforcement and retrospective sanctions.

Case Study 1: Registration Bottlenecks and the De Facto Grace Period

By the end of 2025, approximately 325 PVO registration applications had been lodged with the MoPSLSW, ready for processing by the PVO Board. CSOs reported that while submissions are formally made at the district level, vetting processes remain opaque and inconsistent. Many applications have been held at district offices for months without feedback or onward transmission. Despite the lapse of the statutory 90-day transition period on 22 August 2025, no organisations have been formally instructed to cease operations. This institutional incapacitation has created a de facto grace period, allowing CSOs to continue operating while remaining exposed to legal uncertainty and selective enforcement risks.

5.4 International and Regional Standards

Zimbabwe's domestic regulatory framework exists within a broader international and regional human rights architecture. Key instruments include:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantee freedoms of association, expression, and assembly.
- The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, recognising the legitimacy of civil society work; and
- The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, providing regional protections for civic participation.

These instruments oblige the State to ensure that the regulation of civil society is necessary, proportionate, and non-discriminatory.

FATF Standards

The FATF requires States to adopt risk-based approaches to prevent terrorist financing. While Zimbabwe has cited FATF standards—particularly Recommendation 8—to justify expanded regulation of CSOs, international guidance explicitly cautions against blanket or disproportionate restrictions on the non-profit sector. The absence of a national NPO risk assessment and limited civil society engagement heighten concerns that compliance objectives are being pursued in ways that unnecessarily securitise civic space.

International Standards, FATF, and Securitisation

Zimbabwe's preparations for its third round of the FATF Mutual Evaluation (2026–2027) have significant implications for civic space. FATF Recommendation 8 requires a risk-based and proportionate approach to NPO regulation. However, past practice in Zimbabwe has treated NPOs as uniformly high risk, contributing to overly restrictive measures.

Failure to apply a differentiated risk assessment risks further securitising civic space and undermining legitimate civil society activity. Civil society engagement in the Mutual Evaluation process is therefore critical to ensuring balanced and rights-respecting compliance.

International Operational Pathways

Despite domestic constraints, CSOs continue to engage international and regional mechanisms, including ECOSOC Consultative Status and observer status at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, enabling participation in advocacy, reporting, and norm-setting processes.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's CSO regulatory environment is characterised by a fragile balance between constitutional protections, expanding statutory controls, and inconsistent compliance with international standards. While recent reforms are framed as accountability and compliance measures, their implementation has contributed to shrinking civic space, administrative uncertainty, and increased political control.



6 INTERNAL GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES AND ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE

Internal governance challenges continue to undermine CSO resilience in an increasingly restrictive and high-risk operating environment. Founder-centric leadership, weak board oversight, inadequate internal controls, and limited succession planning remain widespread across the sector. While donor compliance frameworks consistently emphasise strong boards, accountability systems, and risk management, few donors are willing to fund the governance infrastructure required to meet these expectations, such as board induction, governance training, compliance systems, or internal audits. This structural disconnect leaves many organisations ill-equipped to meet the heightened regulatory demands introduced under the PVO Amendment Act (2025), exacerbating institutional vulnerability.

Despite their public role in promoting accountability and good governance, many CSOs continue to struggle with internal governance weaknesses that undermine credibility, continuity, and organisational resilience. These vulnerabilities—rooted in structural imbalances, leadership practices, and chronic capacity constraints—have become more visible and consequential as external pressure on civic space has intensified.

A particularly persistent challenge is “**Founder's Syndrome**”, where founding leaders retain disproportionate control over organisational direction, operations, and decision-making long after organisations have matured. In such cases, boards often exist only in form rather than function, with limited independence or authority. Strategic, financial, and staffing decisions are frequently centralised in a single individual, blurring the line between organisational and personal interests. This concentration of power creates acute institutional fragility—especially when founders face political targeting, arrest, harassment, illness, or forced displacement, as has occurred in several high-profile cases in recent years.

As one respondent observed:

“If you look around, you will find that most organisations are still being led by their founding members, if not founding individuals, and they treat organisations as their personal plots and farms. The principle of separate legal personality does not apply.”

“Even the appointment of board members becomes about loyalty—‘we are comrades, we scratch each other’s backs.’”

Board effectiveness across the sector is uneven. While some organisations benefit from capable and engaged boards, many boards lack the skills, autonomy, or governance literacy required for meaningful oversight. In other cases, boards are compromised by conflicts of interest, family relationships, political affiliations, or social ties, resulting in reluctance to challenge executive leadership. Weak boards often fail to enforce accountability, approve clear risk management frameworks, or interrogate financial practices, increasing exposure to financial mismanagement, regulatory non-compliance, reputational harm, and mission drift.

Financial governance pressures are further compounded by heavy dependence on donor funding. Many organisations adjust strategies and programmes primarily in response to donor priorities rather than long-term community mandates or institutional sustainability. This has resulted in fragmented programming, short-term planning horizons, and weak organisational identity. When donor funding abruptly declined in 2025, many CSOs lacked diversified income streams, reserve funds, or business continuity plans, forcing programme suspensions, staff retrenchments, or organisational closure.

These internal governance deficits have tangible consequences. They weaken organisational resilience, reduce public trust, complicate compliance with regulatory requirements, and make CSOs more vulnerable to state scrutiny, selective enforcement, and delegitimation. In a context where civic space is already constrained, weak governance systems become an additional risk factor rather than a buffer.

Almost **56%** of the respondents raised concern over corporate governance and the general functioning of Boards in most organisations. Therefore, strengthening internal governance is not just a peripheral concern but a core civic space protection strategy. Investment in effective boards, leadership renewal, financial integrity, and organisational systems is essential for sustaining CSO impact, defending legitimacy, and ensuring that civil society remains resilient in the face of increasing legal, political, and economic pressures.

7 EMERGING POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the challenging context, 2025 also witnessed several positive developments that demonstrate the continued vibrancy and adaptability of Zimbabwean civil society. Examples of such progress include the following;

1. **Improved Collaboration with Local Authorities:** Some sectors—particularly residents' associations—reported enhanced engagement with local authorities. The Harare Residents' Trust noted greater access to City Council officials, enabling stronger advocacy on service-delivery issues. This shift suggests growing recognition of CSOs as partners in addressing community needs.
2. **Strengthened Partnerships in Agricultural and Environmental Work:** In Manicaland, organisations like Fambidzanai Permaculture Centre deepened collaboration with AGRITEX officers in Chipinge, Chimanimani, and Buhera. The training of **75 AGRITEX** officers in agroecology reflects productive state–CSO partnerships that enhance sustainable agriculture and local capacity.
3. **Strategic Sectoral Alignment:** Women's rights, youth, and humanitarian organisations reported improved alignment with national development priorities, particularly in climate resilience, food security, youth empowerment, and sustainable livelihoods. Joint initiatives with academic institutions expanded community engagement, research, and outreach. This has generally enabled them to receive support and trust from both the communities and state institutions. In turn, such relations make their operating environment workable.
4. **Enhanced Community-Level Collaboration:** CBOs noted increased cooperation with traditional leaders and district authorities in implementing programmes, especially where work focused on livelihoods, social protection, or climate adaptation. These relationships facilitated smoother programming and broadened community acceptance. It emerged that once there is community buy-in for any interventions, it makes the work of CSOs easier and acceptable to concerned stakeholders. As such, in this regard, the operating environment for CBOs working on what were generally referred to as 'soft issues', as listed above, did not encounter challenges.

These developments highlight that even within restrictive environments, there are meaningful opportunities for collaboration, innovation, and strategic alignment—demonstrating that civic space, while constrained, is not entirely closed.



8 LIVED REALITIES OF CSOs: DIVERSE EXPERIENCES ACROSS THEMES AND REGIONS

Across thematic areas and regions, community-based organisations, women-led groups, and CSOs operating outside major urban centres report being disproportionately affected by registration delays, dual regulation, and funding contraction. Organisations with no active donor funding or operating on zero budgets face particular barriers to compliance, as registration processes often assume access to legal, administrative, and financial resources.

Conversely, organisations that integrate advocacy with livelihoods programming and maintain strong community roots have demonstrated greater resilience. These groups are often better positioned to negotiate access with local authorities and sustain operations despite regulatory uncertainty. In contrast, stand-alone advocacy organisations, particularly those working on governance, elections, and human rights, reported heightened barriers to access communities and heightened surveillance. The following subsections provide a nuanced account of these differentiated experiences.

8.1 Women's Rights Organisations: Navigating Patriarchy and Political Sensitivity

Women's rights organisations in Zimbabwe operate within a repressive political climate, a deeply patriarchal social structure, and a context where gendered threats remain pervasive. Their experiences reflect a complex terrain where the state's stance is neither consistently supportive nor openly hostile; rather, it varies depending on the nature of the organisation's work and how it intersects with political power.

The government generally tolerates—and at times partners with women's rights organisations working on issues aligned with its development agenda, such as:

- Gender-Based Violence (GBV) prevention
- Maternal health and reproductive services
- HIV/AIDS interventions
- Women's economic empowerment initiatives (e.g., village savings groups or mukando projects)

However, this tolerance disappears the moment an organisation's work is perceived as challenging political authority or questioning power relations. Women's groups advocating for political rights, governance reforms, land rights, or legal protections against harmful traditional practices often face institutional resistance and obstruction.

Patriarchal Pushback and Gendered Hostility

Beyond state pressure, women's rights organisations encounter deep-rooted societal and cultural resistance. Patriarchal norms remain ingrained within many communities, and organisations reported:

- being labelled “**un-African,**”
- accused of “**destroying families,**”
- branded as “**feminists**” or even “**prostitutes,**”

These gendered attacks are used to delegitimise their work and erode public trust—particularly in rural communities where customary norms are strongly upheld.

Traditional leaders, as custodians of customary law, often oppose reforms related to:

- land inheritance rights for women,
- contesting patriarchal household decision-making structures,
- efforts to end child marriage and other harmful cultural practices.

This places women's rights organisations in direct conflict with powerful local gatekeepers.

An organisation working on gender equality programming based in Masvingo province highlighted that, *“It is interesting how the communities and local leaders can be so supportive of our work if we are working on themes such as **mitigating climate change, domestic violence, and cash lending programs.** The moment we start talking about the **50-50 in leadership positions,** the atmosphere completely changes. Even the women that we are trying to empower to take up leadership roles, they start showing disinterest in the programs. We still have a long way to go, especially in addressing some patriarchal tendencies in communities.”*

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience Strategies

Despite these structural and cultural challenges, women's rights organisations have developed strategic and resilient approaches to continue their work:

- **Culturally sensitive framing:** Organisations invest time in navigating cultural norms. By framing their advocacy in ways that resonate with local values—while still pushing for gender equality—they reduce backlash and increase acceptance.

- **Strategic litigation:** Women's rights groups have successfully used the courts to advance gender justice, drawing on progressive provisions in the 2013 Constitution. Key victories include court rulings on child marriage and enhanced rights for women in estate administration and family law.
- **Coalition-building:** Networks such as the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ) provide collective visibility, resource-sharing, and solidarity. Working in coalitions helps mitigate risk by offering “safety in numbers.”
- **Digital advocacy:** social media and digital platforms have become crucial tools for awareness-raising, mobilisation, and documenting violations. Despite the risks of surveillance, online activism expands reach, amplifies voices, and enables rapid response to emerging issues.

Summary

Women's rights organisations in Zimbabwe inhabit a contested and highly gendered civic space. Their work is welcomed when aligned with state development priorities, but quickly becomes unwelcome when it challenges patriarchal norms or political authority. They face dual pressures—state repression and societal misogyny—but continue to make meaningful progress through litigation, coalition-building, carefully crafted cultural strategies, and digital advocacy.

These organisations remain vital actors pushing for gender justice, equality, and structural transformation, even within an environment marked by hostility, stigma, and persistent patriarchal resistance.

8.2 Youth Organisations: Operating in a Suspicious and Volatile Political Environment

The experiences of Youth CSOs in Zimbabwe are shaped by the country's youth-heavy population, severe economic decline, and a political environment that perceives youth mobilization as a potential threat. Despite being the population majority—and among the most affected by unemployment, poverty, and exclusion—youth efforts to organise and advocate for change are often met with intense suspicion and repression.

