



SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# **Enabling Environment Snapshot Sierra Leone 29 January 2025**

## Context

Sierra Leone has operated as a multi-party democracy since the 1991 Constitution was promulgated. However, the political space has been dominated by two parties, the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) and the All Peoples Congress (APC), which have alternated in power since independence in 1961. The enabling environment for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) has deteriorated over the [past decade](#) and continues to decline, even in the first two weeks of January 2025, with no signs of improvement.

Notable [breaches in freedom of expression and association](#) include the Speaker of Parliament [banning](#) journalist and commentator Melvin Tejan Mansaray from accessing the Parliament precincts in January 2025 for criticising parliament's removal of the former Auditor General Lara Taylor Pearce and her Deputy Tamba Momoh. This decline reflects a [broader trend over the last five years](#), exacerbated by the enactment of the [Cyber Security and Crimes Act](#) 2021. This Act has been used as a tool to shrink civic space, particularly through Section 44, which criminalises cyberbullying but leaves the definition of the offence too broad and vague. The police have leveraged this section to [silence](#) those who criticise the government.

### 1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

The [1991 Constitution](#) of Sierra Leone guarantees freedoms of expression, association, and assembly in Sections 25 and 26. However, recent assessments show that the civic space in Sierra Leone is [obstructed](#). Over the past decade, successive governments have [violated human rights](#), using intimidation to induce self-censorship among civil society organisations (CSOs). For example, staff of the [National Election Watch](#) (NEW) faced harassment for releasing Process and Results Verification for Transparency (PRVT) for the 2023 elections, and lawyer [Henrietta Kargbo](#) was threatened for her social media posts.

As of January 2025, the civic space remains polarised, with increased hate speech by bloggers associated with the two major political parties, the [SLPP](#) and the [APC](#), targeting critical voices. Pro-government bloggers receive political rewards, while human rights activists [face threats](#), forcing some to flee or remain silent. For example, on the 13th October 2022, [Myk Berewa](#), an SLPP blogger, was rewarded by President Bio with [an appointment](#) as the Director of Communications at State House. Meanwhile, there are allegations of bloggers receiving financial support from politicians and their families, and granted privileges to attend high-level government events. Activist [Edmond Abu](#), was arrested for protesting the rise of fuel prices. The same is true for [Thomas Moore](#) Conteh.

[Security forces](#) and officials of [parliament](#) suppress dissent. Notable examples include journalist and lecturer Thomas Dixon, who went into hiding in December 2024 after [being threatened](#) by the Inspector General of Police for exposing his “abuse of power”. Similarly, journalist Abdul Tejan Mansaray was [banned](#) from entering the Parliament’s precincts by the Speaker of Parliament for criticising the removal of the auditor general.

The situation has recently deteriorated, with the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) increasingly using the [1965 Public Order Act](#) to deny citizens the right to protest and hold processions. Section 17 of the Act requires citizens to notify the Inspector General of Police if they wish to protest, a provision often misinterpreted by the police as requiring authorisation. This misapplication

of the law was evident in the [recent arrest](#) of civil society activist Thomas Babadi and political leader Wadi Williams in December 2024, who wanted to protest for the release of the controversial 2023 Presidential Election results. Both were detained for over two weeks on charges of public disorder and threatening the peace. Meanwhile, the SLP [allowed pro-government supporters](#) to protest in favour of the governing party.

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

The [1991 Constitution](#) of Sierra Leone guarantees freedoms of expression, assembly, and association in Sections 25 and 26. Section 26 specifically emphasises the right to form or join civic groups such as trade unions or other associations. However, since 2007, successive governments have tried to limit CSOs' ability to hold authorities accountable. Attempts to control CSOs have been made through policies like the [NGO Policy Regulations](#) and the Development Cooperation Framework (DCF). The current [National NGO Policy Framework \(2023–2028\)](#) is as a result of [CSO push-backs](#) of the previous policies which included restrictive provisions, causing delays and scrutiny for CSOs. Currently, however, the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development has instituted sectoral coordination meetings of policy and civic actors that are held at national and local levels, including on areas such as Water and Sanitation and Agriculture. NGOs are registered through an [online portal](#), streamlining the process and improving transparency. A harmonised service level agreement between NGOs and the government has also been introduced, with the government committing to a more efficient timeline, reducing the agreement-signing process from one month to two weeks.

Despite the introduction of a new framework, the guiding principles still require NGOs to align their work with government priorities, resulting in no substantial change.