Youth CSOs emerge directly from the socio-economic pressures affecting their constituencies. With youth unemployment estimated at over **90%**, many organisations focus on:

- livelihood creation and entrepreneurship
- vocational training and job-readiness programmes
- youth empowerment and skills development
- addressing school dropouts, unaffordable tuition, and the education–employment mismatch

At the same time, Youth CSOs work on voter education, constitutional literacy, and advocacy for youth representation in governance, seeking to address systemic youth exclusion from political processes.

'Our work with the youths in tertiary institutions is always treated with high levels of suspicion. The authorities do not tolerate any discussion on governance-related issues. If you want to be safe and allowed to work with youths in these institutions, you would rather talk about ending drugs and substance abuse, safe sex, and end there,' remarks by a national-based organisation working with the youths.

Repression, Surveillance, and Criminalisation of Youth Activism

Because young people are widely viewed as the engine of potential political change, the state response to youth organising is often disproportionately harsh. Youth CSOs reported that:

- Any form of youth mobilisation, even around non-political issues, is frequently treated as an opposition activity.
- Youth-led protests are met with extreme force, including tear gas, abductions, beatings, and in some instances, the use of live ammunition.

Young activists often experience:

- Abductions by unidentified armed men believed to be state agents. An example of such has been the abduction of two frontline Chinhoyi University of Technology student activists in November 2025.
- Torture, assault, and enforced disappearances,
- Prolonged detention on charges such as “subversion” or “inciting public violence.”
- Confiscation of phones and monitoring of social media
- Online harassment and intimidation

This environment creates a climate of fear that stifles youth participation and suppresses the emergence of a new generation of civic leaders.

However, Youth CSOs working on non-political themes—such as climate-smart agriculture, coding bootcamps, innovation hubs, arts and culture programmes—may operate with comparatively more space. The state sometimes encourages these initiatives as they are viewed as non-threatening to the political status quo.

Case Study 2: Youth Activism & Criminalisation

Youth-led organisations reported heightened repression in 2025, particularly within tertiary institutions. Multiple incidents of student activists being detained or harassed were documented, including arrests linked to peaceful organising and civic education activities. The arrest and detention of youth activists, including the widely reported case of Namatai Kwekweza, illustrate how youth mobilisation is routinely treated as a security threat, contributing to fear, self-censorship, and reduced civic participation among young people.

Coping Mechanisms and Youth-Led Resilience

Youth CSOs have developed creative, adaptive, and decentralised strategies to navigate the restrictive environment and continue their advocacy:

- **Digital mobilisation and documentation:** They utilise X (Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to mobilise peers, document abuses, run campaigns, and counter state narratives—bypassing state-controlled traditional media.
- **Arts-based and cultural advocacy:** Youth movements embed political messages in music (particularly Zim dancehall and Hip Hop), poetry, theatre, and graffiti. These culturally resonant art forms allow them to communicate dissent in coded, hard-to-criminalise ways.
- **Decentralised organising models:** To reduce vulnerability to infiltration or leadership-targeted arrests, many groups operate through fluid, loosely connected networks instead of formal hierarchical structures.

These strategies allow youth activists to maintain momentum, visibility, and civic energy, even under high levels of risk.

Summary

Youth CSOs occupy one of the most contested and volatile spaces in Zimbabwe's civic sector. Their demographic weight and political potential make them key actors in shaping the country's future—but also primary targets of state repression. While organisations focused on livelihoods or apolitical initiatives may operate with some freedom, those advancing democratic participation or youth empowerment face systemic intimidation, violence, and surveillance.

Despite this, Youth CSOs remain highly innovative and resilient, leveraging digital platforms, cultural expression, and decentralised networks to sustain youth engagement and advocate for change.

8.3 Residents' Associations: Confronting Urban Governance and Political Polarisation

Resident Associations occupy a critical and highly sensitive niche within Zimbabwe's civic landscape. Operating at the hyper-local level, they directly engage with the daily lived experiences of citizens. This proximity to community grievances—particularly around deteriorating public services—makes their role essential, but also renders them highly vulnerable to political manipulation, intimidation, and institutional hostility.

Resident Associations primarily focus on service delivery advocacy, including:

- Lobbying local authorities for improved water supply, waste management, road maintenance, and electricity
- Challenging illegal tariffs, unfair billing systems, and corruption within councils
- Coordinating residents to participate in hearings on land use, housing developments, and urban planning
- Representing communities in disputes with both local and central government authorities

Their advocacy role places them at the intersection of service delivery, accountability, and political contestation, especially in urban centres where opposition-led councils clash with central government.

In Harare, for example, a Resident Association organisation stated that, *'Our local authority is finding it difficult, or rather impossible to ignore us. They have come to terms with the fact that we will always exist to represent the voices of the residents, and that if things do not work well, we will not remain quiet. Our relationship is that of cat and mouse; some days are better and some days can be heated.'*

Precarious Operating Environment

Resident Associations described their environment as precarious, shaped by a combination of conditional tolerance and political hostility. Their service delivery work is sometimes accepted, but their governance advocacy often provokes pushback.

A recurring challenge is being caught in the political tug-of-war between local authorities and the central government. This polarisation often spills into their operational space, complicating efforts to advocate for residents impartially.

While they may not be primary targets of laws such as the Patriotic Act, they are still constrained by restrictive legislation, particularly the MOPA. Organising protests over service delivery failures (e.g., water shortages, tariff hikes) often triggers:

- denial of police clearance

- dispersal of meetings
- arrests of leaders under MOPA provisions

Residents Association leaders are frequently subjected to personal intimidation, including:

- threats and smear campaigns labelling them as opposition agents
- selective enforcement of municipal by-laws
- punitive property inspections or compliance audits
- social media harassment or character attacks

Although they represent large constituencies, resident associations often have no formal representation within council decision-making processes, enabling local authorities to ignore or sideline them.

Urban-based associations reported heightened suspicion, with the state branding them as proxies of opposition political parties. There is also a concerning trend where:

- The government sponsors pro-state “residents associations” to dilute community representation
- authorities use District Development Coordinators (DDCs) to bypass legitimate Resident Associations and undermine opposition councils
- local authorities attempt to co-opt association leaders through promises of positions, tenders, or business opportunities

This environment fragments community voices and weakens genuine accountability mechanisms.

Case Study 3: Civic Space Under Pressure at Community Level – a focus on the Buhera Residents Association

This case study captures the lived experience of a community-based human rights and social accountability organisation operating in Buhera District during 2025. The Buhera Residents Association works on community organising, service delivery monitoring, climate justice, just energy transition, and human–wildlife conflict, using community radio, digital platforms, and local engagement to amplify citizen voices. Established in 2020 following earlier trade union and civic activism, the organisation represents a typical rural CBO navigating Zimbabwe's increasingly restrictive civic environment.

Following the enactment of the PVO Amendment Act, the organisation encountered sustained administrative obstruction. Since 27 August 2025, the Buhera Rural District Council has declined to issue a letter of intent required for PVO registration, despite repeated follow-ups. The organisation was referred between the district and provincial offices without resolution.

Five months after submitting its letter of intent, the organisation remained unregistered, leaving its legal status uncertain and its operations vulnerable. During this period, individuals presenting themselves as government officials demanded sensitive organisational information, raising concerns of informal surveillance and security interference.

'The registration impasse directly undermined freedom of association and assembly. Community meetings became difficult to convene due to a lack of police clearance, fear of infiltration, and intimidation of participants. In one instance, a planned community gathering was disrupted by a counter-meeting, forcing organisers to abandon the event. Some participants were subsequently threatened,' – Director of Buhera Residents Association bemoaned.

Radio-based advocacy was scaled down after the organisation was advised that registration was a prerequisite for continued engagement, further shrinking public visibility.

The organisation experienced informal intimidation, including questioning of community members—particularly women—about their association with the organisation. A community petitioner involved in a service delivery petition received threatening phone calls discouraging further action.

Digital activism was also affected. Fear of online surveillance led to self-censorship, reduced social media engagement, and cautious messaging, limiting the organisation's advocacy reach.

In September 2025, the organisation received its first grant, but this coincided with a broader contraction in civic funding. Access to rapid response legal and protection support for human rights defenders declined sharply. By late 2025, the organisation's three staff members were unpaid, operating voluntarily with minimal allowances. Morale declined as regulatory uncertainty and donor withdrawal converged, forcing the organisation into survival mode and halting long-term planning.

The shrinking civic space had tangible consequences for local communities. Meetings previously held in homes were discontinued after a police raid in late 2024. Community engagement declined, fear normalised disengagement from public life, and collective mobilisation weakened—particularly in a rural context already facing service delivery challenges.

Despite sustained pressure, the organisation adapted through low-profile, high-impact strategies, informal networks, and cautious use of digital tools such as broadcast lists and photo documentation. However, alliances weakened, and participation in national platforms declined due to cost and logistical barriers.

Looking ahead, the organisation anticipates further contraction of advocacy space, particularly if statutory measures are introduced to shut down unregistered organisations. Survival prospects are increasingly tied to income-generating activities, while rights-based advocacy is expected to be confined to a shrinking number of actors.

This case demonstrates how civic space is constrained not only through overt repression but also through bureaucratic obstruction, informal intimidation, surveillance, and funding deprivation. Rural, community-based organisations bear a disproportionate burden, with direct consequences for citizen participation, accountability, and local governance.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience Strategies

Despite these challenges, Residents Associations have developed a range of effective and adaptive strategies:

- **Strategic litigation:** Residents' Associations have become adept at taking councils to court—winning cases on illegal tariffs, unlawful water disconnections, and misuse of funds.
- **Data-driven advocacy:** They conduct independent research on water quality, service delivery trends, billing systems, and council finances. This evidence strengthens their legal cases, improves public awareness, and counters official narratives.
- **Coalition building:** Associations form inter-city coalitions to amplify their voice. Partnerships with national CSOs such as NANGO provide technical, financial, and legal support, enhancing their capacity and protection.
- **Digital grassroots mobilisation:** Associations have become highly active on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, mobilising residents, documenting service delivery failures, and increasing public pressure. This visibility makes it harder for authorities to ignore their demands.

Summary

Residents' Associations operate in a permanent state of negotiation and confrontation with local authorities, while simultaneously navigating the wider political polarisation between central and local government. Their operating space is fragile, contested, and constantly under threat, yet they continue to demonstrate resilience through litigation, evidence-based advocacy, community mobilisation, and coalition-building.

They remain critical actors in defending citizens' rights to basic services and accountable local governance. However, the sustainability of their work depends on their ability to withstand political pressure, maintain independence, and strengthen institutional capacity.

8.4 Community-Based Organisations: Deep Reach, Deep Vulnerability

The experiences of CBOs are distinct from those of national-level CSOs. While they contend with the same political, economic, and regulatory pressures affecting the wider civic sector, their deeply embedded grassroots nature creates a unique set of dynamics—both empowering and precarious.

CBOs are rooted in the communities they serve. Their leaders are often neighbours, relatives, or respected local figures, which gives them a level of trust, legitimacy, and social access that national organisations may struggle to attain. Their work focuses on immediate, day-to-day needs:

- Orphan care and child support
- Youth sports clubs
- Community gardens and savings groups
- Local water point maintenance
- Early childhood activities and informal welfare systems

This intimate community connection allows CBOs to understand nuanced power structures, cultural norms, and priorities. However, most CBOs depend heavily on volunteer labour and unpaid commitment, which leads to burnout and turnover.

Navigating Local Power Structures

All the CBOs indicated that they operate in an environment shaped by local authority hierarchies, which can both legitimize and constrain their work.

- In rural areas, chiefs and traditional leaders hold decisive power. Their approval is essential for accessing land, convening meetings, or being recognised as legitimate actors.
- Traditional leaders, many of whom are aligned with ruling party structures, may attempt to influence programmes, leadership, or resource distribution to ensure activities support their allies or political narratives.

- CBOs reported pressure to channel their work through the DDC, which risks politicising their operations and undermining independence.

It was also highlighted that during election periods, which include both general elections and preceding by-elections, the political environment becomes even more fraught. Politicians may attempt to:

- take credit for CBO projects,
- co-opt their community networks for campaigns,
- or subtly threaten leaders to ensure compliance.

Some CBO leaders reported indirect intimidation—such as visits from local intelligence officers, warnings from village authorities, or harassment of family members.

A CBO in Mashonaland Central stated that, 'In most cases, we work well with our communities and traditional leaders, as long as our programs abide by our local culture and tradition. The challenges in our context usually arise during election time. The gatekeepers do not want to see our feet in the villages. We are often accused of seeking to neutralise the votes, even if our programming does not involve voter education. So as a survival strategy, we have resorted to conducting community outreaches, especially during the peak seasons in any election cycle.'

Resource Constraints and Capacity Gaps

CBOs face significant structural constraints linked to financing, capacity, and digital exclusion:

- They have minimal access to international donor funding, largely due to limited grant-writing skills, lack of English proficiency, and weak systems for reporting or compliance.
- Most rely on small grants or in-kind support from national NGOs, churches, or local charities.
- They often lack basic institutional competencies such as financial management, project planning, monitoring and evaluation, and documentation.
- Limited access to computers, internet connectivity, and digital literacy excludes them from online opportunities, national platforms, and policy processes.

These gaps create high vulnerability to unintentional mismanagement, weaken organisational sustainability, and restrict upward mobility in the CSO ecosystem.

Coping Mechanisms and Survival Strategies

Despite these challenges, CBOs demonstrate remarkable resilience, rooted in community solidarity, local networks, and pragmatic adaptation strategies:

- Community trust and social capital: CBOs rely on personal relationships, mutual aid traditions, and culturally grounded mobilisation approaches, using local languages and

community gatherings.

- Focus on non-political activities: To avoid conflict, many concentrate on softwre issues seen as apolitical—HIV/AIDS support groups, agriculture projects, youth sports, and early childhood development.
- District-level CBO networks: CBOs form informal or semi-formal networks to share resources, coordinate activities, and provide collective strength when engaging authorities. A good example of this is the ACBOs.
- Partnership with national NGOs: Collaboration with larger NGOs is one of the most crucial survival strategies. CBOs act as the “eyes, ears, and hands” for national organisations, enabling them to:
 - gain technical training,
 - access small-scale funding,
 - receive institutional protection, and
 - strengthen their legitimacy.

These partnerships allow CBOs to remain operational, expand community impact, and navigate political risks.

Summary

CBOs are among the most trusted and socially integrated actors within Zimbabwe's civic landscape. Their close community ties give them unique insight and legitimacy, but also expose them to political co-option, surveillance, and resource constraints. Their sustainability depends on community solidarity, careful navigation of local authority structures, and strong partnerships with national NGOs. Despite limited resources and structural marginalisation, CBOs remain essential frontline actors driving community development, welfare support, and local resilience.

8.5 Organisations of Persons with Disabilities: Confronting Double Marginalisation

Disability Rights CSOs in Zimbabwe operate in a space shaped by dual marginalisation: they face the same restrictive civic environment as all other CSOs, while also confronting deeply entrenched stigma, cultural biases, and systemic neglect towards persons with disabilities. This creates a uniquely challenging operating landscape at the intersection of general repression and historic exclusion.

Compared to governance or pro-democracy groups, these organisations typically enjoy slightly more operational breathing room. Their advocacy is often viewed by the state as a social welfare issue rather than a political threat. As a result, they face less direct surveillance, fewer targeted arrests, and less overt interference from security actors.

Their work is anchored in a strong normative framework. Zimbabwe is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and the national Disability Act (Chapter 17:01) provides a legal basis for accountability. Disability Rights CSOs often frame their advocacy as supporting the implementation of these existing commitments, which helps reduce political friction.

Systemic Barriers and Sector-Specific Challenges

While they are not prime targets of repression, Disability Rights CSOs face profound structural and cultural barriers, which often pose more persistent challenges than overt political interference.

Key constraints include:

- **Entrenched charity-based perceptions of disability:** Many stakeholders—including government departments, development partners, and communities—continue to view disability through a welfare or charity lens, rather than a rights-based framework. This undermines advocacy for full inclusion and participation.
- **Chronic underfunding:** Disability rights receive a very small share of donor funding. Resources are frequently short-term, project-based, and insufficient to sustain long-term advocacy, organisational growth, or core costs.
- **Accessibility challenges:** CSOs themselves often struggle with inaccessible offices, public buildings, and transportation—mirroring the very exclusion they aim to address. Public information is frequently unavailable in accessible formats such as sign language, Braille, or easy-read materials.
- **Weak enforcement of employment quotas:** Efforts to push the government and the private sector to comply with disability employment quotas have had limited success due to weak enforcement mechanisms and low political prioritisation.
- **Intersectional discrimination:** Disability Rights CSOs represent highly vulnerable subgroups—including women and girls with disabilities, persons with albinism, children, and the elderly—who face overlapping layers of discrimination. Addressing these intersectional issues with limited resources is a major operational burden.
- **Slow and superficial government engagement:** Government departments responsible for disability issues are under-resourced and often slow to respond. CSOs are sometimes invited to consultations, but their inputs are rarely incorporated meaningfully. Inclusion is often tokenistic—an exercise in “box-ticking” rather than substantive policymaking. Mainstreaming disability across broader government policy areas remains a significant challenge, as disability is still treated as a standalone issue.

Coping Mechanisms and Adaptive Strategies

Despite these structural barriers, Disability Rights CSOs have demonstrated remarkable resilience and strategic innovation. Their coping mechanisms and achievements include:

1. **Strategic litigation:** CSOs have used the courts to advance disability rights. Notably, the 2021 High Court ruling affirmed that the government's failure to provide sign language interpretation during COVID-19 briefings violated the rights of deaf people—an important precedent for future advocacy.
2. **Coalition-building:** Organisations collaborate in networks to amplify their collective voice, share resources, and strengthen policy advocacy. Coalition work helps compensate for limited individual capacity.
3. **Public awareness and social norm change campaigns:** Through national commemorations such as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, CSOs run campaigns aimed at challenging stereotypes and putting disability issues firmly on the public agenda.
4. **Grassroots and member-driven approaches:** Many organisations operate using participatory and community-based structures led by persons with disabilities themselves. This “**Nothing Without Us**” principle enhances legitimacy, strengthens constituency ownership, and increases the moral force of their advocacy.

Summary

Disability Rights CSOs occupy a distinctive space within Zimbabwe's civic ecosystem. Their work benefits from a degree of protection due to its alignment with international and national commitments and its perception as non-political. Yet their most significant challenges stem from systemic indifference, entrenched stigma, chronic underfunding, and structural exclusion, rather than direct repression.

Their resilience—rooted in strategic litigation, coalition-building, public awareness, and strong member-led structures—has enabled them to make important gains despite a difficult and under-resourced operating environment. They remain essential actors pushing for inclusion, dignity, and the realisation of rights for persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe.

8.6 Humanitarian Organisations: Operating in an Allowed but Heavily Controlled Space

Humanitarian CSOs in Zimbabwe operate in a distinct yet highly complex environment, different from the overtly confrontational terrain faced by governance or human rights groups. While they often enjoy relatively more operational freedom, this space is tightly regulated, politically sensitive, and subject to constant state oversight.

Humanitarian organisations are tolerated because they fill critical service delivery gaps where the government lacks capacity—responding to food insecurity, drought, health crises (such as

HIV/AIDS and cholera), and natural disasters. However, this tolerance is conditional and quickly evaporates the moment humanitarian work is perceived as politically threatening, empowering opposition constituencies, or undermining state legitimacy.

These organisations operate under a cumbersome regulatory framework, primarily governed by the PVO Act, which requires registration with the Department of Social Development and Disability Affairs and close state approval for their operations.

Politicisation of Humanitarian Work

One of the most significant challenges for humanitarian CSOs is the politicisation of aid delivery. Even neutral, needs-based humanitarian interventions can be interpreted through a political lens. Examples include:

- Distributing aid in opposition strongholds framed as “campaigning” for the opposition
- Focusing on needs in one area, resulting in accusations of favouring or neglecting communities aligned with the ruling party
- Pressure to channel aid through local authorities or chiefs aligned with the ruling party

This politicisation distorts humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality and undermines the ability of CSOs to reach vulnerable communities based on need alone. The government also restricts access to certain areas, particularly those perceived as politically sensitive. CSOs may be denied clearance to operate in such regions, or their staff may face harassment, making it impossible to deliver aid effectively.

“We are worried that some authorities come in and hijack our activities to push their own narratives, which will be completely outside our scope of work. What makes it even more difficult is that these will be the same authorities that we need to continue with our work of servicing communities. We remain between a rock and a hard place in trying to balance our neutrality vs the interruption of authorities. When we try to disapprove of any politicisation of our work, we are often responded to with office invitations for some closed-door meetings. At times, one can just choose peace over everything else- we just need to get the work done at the end of the day”.

Remarks by a representative of an organisation working on humanitarian work.

Surveillance and Operating Risks

Humanitarian CSOs reported that their work often occurs under intense state surveillance. Meetings with communities may be monitored by intelligence agents, and staff may be followed or questioned during project implementation. This surveillance not only intimidates aid workers but also creates fear among beneficiaries, compromising the integrity of programme delivery.

Funding Constraints

Funding remains a persistent challenge shaped by:

- Donor fatigue resulting from Zimbabwe's prolonged humanitarian crises
- Shifting global priorities that divert resources to newer or more politically prominent crises
- State interference or bureaucratic hurdles in approving or facilitating donor-funded operations

These dynamics place significant strain on organisations attempting to maintain consistent programming in a context of chronic need.

Coping Mechanisms and Adaptive Strategies

Despite these constraints, humanitarian CSOs have developed practical and resilient strategies that allow them to continue operating effectively:

1. **Robust monitoring and evaluation systems:** Organisations implement strict checks on aid delivery, including community feedback mechanisms and digital resource tracking, to prevent diversion and build trust with donors.
2. **Negotiation and relationship management:** Constant engagement with government agencies—from district-level officials to national ministries—helps secure operational space and resolve access barriers. Relationship-building has become a critical survival skill.
3. **Low-profile operations:** Some organisations deliberately avoid public criticism of the government, focusing on quiet, consistent service delivery to minimise risk.
4. **Localisation and partnership:** Empowering local staff and partnering with CBOs enhances acceptance in politically sensitive areas and leverages local knowledge of community dynamics.
5. **Coordination and collective advocacy:** Platforms such as the Zimbabwe Humanitarian and Development Forum enable CSOs to share information, align positions, and negotiate with the state collectively. This reduces the vulnerability of organisations being isolated or targeted individually.

Summary

Humanitarian CSOs in Zimbabwe operate in a carefully controlled and politically charged environment. Their work is permitted—but only as long as it remains non-political, compliant, and aligned with state expectations. Their operating space is shaped by regulation, surveillance, politicisation of aid, and resource constraints.

At the same time, their resilience is rooted in diplomacy, community partnerships, strong accountability systems, and strategic coordination, allowing them to deliver life-saving assistance even under challenging political conditions. Humanitarian CSOs remain essential actors within Zimbabwe's civic and social landscape, but their ability to function depends on a delicate balance of neutrality, negotiation, and operational discretion.

8.7 Media and Media-Support Organisations: Operating on the Frontlines of Repression

Media-focused CSOs operate in one of the most intense and politically contested spaces within Zimbabwe's civic landscape. They work at the frontline of defending freedom of expression, media independence, and access to information—areas that the state seeks to control as part of its broader political-security strategy.

'Our work has never been easy. As senior media practitioners, we are worried about the young ones who have just joined and are rising in the profession. Most of them are full of fear, emanating from what they see us going through. At times, the nature of our work takes a toll on you physically, mentally, and can be emotionally draining. Yes- the laws that protect our work are there, but their application can be a different story altogether. We just don't know what is awaiting us, but we will continue with our work, because journalism is a calling.' Remarks by a media practitioner interviewed during the reporting period.

These organisations navigate a dense web of restrictive legislation designed to criminalise journalism, suppress scrutiny, and silence dissent.