## 3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Funding for civil society actors in Sierra Leone is relatively inaccessible. CSOs rely heavily on international donors, with a limited number of multilateral donors such as the European Union (EU), Irish Aid, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) supporting civil society work. Organisations like Trócaire, Christian Aid and CordAid act as intermediaries to fund most CSO activities. These organisations, often supported by their home-country development agencies, are regarded as having [advanced technical and implementation capacities](#). This has led to limited access to funding for local CSOs in critical sectors such as health, education, and social services.

The funding environment has become increasingly challenging, with significant reductions in support from partners like UK Aid due to Brexit. Additionally, many international organisations now prefer to implement their programmes directly, side-lining local CSOs in critical sectors such as health, education, and social services. Examples include Welthunger Hilfe, Catholic Relief Services, National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI), Plan International, Save the Children, and the United Nations Population Fund.

Articles 9.1.2 of the NGO Policy Framework allows the government to provide incentives including financial support to CSOs, but the practice over time is that [these contracts typically](#) go to organisations that are not critical of the government. Many CSOs complain that the government's open calls for funding proposals are [not publicised](#) and that funding is not awarded through a fair and competitive process, leading to calls for the depoliticisation of government-CSO interactions.

Generally CSOs are constrained in accessing funding due to limited capacity to compete for donor funds. In addition, CSOs must regularise their registration to avoid government accusations of illegality, which complicates collaboration with donors. Only a few CSOs have the financial sustainability to run their programmes by diversifying their revenue streams, such as through rental income, managing farms, or operating small-scale enterprises.

## 4. State openness and responsiveness

The interaction between the government and CSOs is mixed. Most state agencies either collaborate with CSOs that they believe support their programmes or engage with CSOs when they need to boost legitimacy and comply with their donor requirements. The government has the prerogative to select the CSOs they want to work with. For example, in the passing of the Criminal Procedures Act in 2024, despite significant criticisms from activists and citizens due to the [elimination of the jury system](#) in criminal cases, government still had support from some CSOs to pass it. Conversely, for the [Safe Motherhood Bill](#) currently before Parliament, the Ministry of Information and Civic Education and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation are working closely with activists and rights groups to highlight its importance and [encourage Parliament](#) to pass the legislation.

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

Advocacy organisations are either [appreciated or disparaged](#) depending on the type of advocacy they conduct and on individual allegiances. The government has been antagonistic towards CSOs in recent years because these organisations call for accountability and demand better and more transparent governance processes.

In October 2024, Abdul Fatoma, the Director of the Centre for Human Rights and Development International, noted on his [Facebook](#) page that he was subjected to abusive language from judges after for statements he made [accusing judges](#) of inappropriate behaviour. In January 2025, a journalist was [banned](#) from Parliament for criticising the wrongful act of removing the Auditor General from auditing the accounts of the Presidency. CSO leaders, activists, and journalists such as [Marcella Samba Sesay](#) and [Thomas Dixon](#) have been subjected to intimidation, including [public shaming](#) on social media, in attempts to silence them.

The public space is quite toxic and restrictive, particularly for CSOs demanding accountability and human rights, leading to self-censorship. In 2023, the Office of National Security issued a [statement](#) against National Election Watch (NEW) after they published their Process and Result Verification for Transparency (PRVT) findings on the election results. As a result, NEW leaders had to temporarily leave the country.

Despite these challenges, the relationship between CSOs in Sierra Leone is largely collaborative and inclusive. CSOs work across diverse themes and are represented in networks and coalitions. There is a strong emphasis on inclusivity, particularly regarding gender and persons with disabilities, which has ensured [minimal marginalisation](#) in CSO activities.

## Challenges and Opportunities

Government harassment is likely to continue targeting CSO activists who are critical of their activities, particularly regarding rights and freedoms, and holding the government accountable. This is especially relevant considering the recently released Auditor General's [Report for 2023](#), which reveals [corruption](#) in government agencies, including the Foreign Ministry and the National Revenue Authority. Some CSOs have compromised their positions due to their affinity with the ruling government or the benefits they receive, effectively doing the [government's bidding](#). This is also tied to the availability of funding, as declining funding opportunities have affected operations and led some CSOs to change course. Regardless of these challenges, there are some civil society consortia that have remained consistent and dedicated to defending human rights such as Budget Advocacy Network and National Election Watch among others.

However, there are opportunities to promote an enabling environment for CSOs in Sierra Leone. CSOs can explore avenues to fund their operations through crowdfunding and be empowered with social enterprise skills to sustain their momentum and fund their activities when donors are unavailable. Activists can continue their advocacy and hold the government accountable by using international and social media platforms, as well as international forums like the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council, to highlight shortcomings and encourage the government to promote an enabling environment for CSOs, especially since the country currently [sits](#) on the UN Security Council. There is also a need for CSOs to reopen conversations with the government and re-emphasise the areas that affect their operational independence.

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