Legal and Regulatory Threats

The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Act (Patriotic Act) represents the most severe legislative threat. It criminalises any communication with a foreign government deemed to “undermine Zimbabwe.” For media CSOs, this could be interpreted to include:

- Training journalists on international safety standards
- Reporting press freedom violations to AU or UN mechanisms
- Receiving foreign funding for media development
- Engaging in international advocacy or partnerships

Under this expansive definition, core media development work can be framed as “wilfully injuring the sovereignty of Zimbabwe.”

Although the Freedom of Information Act and the CDPA replaced the once-notorious Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), they retain significant repressive powers:

- FOIA includes broad and ambiguous exemptions that allow government agencies to withhold information classified as “sensitive,” undermining transparency.
- The CDPA criminalizes “cyberbullying” and “transmitting false data”—terms used to target journalists and citizens for online criticism of the government.

These laws allow the state to regulate both traditional media and digital expression, creating a comprehensive system of surveillance and censorship.

Direct Threats and Hostile Operating Conditions

Media CSOs and journalists reported frequent encounters with criminalization, harassment, and outright violence:

- Journalists working for independent or foreign media are often arrested while covering protests, corruption, or politically sensitive stories.
- Charges commonly include “**inciting violence,**” “**obstruction of justice,**” or “**publishing falsehoods,**” often without evidence.
- State-owned and aligned media routinely conduct smear campaigns, portraying media CSO leaders and investigative journalists as “**sell-outs,**” “**terrorists,**” or “**agents of regime change.**”

These character assassinations aim to erode public trust and justify reprisals.

Documented cases include arrests of journalists such as Faith Zaba and Blessed Mhlanga, highlighting the personal risks associated with the profession.

The cumulative effect is a climate of fear, intimidation, and self-censorship, which severely undermines media freedoms.

Coping Mechanisms and Strategies for Resilience

Despite these challenges, media-focused CSOs have developed robust and innovative adaptation strategies to continue their work and protect journalists:

1. **Strategic litigation:** Organisations challenge the denial of broadcasting licenses, contest unconstitutional laws, and sue for the release of detained journalists. Litigation forces the state to justify its actions legally and creates a public record of repression.
2. **Digital security training:** CSOs train journalists in encryption, secure communication, and safe digital practices to protect themselves and their sources from state surveillance.
3. **Support for citizen journalism:** By promoting social media, podcasts, online radio, and independent digital platforms, media CSOs help bypass state-controlled traditional media.
4. **Rapid-response legal and psychosocial support:** Collaboration with organisations such as Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) and MISA ensures lawyers, trauma counselling, and emergency assistance are immediately available to targeted journalists.

These strategies have sustained media work even in a hostile environment and contributed to ongoing public access to independent information.

Summary

The experience of media-focused CSOs in Zimbabwe is one of intense pressure and high risk. Because they shape public opinion and expose state wrongdoing, they are treated as primary targets for control. Their operating space is constrained by:

- repressive legislation,
- direct physical violence and harassment,
- state-controlled media dominance, and
- sophisticated digital surveillance systems.

Despite this, media CSOs continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, grounded in legal expertise, digital innovation, international solidarity, and a firm commitment to the principle that access to information is both a right and a foundation of democratic society.

8.8 Faith-Based Organisations: Balancing Service Delivery and Moral Advocacy

FBOs in Zimbabwe operate in a unique and complex environment marked by a mixture of legitimacy, moral authority, political sensitivity, and vulnerability to state pressure. Their experiences differ significantly from those of other CSOs because they are simultaneously trusted social institutions, influential mediators, and potential targets of state scrutiny.

FBOs enjoy a level of societal legitimacy and grassroots trust that many CSOs cannot easily attain. Their work often blends spiritual ministry with social action, giving them deep access to communities across urban, peri-urban, and remote rural areas.

Spheres of Influence and Areas of Tolerance

FBOs are particularly active in humanitarian and service delivery roles, running:

- hospitals and clinics
- schools and vocational centers
- food aid and welfare programmes
- community peacebuilding initiatives

These activities are generally tolerated—and in some cases encouraged—by the state, as they fill critical gaps where public institutions are under-resourced or absent.

Their moral authority also allows them to speak publicly on issues such as corruption, poverty, and economic injustice. Framing these concerns as ethical or moral failures enables FBOs to raise sensitive issues in ways that are harder for the state to dismiss or repress outright.

FBOs have also historically played important roles as mediators and conveners of national dialogue. Institutions such as the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ) have long been involved in peacebuilding, election observation, and facilitating political conversations.

Tightrope Between Prophetic Voice and Institutional Survival

Despite their authority, FBOs must navigate a delicate balance between:

1. **Speaking truth to power**—condemning human rights abuses, governance failures, and corruption
2. **Maintaining functional relations with the state**—required to keep their hospitals, schools, and welfare institutions operating

This tension often places them on a political tightrope: assertive prophetic advocacy aligns them with pro-democracy CSOs, while institutional survival pushes them toward cautious engagement with state actors.

A representative from a national-based FBO had this to say, 'For as long as we are agreeing with the State in terms of everything- and I mean everything, then we are good. Things only get complicated when we try to speak the truth to power. Constructive criticism has not been received in the best way we would have wanted. Some of our members are trading extremely carefully to an extent that they are compromising the role of the church as watchdogs.'

The situation is complicated by the fact that some church leaders openly align themselves with the ruling party, especially during elections. These leaders sometimes receive political protection or business opportunities in return for their loyalty, creating divisions within the broader faith community. Meanwhile, outspoken religious leaders who challenge the government often face smear campaigns, intimidation, and threats.

FBOs also share the wider sector's funding constraints, particularly for advocacy or governance work. Donors are often hesitant to support explicitly religious institutions, even when their governance activities are secular.

Summary: Contingent Legitimacy

The experience of FBOs in Zimbabwe can be described as one of “contingent legitimacy.” Their moral authority, wide grassroots reach, and historical role in peacebuilding give them significant influence and a degree of protection. The state is generally cautious about directly confronting respected religious institutions.

However, this protection is conditional and fragile:

- When FBOs focus on service delivery, they are welcomed as partners.
- When they adopt a prophetic voice and challenge injustice, they risk becoming targets of co-option, surveillance, and intimidation.
- Their ability to operate effectively thus depends on:
- their denominational identity,

- the courage and independence of their leadership,
- and their strategic capacity to balance advocacy with institutional stability.

FBOs remain essential actors within Zimbabwe's civic ecosystem—capable of mobilising communities, mediating national tensions, and offering a moral compass—yet their operational space remains precarious and highly sensitive to political dynamics.

8.9 Environmental and Natural Resource Rights Organisations: Facing Politicised Economic Interests

CSOs working on environmental rights in Zimbabwe operate in a high-risk, politically charged, and increasingly volatile environment. Their work sits at the intersection of governance, economic interests, climate vulnerability, and community survival, which places them in direct conflict with powerful political actors and business networks controlling natural resources.

Environmental rights organisations intervene in high-stakes sectors, particularly mining and extractives—the most contentious arena in the country's environmental governance landscape. Their work often involves documenting or protesting:

- Pollution of rivers and groundwater by cyanide, mercury, and other toxic substances from gold mining
- Deforestation and land degradation caused by large-scale mining, artisanal miners (makorokoza), and illegal logging
- Environmental destruction linked to agricultural expansion and demand for wood fuel
- Forced evictions, land grabs, and displacement caused by mining concessions
- Poaching and illegal wildlife trade
- Mining projects encroaching on protected areas, national parks, or biodiversity hotspots

Environmental CSOs also advocate for equitable climate responses, support community adaptation strategies, and hold the government accountable for its domestic and international climate commitments.

Repression, Threats, and Criminalisation

Remarks by an organisation working on environmental rights in the Midlands Province stated that,

“2025 saw an increased number of investors coming to conduct their operations in our surrounding communities. Most communities have been engaging us, raising concerns over pollution, environmental degradation, and the general lack of consultations. Our efforts to escalate the issues with the authorities have always faced resistance. The situation has gone bad to an extent that some of our environmental rights activities are facing intimidation at a personal level, and the communities, including us, we all do not feel safe anymore.”

Unlike CSOs engaged in humanitarian work, environmental rights defenders are frequently targeted because their activities disrupt lucrative commercial interests—often involving politically exposed persons, local elites, or foreign investors.

Reports include:

- Abductions, assaults, and torture of environmental activists, particularly those operating at the community level
- Death threats against CSO leaders and community organisers challenging politically connected mining operations
- Communities and CSOs protesting environmental harm being labelled “anti-development,” “saboteurs,” or “unpatriotic”, a narrative used to delegitimise their grievances
- Militarisation of mining zones, with state security forces and private militias protecting mining sites, especially Chinese-owned or foreign companies
- Violent repression of protests, justified under claims of defending “strategic national assets.”
- Threats to journalists and investigators exposing environmental abuses
- Restricted access to information on mining contracts, environmental audits, and regulatory compliance, undermining evidence-based advocacy

The environment is therefore highly securitised, opaque, and shaped by powerful economic interests that routinely override environmental protections and community rights.

Coping Mechanisms and Strategies for Survival

Despite intense pressure, environmental rights CSOs have developed innovative, courageous, and increasingly sophisticated coping mechanisms that allow them to continue their work:

- **Community empowerment and paralegal programmes:** CSOs train Community-Based Monitors (CBMs) in environmental monitoring, water testing, documenting abuses, and understanding legal rights. These local monitors form an essential early-warning and evidence-gathering system.
- **Strategic litigation:** Organisations increasingly take mining companies and government agencies to court—sometimes securing rulings that halt operations, demand compliance, or require compensation for affected communities. However, enforcement remains inconsistent.
- **Coalition-building:** Environmental CSOs work in broad alliances combining environmental, governance, human rights, and community groups. These coalitions amplify advocacy and offer some degree of protection through collective visibility. Organisations like ZELO play a leading role in these efforts.
- **International advocacy:** CSOs leverage UN mechanisms, engage regional bodies, and collaborate with global environmental NGOs to apply external pressure on the state and private actors. This international dimension is crucial where domestic remedies are weak or

politically compromised.

Summary

Environmental rights CSOs operate in one of Zimbabwe's most contested and securitised spaces. They challenge powerful actors whose interests are embedded in extractive industries and land-based wealth. As a result, they face surveillance, violence, harassment, and deliberate efforts to delegitimise their work. Yet their persistence—through litigation, community mobilisation, coalition-building, and international engagement—demonstrates a resilient and highly adaptive sector, essential for defending ecological integrity, climate justice, and community rights.

8.10 Democracy and Governance Organisations: The Most Targeted Sector Operating Environment for CSOs Working on Democracy and Governance

CSOs operating in the democracy and governance sector face the harshest, most restrictive, and most politically perilous conditions within Zimbabwe's civic landscape. Their mandates place them at the frontline of political accountability, directly interrogating the state's power, decision-making, and governance practices. As a result, they often experience systematic repression, more severe than that faced by other sectors. Human Rights Defenders such as Namatai Kwekweza and the ARTUZ member were arrested and detained, although they were later released. Such experiences indicate how difficult it could be to operate and survive in the environment.

In Zimbabwe, organisations working on governance, electoral integrity, transparency, and rule of law operate in a highly securitised political environment. State authorities frequently portray such work as a threat to sovereignty, framing accountability and democracy initiatives as components of a foreign-funded regime-change agenda. This narrative has been consistently used to justify restrictive legislation, administrative obstruction, surveillance, and periodic legal harassment of civic actors.

The resulting risk environment has influenced donor behaviour. Faced with political hostility and regulatory uncertainty, some donors have reduced support to “hard” governance and human rights programming and redirected resources toward less politically sensitive sectors such as child welfare, livelihoods, or economic growth. While this recalibration reflects pragmatic risk management, it has contributed to a growing “soft sector bias” in external support. Over time, this shift risks weakening the very accountability mechanisms necessary to sustain democratic governance, particularly in contexts where civic space is already constrained.

The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Act (Patriotic Act) is used to criminalise core governance activities, such as international engagement, advocacy, and

public mobilisation. State-owned and aligned media outlets routinely publish smear campaigns targeting leaders of governance CSOs, branding them as “**traitors,**” “**foreign agents,**” or “**unpatriotic elements.**” This deliberate delegitimisation aims to isolate the organisations from the public, erode trust, and lay the groundwork for more aggressive state action.

Direct Repression and Operational Disruptions

Governance CSOs described a consistent pattern of state-orchestrated disruptions that paralyse their organisational functions:

- **Public demonstrations and civic events:** Obtaining police clearance is exceptionally difficult. Events that proceed often face heavy-handed responses, including beatings, tear gas, arrests, and, in some cases, the use of live ammunition.
- **Arrests and harassment:** Leaders and staff of pro-democracy groups are frequent targets of arbitrary arrests on charges such as “inciting public violence” or “subverting a constitutional government.” These arrests typically serve as short-term intimidation tools.
- **Office raids:** Police and intelligence agents regularly raid CSO offices, seizing computers, documents, and communication devices under the guise of investigations. These actions severely disrupt operations, erase data, and create a climate of fear. A case in point has been the unexplained fire incident that occurred at the SAPES Trust, an institution well known for hosting public debates of national interest.
- **Election-related hostility:** Election-focused organisations face particularly intense scrutiny. Groups such as the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) and the Election Resource Centre (ERC) face systematic obstruction, with voter education activities being disrupted or mischaracterised as partisan mobilisation.

These dynamics confirm a civic environment where democracy and governance groups operate under persistent threat, with their space not only shrinking but actively targeted for dismantling.

Civil Society Reflections on the Broader Context

Insights shared during interviews underscore a civic space under severe strain. Zimbabwe's “**restricted**” rating by [CIVICUS](#) aligns with the realities experienced on the ground, particularly in relation to freedom of association, assembly, and expression. The impending implementation of the PVO Act further threatens the operational autonomy of CSOs, with profound implications for their role in accountability, human rights protection, and development.

Yet, despite this pressure, CSOs remain remarkably resilient, driven by a commitment to constitutionalism, democratic norms, and the well-being of their communities. The interviews highlighted the need for collaborative strategies, unified advocacy, and constructive engagement with the state grounded in shared constitutional values and international

standards.

Coping Mechanisms and Sources of Resilience

Governance and democracy CSOs have developed a range of strategies to withstand repression and continue their work:

1. **Strategic litigation:** Organisations have increasingly turned to the courts to challenge repressive laws, contest arbitrary arrests, and push back against unconstitutional state actions. While outcomes vary, legal challenges compel the state to justify its conduct within a formal framework.
2. **Coalition-based organising:** Networks and coalitions continue to provide collective strength, resource-sharing, and mutual protection. Coalition-building has become essential for safety and strategic coherence.
3. **Alternative media and digital platforms:** To bypass state-controlled media, organisations use social media, online radio, podcasts, and encrypted communication tools to mobilise citizens, share information, and document abuses.
4. **Long-term civic education:** Some CSOs have adopted less confrontational, community-level strategies—such as constitutional literacy programmes, civic engagement training, and local governance strengthening—that are harder for the state to suppress.
5. **Rigorous documentation:** Governance CSOs meticulously record human rights violations, electoral irregularities, and abuse patterns. These records serve as a critical evidentiary base for future accountability and historical memory.

Summary

In summary, the experiences of democracy and governance CSOs in Zimbabwe are defined by constant confrontation with the state. They are perceived as political antagonists and subjected to a combination of legal, psychological, financial, and physical repression. Their operating environment is not merely constrained—it is actively being dismantled through draconian legislation, brute force, surveillance, and systematic delegitimisation.

Yet their continued operation, in the face of profound risk, reflects extraordinary courage and an unwavering commitment to democratic principles, human rights, and constitutional governance. Their resilience remains one of the strongest pillars of Zimbabwe's civic landscape.

8.11 Children's Rights Organisations: Operating in a Challenging Socio-Cultural Environment

CSOs working on children's rights operate in an environment that is both uniquely protected and profoundly challenging. Their mandate places them in a relatively safer advocacy space, yet the root causes of the violations they confront often draw them into conflict with deeply embedded

societal norms and, occasionally, with powerful political or economic interests.

Unlike governance or anti-corruption organisations, children's rights CSOs generally enjoy a higher level of legitimacy. Their mission is universally resonant, morally compelling, and difficult for the state to openly oppose. This creates a protective layer of acceptability, enabling these organisations to carry out their work with comparatively less overt restriction. Government agencies often collaborate with them on non-controversial issues that align with national priorities and existing legal obligations.

Zimbabwe's role as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the existence of a relatively progressive Children's Act (Chapter 5:06) provide a legal and normative framework that CSOs use to anchor their interventions. These instruments enable them to hold government accountable while pursuing advocacy within an established rights-based framework.

Persistent Challenges in the Children's Rights Sector

Despite the general acceptance of their work, children's rights organisations face several practical and structural challenges:

Entrenched harmful practices: The most significant violations—child marriage, child labour, and various forms of exploitation—are rooted in cultural norms, poverty, and gender inequalities. Addressing these issues invariably brings CSOs into confrontation with long-standing community practices and economic interests.

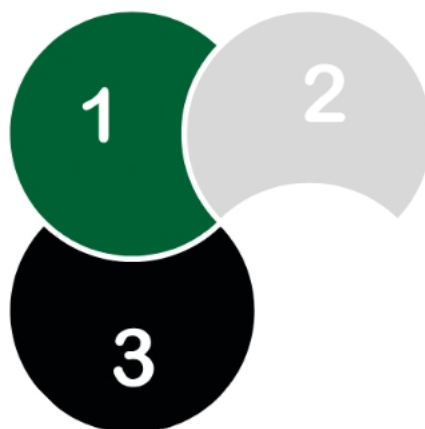
- **Digital and online safety for children:** It was also highlighted that there is an emerging trend of challenges relating to the safety of children in digital spaces. Children are spending most of their time on social media and online platforms, some of which are sophisticated to an extent the parents and guardians are unable to monitor. In that regard, various abuses and safeguarding concerns are emerging.
- **State incapacity and bureaucratic hurdles:** Children's rights work requires coordination across multiple ministries—often siloed, under-resourced, and slow-moving. This fragmentation complicates case management, referral pathways, and the implementation of comprehensive child protection systems.
- **A mindset challenge:** Many communities, and even some parts of the government, still view children as passive recipients of charity rather than as rights-holders. CSOs must therefore invest heavily in awareness-raising, social norm change, and capacity-building.
- **Limited funding streams:** Dedicated funding for children's rights is small and highly competitive. Available resources tend to be short-term and project-based, making it difficult to build and sustain long-term child protection structures and advocacy work.

Coping Mechanisms and Achievements

In response to these constraints, children's rights CSOs have adopted strategic coping mechanisms that demonstrate resilience and innovation. Their work has resulted in significant gains, including:

Community-based child protection systems:

Many organisations have established and trained community-level child protection committees. These committees now function as critical first responders, providing referral, monitoring, and support for vulnerable and abused children.



Strategic litigation:

CSOs have used the courts effectively to advance child protection. A major milestone was the 2016 Constitutional Court ruling that outlawed child marriage and set 18 as the minimum age of marriage.

Coalition-building:

Children's rights CSOs often work in alliances that enhance their advocacy impact, strengthen coordination, and amplify their collective voice in engaging government institutions and policymakers.

9 STATE, SECTORAL AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS: PATTERNS OF ENGAGEMENT AND CONTESTATION

Relations between CSOs and stakeholders are highly uneven, shaped by political geography, thematic focus, and institutional attitudes. Despite the challenges, many organisations reported continuities in collaboration and pockets of constructive engagement.

9.1 Relations with Government and State Institutions

CSOs reported that government agencies are generally receptive to structured engagement at the local level, particularly in settings where collaboration contributes to tangible outcomes such as policy development or improved service delivery. However, 60% of CSOs indicated that their relationships with government agencies remain complex and vary significantly across districts and provinces.

Many organisations noted that cooperation tends to improve when CSO programmes align with national development priorities, complement existing public initiatives, or strengthen policy implementation at the community level.

CSO also highlighted that there has been the formation of government and/or ruling-party-aligned CSOs. A specific example that was made was the Forever Associates of Zimbabwe (FAZ), which became popular during the latest harmonised elections, being aligned to the ruling party. It was stated that these organisations counteract the efforts that were being made by the non-partisan NGOs.

Areas of Positive Engagement

Manicaland and Masvingo Provinces

Both NANGO and ZimRights reported a positive shift in their engagement with government agencies in 2025. This was attributed in part to the NGO Expos organised by NANGO across several provinces, which brought together CSOs and various state institutions for joint exhibitions. Furthermore, NANGO's **'Talk to Your Regulator'** initiative also led to regular systematic engagements between CSOs and the state to address and resolve matters arising

in the operating environment of CSOs. These platforms contributed to increased visibility, trust-building, and constructive dialogue.

Mashonaland East

CSOs described their relationships with government agencies as generally cordial, especially when working on what they termed “soft issues” such as domestic violence and sexual and reproductive health rights. However, they still experience bureaucratic delays in obtaining necessary clearances for programme implementation.

Midlands Province

The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) highlighted the maintenance of positive and consistent working relations with government stakeholders in 2025. They pointed to strong support from the Ministry of Women Affairs, the Ministry of Youth, and the Department of Social Development. These institutions have facilitated resources, offered policy guidance, and contributed significantly to the success of ZCC's community initiatives.

Masvingo Province

The Youth Decide Zimbabwe organisation reported successful collaboration with the Ministry of Youth in Masvingo Province, including joint trainings and the drafting of a Youth Policy following a petition to the Masvingo City Council.

Mashonaland West

CSOs described their relationship with government agencies as “generally fair.” Nonetheless, frequent reminders about compliance with the PVO Act were noted as a point of tension, with some organisations expressing concern that the regulatory environment could strain relations further.

Areas of Strained or Hostile Relations

Matabeleland North

CSOs in this province reported significant challenges in building constructive relationships with government agencies. They stated that they are often mistrusted, viewed as pushing a regime-change agenda, or forced to operate under surveillance. One CSO noted:

“Most of the time, CSOs are not trusted, and we are viewed as a regime-change agency. We are sometimes at loggerheads as they do not understand the mandate of our different organisations. Very few realise our worth when they engage us, but only after a very long time and so much effort. Censorship is common... we operate under surveillance.”

Matabeleland South

The situation mirrors that of Matabeleland North, with CSOs describing relations as tense during the reporting period. Suspicion is especially high for organisations working on human rights and governance-related projects. One respondent explained:

“Security agencies put us under surveillance. They do not allow us to carry out some activities, and they have stopped us during social and economic rights training. Moreover, the local authorities review the MOUs repeatedly. If you raise governance issues, we are sometimes not accommodated.”

Case Study 4: Paid MOUs and Local Authority Gatekeeping

Since 2022–2023, several local authorities—particularly in Matabeleland—have introduced mandatory Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) for CSOs, often accompanied by significant fees. In Gweru, attempts were made to charge USD 300 for reference letters and up to USD 2,000 for MOU processing. In Mutasa, the Programmes Director at the Mutasa Youth Forum and Community Empowerment Trust noted that, **“we are almost completing our PVO registration status using family resources, though we are yet to renew our MoU with Mutasa Rural District Council, which is expensive for a CBO because we are required to pay \$200.”**

CSOs reported being compelled to fund extraordinary council sessions to secure approvals. While some international NGOs have complied, smaller and local organisations have been disproportionately excluded, exposing coordination failures and uneven sectoral responses.

9.2 Relations with Development Partners

Relations with development partners during 2025–2026 have been shaped by heightened risk aversion and strategic caution. CSOs reported that many donors have elected to work primarily with organisations perceived to be in good standing with the government, well before the implementation of the PVO Amendment Act. Funding modalities increasingly favour short-term grants, limited geographic scope, and a wait-and-see approach, particularly for governance-related programming. However, some donors continue to provide technical support, moral backing, and limited financial assistance.

Consortia arrangements have become more common, with donors strongly encouraging or requiring the use of registered fiscal agents. This has effectively excluded unregistered CSOs from accessing funding opportunities. In addition, respondents emphasised that donor

behaviour can unintentionally amplify these risks. In particular, the increasing insistence on consortium funding arrangements was flagged as problematic. While intended to reduce donor risk, forced consortiums can dilute accountability, expose smaller organisations to political risk through association, and deepen dependency rather than resilience. While some donors have remained comparatively progressive and supportive of registration and compliance efforts, resident donors in Zimbabwe report heightened fear and reluctance to engage in politically sensitive programming. Nevertheless, there was a strong call for donors to de-risk civil society, not by withdrawing or narrowing support, but by:

- funding core costs and compliance capacity,
- supporting independent registration and legal processes,
- avoiding safe sector bias
- avoiding one-size-fits-all partnership models, and
- recognising legitimacy beyond formal registration status.

As one participant concluded:

“If donors don't rethink how they engage, we will end up with compliant organisations that are registered, silent, and irrelevant to the people.”

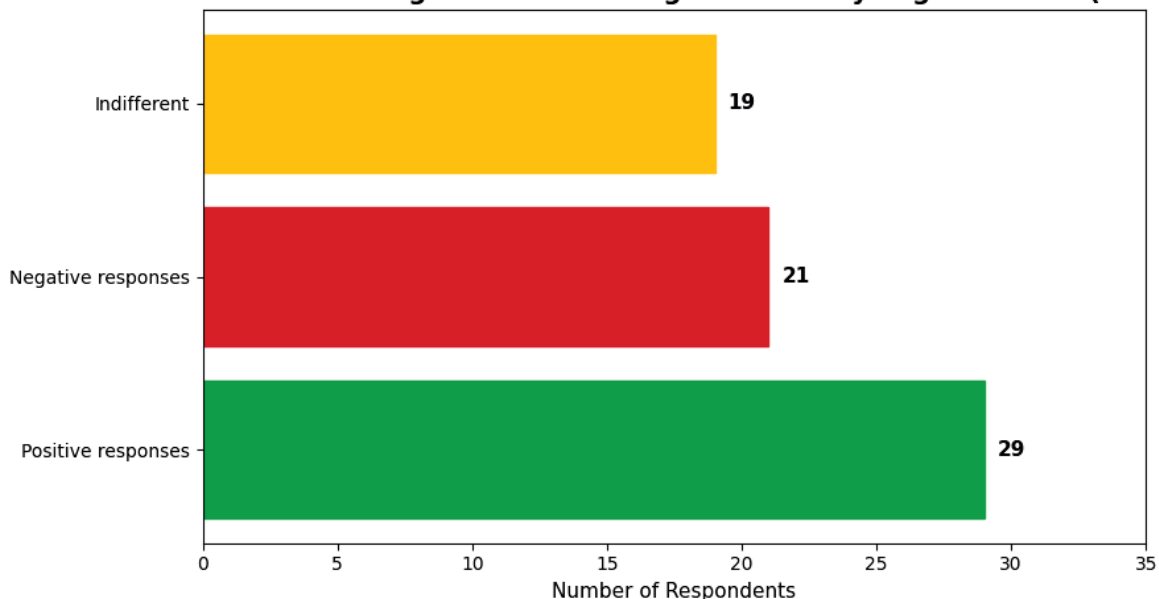
Case Study 5: Donor Risk Aversion and Exclusion Effects

Following regulatory uncertainty and global funding contractions, many donors adopted conservative funding approaches in Zimbabwe. CSOs reported being advised to partner only with organisations already registered or previously deemed compliant by the State. Consortia increasingly require registered fiscal agents, effectively excluding unregistered CSOs. While some support persists, resident donors have largely withdrawn from governance-focused funding, deepening sectoral fragmentation.

9.3 Relations Among CSOs

CSO-to-CSO relations reflect both solidarity and competition. While many organisations collaborate effectively through coalitions, networks, and thematic clusters, competition for shrinking funding has generated tensions. Some provincial organisations feel overshadowed by larger national NGOs. Conversely, national organisations emphasise the critical role of CBOs in community mobilisation, clearance processes, and local legitimacy.

Nature of Working Relations Among Civil Society Organisations (n=69)



State of Inter-CSO Relations in 2025

Indifferent Responses (19 of 69 CSOs)

A total of 19 CSOs reported that, following the shift in the funding landscape that began in January 2025, they had grown largely indifferent to the work of other CSOs. These respondents indicated that their primary focus had shifted toward meeting the compliance requirements of the PVO Amendment Act, which had become more demanding under the changing regulatory environment. Several also noted that they were concentrating on personal survival strategies, as reductions in funding had directly affected their income streams.

CBOs constituted most of this group. Many explained that their operations depend heavily on supporting programmes of national CSOs. As national organisations themselves were struggling with reduced funding, CBOs felt there was little collaborative work or support they could realistically expect during this period.

Negative Responses (21 of 69 CSOs)

16 CSOs reported deteriorating working relations within the sector in 2025. The primary cause cited was increased competition for limited funding following the cessation of USAID support. Respondents described a heightened sense of rivalry, with some organisations allegedly adopting a “**big-brother mentality**” that created tension and undermined cooperation.

As one respondent noted:

“Relations vary with the level of an organisation's growth. Some peer organisations understand the concept of collaboration and solidarity, while others are marred by the desire to become the big brother, maintaining a longstanding hero mentality.”

Most of these negative responses came from regional or provincial organisations who felt that national CSOs were “bullying” them, particularly in spaces requiring visibility, influence, or access to resources. Two CSOs reported that other organisations had made false accusations against them, resulting in strained relations with government agencies, development partners, and peer organisations.

Positive Responses (29 of 69 CSOs)

Despite the challenges, positive responses formed the largest share of the feedback, with 42% of CSOs reporting constructive and collaborative working relations. Many highlighted that cooperation with peer organisations had enhanced their efficiency, impact, and community reach.

NANGO noted that strengthened collaboration within the sector had generated meaningful synergies, a shared sense of purpose, and broader reach—factors that also contributed to improved trust and cooperation from government stakeholders who observed the unity within the civil society sector.

CSOs operating in Harare, Midlands, and Masvingo reported strong networks, active information-sharing platforms, functional referral pathways, and joint initiatives that had delivered tangible benefits within communities. National organisations affirmed receiving consistent support from CBOs, particularly in mobilisation and clearance processes essential for programme implementation.

CBOs likewise confirmed that relations with national CSOs remained positive, noting that national CSOs bring development projects that benefit local communities and help strengthen CBO relevance among local stakeholders.

Windows of Hope, a CSO in Manicaland, stated that it maintains cordial relationships with other organisations—especially within the NANGO network—through information sharing, referrals, and joint advocacy on child protection and livelihoods.

9.4 Relations with Communities

Most CSOs report strong community support, which they view as foundational to their resilience. However, governance-focused organisations face community reluctance in politically sensitive areas, where fear of reprisals from traditional or political leaders undermines participation.

In provinces like the Midlands, long-standing community relationships have allowed CSOs to deliver activities even without funding—particularly in gender-based violence prevention and

child protection.

Almost **85%** of CSOs reported positive working relations with the communities they serve, indicating strong levels of trust, cooperation, and engagement across most operational areas. These organisations highlighted that community support has been one of the key factors sustaining their work despite the broader operational and funding challenges.

Strained Relations (15% of CSOs)

The remaining **15%** reported strained relations with communities. These concerns were raised primarily by CSOs working on governance-related initiatives. The respondents attributed the tensions to a general lack of trust, largely fuelled by false narratives disseminated by local gatekeepers—often political or traditional leaders. In several rural areas, community members were reportedly discouraged or intimidated from participating in CSO activities due to fear of punishment or surveillance. This environment has made it difficult for CSOs to secure the cooperation they need from communities, who are their primary beneficiaries.

A governance-focused organisation operating in Masvingo, which requested anonymity, explained:

“Communities are very welcoming and eager to have more of our programmes, but the problem is the political and traditional structures. Our communities are at times intimidated, restricted, and censored. Obviously, they get scared to participate.”

Positive Dynamics and Strong Community Engagement

Despite isolated challenges, the majority of CSOs emphasised that community backing remains central to their effectiveness. Organisations in the humanitarian and women's rights sectors reported working closely with communities as key stakeholders and co-creators of interventions. They described active participation, community ownership, and local leadership in identifying needs, shaping solutions, and sustaining impact.

In the Midlands Province, CSOs highlighted that strong relationships have persisted even in the absence of financial resources. As one organisation noted:

“We keep on doing one or two zero-budget activities, especially with women. Those we have worked with before still recognise our work and impact, and for campaigns we have done—like on GBV—we still receive cases, which we then refer to appropriate government institutions.”

These testimonies demonstrate that, while governance-related tensions persist in some localities, the overall relationship between CSOs and communities remains robust, resilient, and grounded in mutual trust and collaboration.

10

KEY CHALLENGES CONFRONTING CSOs

10.1 Bureaucratic Clearance Processes

CSOs reported experiencing significant delays in obtaining approvals from various government departments, often accompanied by complex and shifting instructions. These challenges were particularly prevalent in political hotspot areas such as Mashonaland West, Harare, and Mashonaland East. Organisations indicated that even for a single activity, multiple reports were required by each government department involved. Additionally, CSOs were frequently asked to complete several templates at short notice, creating administrative strain.

Other organisations highlighted that when government stakeholders are invited to take part in activities, CSOs are often overshadowed, with their presence or leadership not acknowledged, thereby diminishing their visibility and recognition in communities.

10.2 Donor Dependency Syndrome

CSOs in Midlands, Matabeleland North, and Mashonaland Central noted challenges arising from unrealistic and materialistic expectations from both communities and some state institutions. While communities generally understand the developmental role of CSOs, a significant number perceive them as donors with abundant resources. This has resulted in reduced participation in programmes that do not offer monetary incentives.

Similar expectations were reported from government institutions. In the Midlands, CSOs noted that officials demand cash allowances for participation in activities, sometimes dictating the specific amounts. These demands persist despite strict donor restrictions on budget lines. In some areas, CSOs are required to conduct fieldwork accompanied by government officials who also expect allowances, many of which CSOs cannot provide.

10.3 Legislative and Policy Changes

Approximately 65% of CSOs indicated that they were affected by the implementation of the PVO Amendment Act. Many organisations, especially those registered as Trusts, were in the process

process due to slow processing of applications or a lack of funds to cover registration fees, particularly for CBOs.

ACSO in Mashonaland West stated:

“The coming in of the PVO laws has affected us as we can no longer organise freely without fear of being flagged as breaking the law. We have not yet started the registration process, hence the fear of being victimised. We are now doing our work in a sort of hiding manner.”

Another CSO in Matabeleland North noted:

“The PVO Act has affected us as we are supposed to reregister our organisation. The registration requirements are cumbersome—you need to move from one office to another, and it requires funding and time. From where we stand, it appears the regulatory environment and requirements are not yet fully understood in the offices that are expected to assist us.”

In addition, organisations reported increased uncertainty and fear among grassroots CSOs. There has been heightened scrutiny of programming, affecting planning and undermining community trust. Some organisations expressed fears of deregistration or asset seizure. It was evident that several CSOs lacked adequate information on the implications of the PVO Amendment Act and the steps required to comply with new registration procedures.



STAFF WELFARE

11

STAFF WELFARE AND SECURITY: A SECTOR UNDER STRAIN

CSOs reported that the year 2025 has been characterised by heightened uncertainty, job losses, and declining staff wellness, largely driven by shrinking funding streams. Many organisations were compelled to reduce salaries, terminate contracts, or depend heavily on voluntary labour. In several cases, staff worked remotely and only received activity-based allowances. Very few organisations had emergency or reserve funds to cushion employees during abrupt funding disruptions. An organisation based in Harare explained,

“In terms of labour requirements we are making use of interns from universities or technical colleges. We then save on labour costs.”

Across the sector, approximately 65% of CSOs indicated that since January 2025 they had been unable to provide competitive remuneration, health benefits, or wellness support to their staff. Capacity-building opportunities—critical for morale, retention, and professional development—were also significantly limited because of reduced financial resources.

Despite these challenges, organisations underscored their continued commitment to staff wellbeing, development, and safety. Staff members are encouraged to contribute ideas, lead initiatives, and take part in shaping institutional policies, programme design, and strategic direction. This approach has helped sustain a sense of ownership and accountability even during periods of institutional strain.

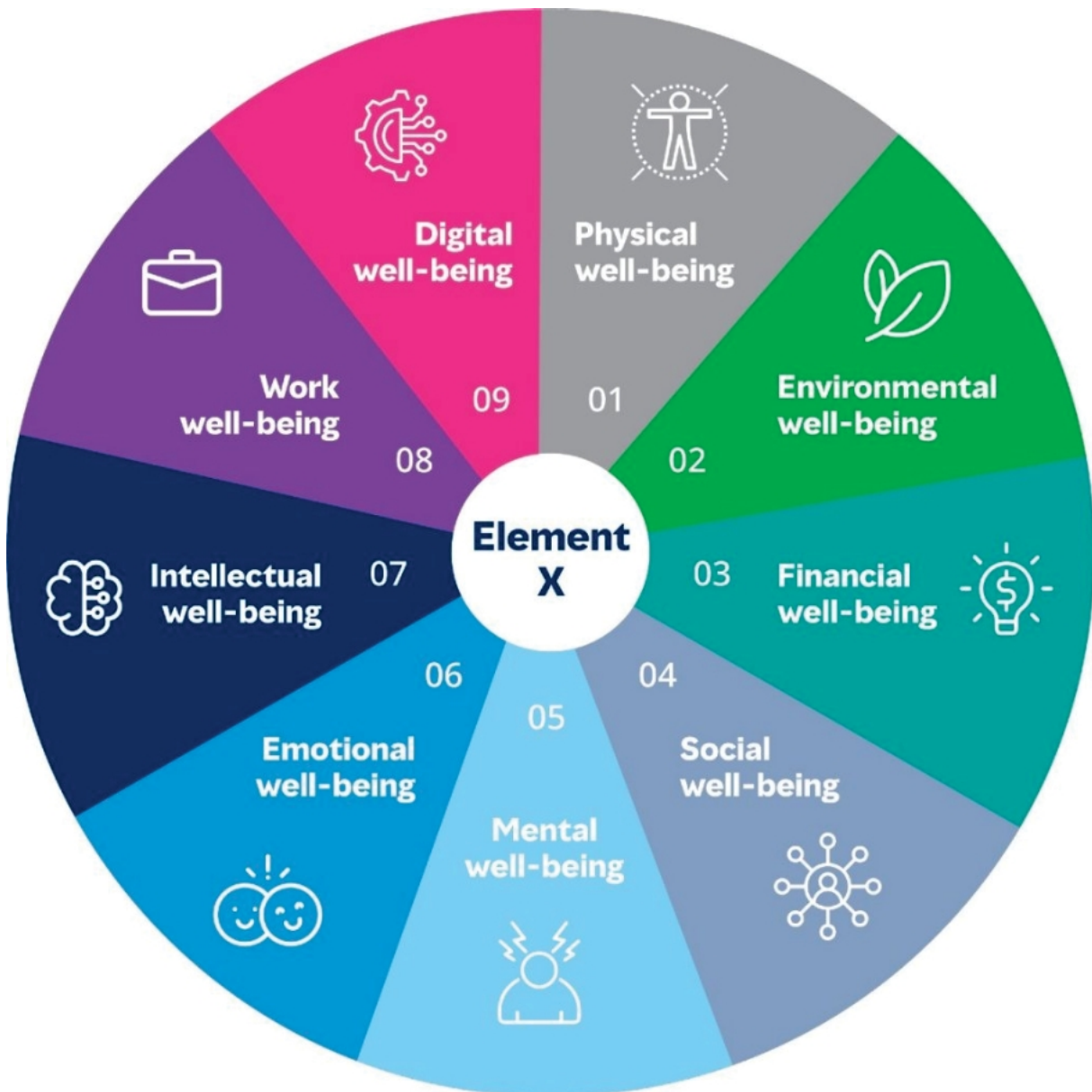
11.1 Staff and Organisational Security

Only 3 out of the 69 organisations consulted reported experiencing no security challenges. One organisation from Manicaland stated, **“We would like to thank the government for creating a conducive environment for CSOs and other stakeholders to operate in.”** For the majority, however, security risks varied according to the thematic focus of their work and the provincial context in which they operate. The most cited security concerns included:

- Unscheduled office visits or summons for questioning by individuals believed to be state security agents.
- Anonymous nighttime phone calls to staff from unknown numbers.

- Surveillance and monitoring of staff movements.

These risks have contributed to an environment of operational caution, self-censorship, and heightened stress among CSO personnel, particularly those working on governance, human rights, and accountability issues.



12 STRATEGIES SUSTAINING CSOs RESILIENCE IN RESTRICTIVE CONDITIONS

Despite an increasingly restrictive operating environment, CSOs have demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. Their continued survival and impact are not accidental; they are the product of deliberate, strategic, and at times courageous adaptation. The following strategies illustrate what has been working for CSOs in sustaining their operations in Zimbabwe:

- **STRATEGIC LITIGATION AS A PROTECTIVE TOOL:** CSOs have increasingly used the law as both a protective mechanism and an advocacy tool. Organisations such as ZLHR and Veritas have mounted constitutional challenges against repressive legislation, including the PVO Amendment Bill and the Patriotic Act. While court victories are not always guaranteed, the litigation process itself helps delay restrictive measures, raises public awareness, and creates a legal record that documents patterns of state repression.
- **RAPID-RESPONSE LEGAL AID FOR ACTIVISTS:** Timely legal assistance has become a core strategy. CSOs continue to provide emergency legal support to activists, journalists, and human rights defenders facing arbitrary arrest. Securing bail, ensuring access to legal representation, or having charges dismissed reduces the effectiveness of arrest and detention as tools of intimidation.
- **DIGITAL INNOVATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE CIVIC SPACE:** With physical restrictions and surveillance intensifying, many organisations have shifted significant portions of their work online. CSOs increasingly rely on social media platforms, podcasts, and online radio to disseminate information, mobilise communities, and run advocacy campaigns—an approach that helps bypass state-controlled traditional media.
- **STRENGTHENED DIGITAL SECURITY PROTOCOLS:** To mitigate risks of surveillance and cyber intrusion, CSOs have adopted stronger digital safety practices, including encrypted communication, secure data storage, and the use of virtual private networks (VPNs). These measures have become essential for safeguarding staff, sources, and sensitive organisational information.

- **DIGITAL DOCUMENTATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES:** CSOs have also leveraged mobile technologies and digital tools to document human rights violations in real time. Smartphones and evidence-collection apps are increasingly used to record incidents of police brutality, electoral misconduct, and other abuses, generating timely and verifiable evidence for advocacy and legal action.
- **COALITION-BUILDING AND COLLECTIVE DEFENCE:** Recognising the strength of collective action, CSOs have invested heavily in forming and sustaining alliances. Coalitions such as the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, thematic clusters, and alliances across sectors—including trade unions, FBOs, and professional associations—provide a broader platform for advocacy. Working within networks disperses risk, protects smaller organisations from targeted attacks, and amplifies collective influence.
- **COMMUNITY EMBEDDEDNESS AND LOW-VISIBILITY ENGAGEMENT:** Many organisations have shifted from highly visible, confrontational activism to more community-rooted approaches. This includes training community monitors, supporting village savings schemes, and strengthening local advocacy structures. Service delivery—humanitarian relief, health services, and livelihood support—has become a strategic entry point for building trust and embedding civic education within communities. These quieter, locally grounded initiatives generate legitimacy and reduce exposure to overt repression.
- **DIVERSIFIED AND RESILIENT FUNDING MODELS:** In response to shrinking external funding and increased scrutiny, CSOs are experimenting with diversified financial strategies. Consortium-based funding, where resources are channelled through larger networks and sub-granted to smaller partners, reduces visibility and protects frontline organisations. Although limited in scale, some CSOs are also exploring local fundraising, membership models, and income-generating ventures to enhance financial independence.
- **STRENGTHENED SECURITY PROTOCOLS AND WELLNESS SUPPORT:** Acknowledging the emotional and physical risks faced by staff, several organisations have institutionalised security and wellness measures. These include routine security training, maintaining lawyers on retainer, establishing clear emergency protocols, and offering counselling and mental health services. Such investments in staff wellbeing are essential to sustaining organisational resilience amid persistent intimidation and trauma.

Summary

The strategies outlined above demonstrate a sector-wide shift from confrontational advocacy to adaptive resilience. CSOs are becoming more legally savvy, digitally advanced, community-embedded, and network-oriented. Their continued presence and influence reflect less the existence of an enabling environment and more the sector's own ingenuity, determination, and deep commitment to advancing rights and accountability in Zimbabwe.

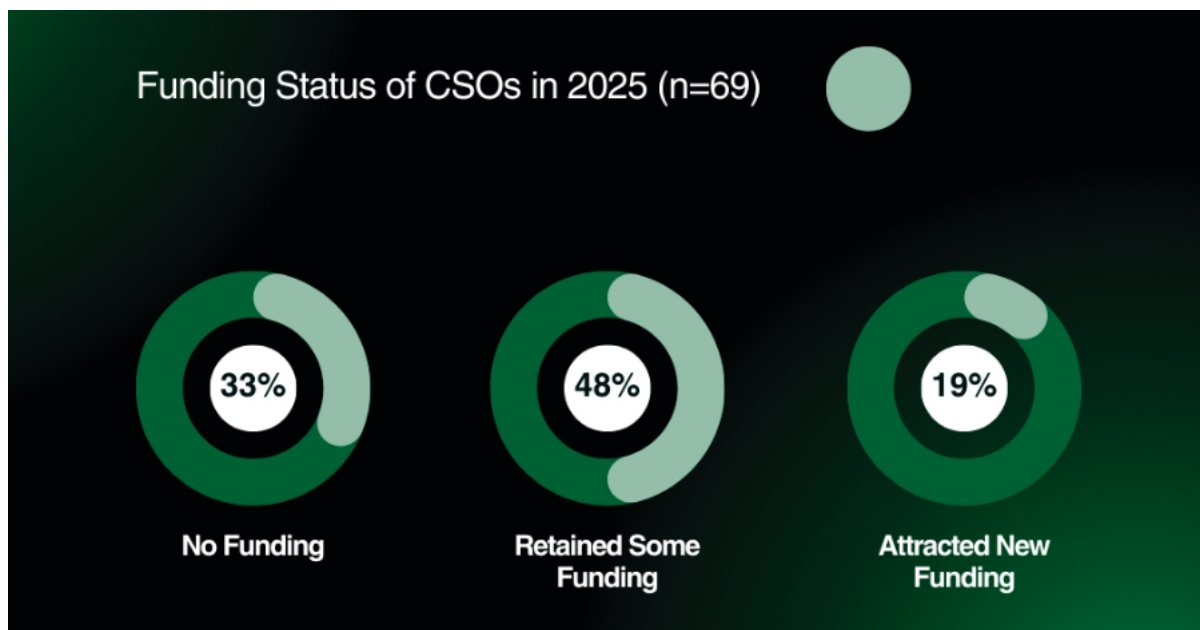
13 FUNDING LANDSCAPE IN 2025: CRISIS, CONTRACTION, AND EMERGING ADAPTATIONS

The overall funding landscape for CSOs in Zimbabwe has become extremely constrained and precarious. It is shaped by a convergence of factors: intensifying government restrictions, a shifting global donor ecosystem, and ongoing domestic economic instability. Together, these conditions have produced a severe contraction in the financial resources available to the sector.

The most dramatic shock has come from the significant cuts to the USAID budget, which reduced global programming by an estimated **83%**. For Zimbabwe, this resulted in the abrupt termination of projects valued at more than **US\$388 million**. Cuts amounting to over US\$90 million in HIV programming alone have had devastating, tangible consequences—reduced access to antiretroviral therapy, elimination of support for viral load testing kits, and the loss of salary top-ups for nurses and community health workers. Clinics that depended on these resources have been forced to close, while medical staff exit the sector in search of more stable livelihoods. For people living with HIV, these cuts represent more than funding shortfalls; they pose a direct threat to survival.

USAID's withdrawal has coincided with a broader reduction in international donor commitments. European funders, strained by protracted crises and shifting geopolitical priorities, have redirected their resources to humanitarian emergencies such as Ukraine and the Sahel region. At the same time, international banks have increasingly “**de-risked**” by closing or freezing accounts of CSOs operating in high-risk jurisdictions, further constricting financial flows.

These dynamics have produced cascading consequences: school feeding programmes halted mid-cycle, abandoned water and sanitation projects, and community-based organisations unable to pay staff or maintain basic operations. All CSOs engaged in this assessment reported being significantly affected by the USAID funding shifts. NANGO estimates that its membership—collectively employing approximately **18,000 Zimbabweans**—is experiencing widespread downsizing, salary reductions, and forced leave. Several organisations noted that they were unable to secure any new funding during the reporting period.



Only **48%** of CSOs reported being able to retain some level of funding following the USAID cuts. For instance, a national CSOs indicated that long-term strategic partners that continued to support its flagship agroecology and community outreach programmes. However, many organisations clarified that although they remained operational, several of these funding streams would end by December 2025, leaving prospects uncertain.

Approximately **33%** of respondents, particularly CBOs, reported operating entirely without external funding, relying instead on voluntary labour. Some national organisations that depended exclusively on USAID funding have been forced to suspend operations. A CSO in Matabeleland North described the situation as follows:

“ We were part of the Integrity project under ZIMCODD, but when USAID issued a stop order, we were affected badly, and we have not yet recovered. Funding ceased completely. What has kept us going is self-funding some activities because we are rooted in our communities. But we struggle with rentals as funding has dried up. The funding situation is not conducive, and the operating environment is not friendly. ”

A smaller proportion—**19%** of CSOs, mainly those working in humanitarian relief and public health—reported success in securing new funding during the period under review.

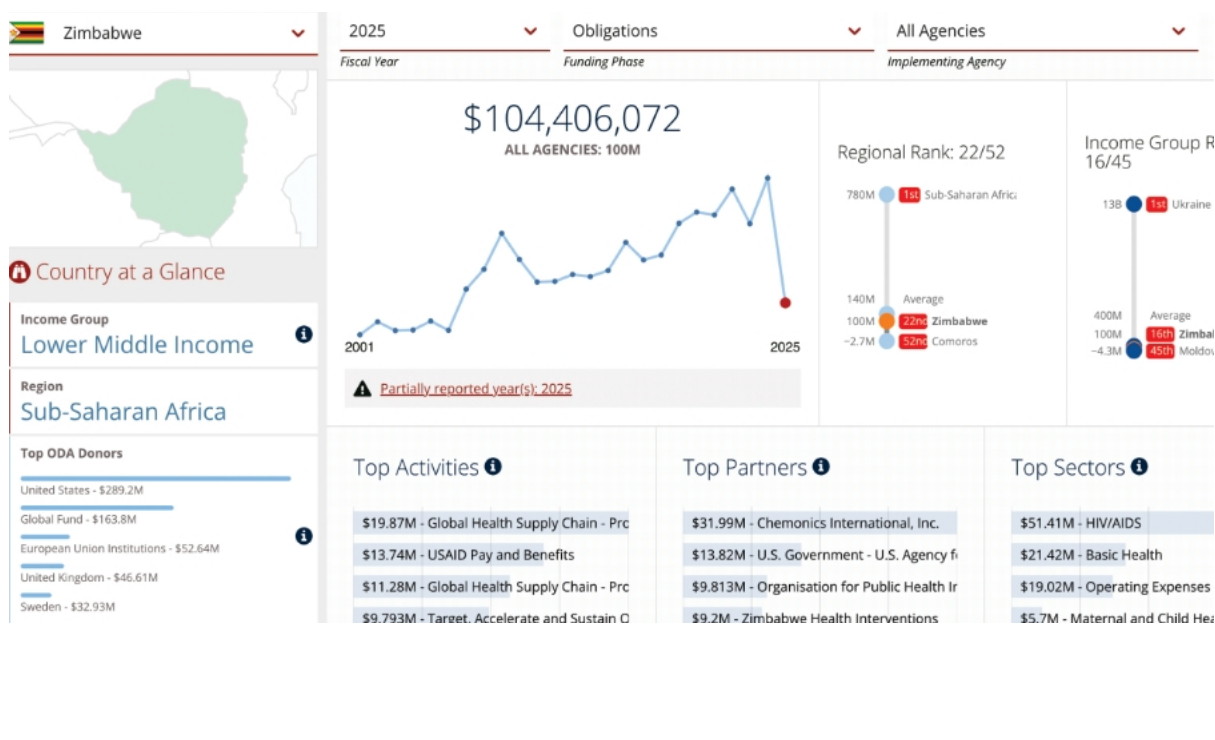
Some organisations also explored alternative funding sources, including Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) platforms and faith-based institutions. The funding crisis has prompted a creative rethinking of organisational survival strategies. Certain CSOs have ventured into income-generating initiatives such as large-scale poultry projects, while others are renting out office space to offset operational costs.

The combined effect of the funding crisis and the restrictive PVO regulatory framework is highly uneven across the sector. The degree of impact depends largely on the nature of the organisation's mandate, its constituency, and how politically sensitive its work is perceived to be. Smaller and medium-sized organisations—especially those in governance, democracy, and human rights—are at the highest risk of closure due to their heavy reliance on external funding and limited internal reserves. Inability to pay competitive salaries has resulted in layoffs and contributed to an ongoing brain drain, as skilled activists migrate to the private sector, international NGOs, or leave the country entirely. Many CSOs have been forced to scale back programming, prioritising short-term service delivery over long-term advocacy, movement-building, and institutional strengthening.

The contraction of donor funding has accelerated pooled financing approaches and localisation initiatives, including targeted support for CBOs to navigate registration requirements. Nevertheless, overall resources remain severely constrained. Competition for limited funding has intensified, reinforcing conservative compliance thresholds and incentivising self-censorship among CSOs seeking to remain operational.

ZIMBABWE

- 2024 - Global Fund 164 MIL USD (437 MIL approval in 2024 for 24-26)
- EU Institutions 53 MIL – 75 MIL USD (165 MIL 2021-2027)/ ECHO withdrawal from ZIM
- FCDO - 40 MIL USD in 2024 – 19 MIL USD in 2025
- Sweden 50 MIL USD in 2019 to 34 MIL in 2024 and 10 MIL in 2025



14

RECOMMENDATIONS: REFORMS FOR AN ENABLING AND SUSTAINABLE CIVIC ENVIRONMENT

Improving the operating environment for CSOs requires a combination of state reforms, strengthened internal governance, and sustained international engagement. The following recommendations reflect practical, evidence-based steps aligned with the political and economic realities of Zimbabwe.

14.1 Recommendations to the Government of Zimbabwe

Reform Restrictive Legislation and Regulatory Frameworks

- Repeal or substantially amend the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Act (Patriotic Act) to ensure full compliance with the Constitution of Zimbabwe and international human rights obligations, including freedoms of association, expression, and peaceful assembly.
- Review and reform the PVO Amendment Act, replacing punitive, control-oriented provisions with transparent, proportionate, and risk-based regulation that enables legitimate civil society activity.
- Harmonise all civic-related laws and regulations to eliminate overlapping mandates, discretionary enforcement, and contradictory compliance requirements.

End the Politicisation and Securitisation of Civic and Humanitarian Work

- Publicly recognise civil society as a legitimate development and accountability partner and affirm the right of CSOs to operate independently and non-partisanly.
- Guarantee impartial and equitable access to humanitarian assistance, free from political interference, gatekeeping, or discrimination.
- Immediately cease state-sponsored intimidation, surveillance, harassment, and stigmatisation of CSOs, journalists, and human rights defenders.

Strengthen Accountability, Due Process, and the Rule of Law

- Investigate, prosecute, and hold accountable all perpetrators of violence, abductions, arbitrary arrests, and intimidation targeting CSOs, journalists, and HRDs.

- Uphold judicial independence and comply with court rulings that protect civic freedoms and constitutional rights.
- Ensure transparent, time-bound, and reviewable administrative processes for CSO registration, clearance, and oversight.

14.2 Recommendations to CSOs

Strengthen Internal Governance, Integrity, and Accountability

- Professionalise boards and leadership structures to enhance independence, oversight, and strategic direction, and to address founder dominance and conflicts of interest.
- Strengthen financial management systems, including audits, internal controls, and compliance frameworks that enhance credibility and resilience.
- Invest in leadership development and succession planning to ensure organisational continuity under pressure.

Deepen Collaboration, Solidarity, and Public Engagement

- Expand alliances across sectors, including trade unions, faith-based organisations, professional bodies, community networks, and social movements.
- Strengthen public communication and narrative-building to demonstrate community impact, defend legitimacy, and counter misinformation and delegitimisation campaigns.

Enhance Organisational Security and Risk Management

- Institutionalise integrated digital, physical, and legal security protocols tailored to organisational risk profiles.
- Provide regular safety, well-being, and psychosocial support training for staff, volunteers, and community partners.
- Undertake scenario planning and organisational risk assessments to prepare for regulatory, financial, and political shocks.

Diversify and Localise Funding Models

- Reduce over-reliance on single donors by investing in social enterprise models, local philanthropy, diaspora engagement, and private-sector partnerships.
- Build internal resource mobilisation capacity to strengthen sustainability and autonomy.

14.3 Recommendations to International and Regional Actors

Adopt Flexible, Long-Term, and Risk-Tolerant Funding Approaches

- Prioritise core funding, staff welfare, and institutional resilience, including legal defence and compliance support.
 - Support smaller, grassroots, and rural CSOs through simplified grant mechanisms, micro-grants, and mentorship arrangements.
-

- Avoid “**safe-sector bias**” that marginalises governance, human rights, youth, and women's rights organisations.

Strengthen Protection Mechanisms for Human Rights Defenders

- Expand emergency protection measures, including rapid response funding, legal assistance, emergency visas, and relocation pathways.
- Use diplomatic engagement and political dialogue to press for the protection of civic space and accountability for violations.

Support Regional and Continental Accountability and Oversight

- Encourage SADC and African Union mechanisms to actively monitor civic space conditions and respond to violations.
- Support CSO engagement with regional and international human rights bodies, including the African Commission and courts, to strengthen accountability and normative compliance.



15 CONCLUSION: CIVIC SPACE AT CROSSROADS

Zimbabwe's civic landscape in 2025 reflects an increasingly constrained and differentiated environment, shaped by the convergence of political repression, regulatory uncertainty, economic instability, and dramatic shifts in international funding. Expanded state control through legal and administrative measures has coincided with a sharp contraction in donor support, weakening organisational sustainability and amplifying risk for civil society organisations—particularly those engaged in governance, human rights, youth mobilisation, and accountability work.

At the same time, the operating environment has become unevenly stratified. Humanitarian and service-delivery organisations continue to operate within conditionally tolerated space, while advocacy-oriented CSOs face intensified scrutiny, restricted access to communities, and declining financial support. These dynamics are further compounded by global compliance pressures, including the misapplication of AML/CFT/PF standards in ways that risk securitising legitimate civic activity rather than strengthening financial integrity.

Yet despite these pressures, civil society in Zimbabwe has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. CSOs remain deeply embedded in communities and indispensable to humanitarian response, social protection, service delivery, and democratic accountability. Through strategic litigation, digital mobilisation, coalition-building, community-rooted programming, and emerging local resource mobilisation strategies, organisations have continued to sustain civic engagement even as formal space narrows.

Looking ahead, the sustainability of Zimbabwe's civil society will depend on strengthened internal governance, reduced over-reliance on external funding, enhanced organisational care for staff and human rights defenders, and sustained public legitimacy at community level. For international actors, meaningful support must prioritise flexible, long-term financing, protection mechanisms, and approaches that reinforce autonomy rather than risk aversion. For the State, recognising civil society as a development and accountability partner—rather than an

A vibrant, independent civil society is not a threat to Zimbabwe. It is a prerequisite for democratic renewal, inclusive development, and social justice. Safeguarding civic space is therefore not only a constitutional obligation, but a national imperative—central to the country's future resilience, legitimacy, and progress

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