



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Colombia

August 2025

Context

Colombia remains mired in a protracted armed conflict, with illegal armed groups—linked to drug trafficking and illegal mining—exercising control over vast territories. According to the [2025 report by Human Rights Watch](#), the main actors with territorial control are the ELN, FARC dissidents, and the Clan del Golfo. In June 2024, the Clan del Golfo had a presence in 392 municipalities, the dissidents in 299 and the ELN in 232, representing a worrying increase compared to 2022. Although there is no clear judicial traceability, their actions directly threaten the free functioning of civil society, especially in the regions.

More than 16 million people ([33% of the population](#)) live in poverty and exclusion, which exacerbates barriers to citizen participation. Although the [1991 Constitution](#) and the 2016 [Peace Agreement](#) with the FARC enshrined citizen participation as a structural pillar of democracy, its implementation has been partial and uneven, especially in regions affected by the conflict.

Despite formal democratic institutions, the legitimacy of Colombian democracy is increasingly questioned. A 2023 [national survey](#) revealed that 76.2% of people over the age of 18 value living in a democracy, but an [independent 2025 survey](#) revealed that 74% believe that democracy is in danger. Social protest, a key form of citizen participation, [faces](#) repression under a militarised security approach, which often results in human rights violations.

Violence against civil society actors has skyrocketed: more than 180 social leaders were [killed](#) in 2024, including [28 signatories of the Peace Agreement](#). Colombia is now the deadliest country for environmental defenders, with [461 killed between 2012](#) and 2023. Armed conflict and criminal violence [displaced or confined](#) more than 75,000 people in early 2025 alone, a 59% increase over the previous year.

Under President Gustavo Petro, elected in 2022, efforts to expand participation have been [hampered](#) by entrenched centralisation and institutional mistrust. Corruption remains widespread; Colombia ranks [92nd](#) in Transparency International's 2024 index, and [recent scandals](#) have undermined promises to fight corruption. Taken together, these dynamics erode the enabling environment for civic space and democratic participation.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

Despite constitutional guarantees and the [2016 Peace Agreement's](#) promise to expand democratic participation, Colombia continues to face serious setbacks in the protection of civil society's fundamental freedoms. The right to freedom of expression remains under threat, [particularly for journalists](#) and human rights defenders. In [2024](#), 300 journalists were threatened, 14 displaced and 5 killed; in the first five months of 2025, 57 threats and one murder were recorded, according to the [Foundation for Press Freedom \(FLIP\)](#). These attacks, coupled with the deterioration in the implementation of Law 1712 on access to public information, have undermined transparency and public oversight.

Freedom of association is increasingly precarious. Between January 2024 and June 2025, 253 social leaders and 56 peace signatories were killed, according to [Indepaz](#). These killings, which often target indigenous people, Afro-descendants and environmental defenders, reflect a systematic effort to silence voices that question illegal economies and extractive projects. The Constitutional Court [declared](#) the situation of human rights defenders "unconstitutional in December 2023, demanding urgent measures from the State to protect them."

The right to freedom of assembly remains controversial. While protests—such as those that [took place](#) during [COP16](#) and the October [2024 peasant](#) strike—have led to political advances, such as [Decree 1231](#) of 2024, which limits the use of police force during protests, repression persists, and excessive use of force, surveillance, and stigmatisation of protesters continue, and Congress has yet to pass comprehensive legislation to safeguard this right. The [shelving of Bill 166 of 2024](#) in May 2025 illustrates the lack of political will to institutionalise protections, given that this initiative had been the result of extensive dialogue with civil society organisations and the United Nations to prioritise an approach based on respect for human rights and guarantees for protest.

2. Legal framework supporting the work of civil society actors

The Colombian legal framework formally recognises civil society organisations, but in practice presents significant obstacles to their autonomy, sustainability and access to resources. CSOs must register in order to operate, and failure to update their information with the Chamber of Commerce can lead to their automatic dissolution, without due process, under Article 86 of the 2022-2026 National Development Plan, which provides for the dissolution of organisations that fail to comply with registration and reporting obligations, jeopardising their legal status and access to resources. These provisions have been [criticised by CSOs](#) for disproportionately affecting grassroots, territorial and ethnic organisations that face structural obstacles to compliance.

While the 1991 Constitution guarantees freedom of association, expression and participation, the regulatory landscape remains fragmented and burdensome. Reporting requirements are applied inconsistently, and smaller organisations lack the technical capacity to comply, undermining transparency and access to funding. Although there are no formal legal restrictions on access to networks or resources, power asymmetries and limited coordination mechanisms marginalise many CSOs, especially in rural areas.

The legal framework does not adequately protect CSOs from interference. The [shelving](#) of Bill 166 in May 2025, which sought to protect protest rights, illustrates the lack of political will to strengthen civil liberties. Furthermore, the presidential decree of June 2025, which called for a referendum without Senate approval, raised constitutional concerns, and more than 24 CSOs [warned](#) of threats to the institutional balance.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Access to sustainable resources remains a key challenge for CSOs in Colombia, particularly those operating in rural and conflict-affected regions. While both foreign and domestic funding is available, access to it is increasingly limited by political, regulatory and institutional barriers. International cooperation remains a vital source of support, especially for organisations defending human rights and environmental justice. However, in 2025, funding has declined sharply, particularly with the [withdrawal](#) of USAID, which has cut more than [\\$389 million](#) annually, and Germany's proposal [to reduce](#) cooperation with Colombia by 37%. These changes, driven by geopolitical shifts and donor fatigue, have disproportionately affected small and grassroots organisations.

Funding is predominantly project-based, short-term and administratively demanding. Complex reporting requirements, such as those established by [the FATF](#) on banking procedures, which

can limit the flow of financial resources, and Colombia's [special tax regime](#), require technical capacity that many CSOs lack. The National Tax Directorate increasingly treats CSOs as small and medium-sized enterprises, making registration, reporting, and income and tax declaration increasingly demanding. International donor funding is not immune to this challenge, as their reporting requirements are becoming increasingly stringent. All of this requires institutional, financial and administrative resources.

National funding mechanisms are weak. Although the [National Development Plan 2022-2026](#) contains commitments to strengthen and fund social organisations, these have not yet materialised. The Fund for Participation and Strengthening Democracy, created under Law 1757 of 2015, remains inactive. The Colombian Presidential Agency for International Cooperation (APC-Colombia) [cooperation mechanisms](#) are virtually non-existent and there is no comprehensive public policy to promote autonomous and politically neutral state funding for CSOs.

These limitations undermine the long-term sustainability, independence and effectiveness of civil society. Without reforms to simplify access, diversify funding and protect organisational autonomy, Colombia risks weakening actors that are essential for democratic governance and inclusive development.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Colombia has a formal institutional and regulatory framework that supports civil society participation, including its accession to the [Open Government Partnership](#) (2011), the adoption of [CONPES 4070](#) (2021) and the ongoing implementation of [the Fifth Open Government Action Plan](#). The Decentralisation Mission (2023-2024) [also proposed reforms](#) to improve transparency, access to information and citizen participation, some of which have been incorporated into pending national policy instruments.

Legal provisions guarantee participation and access to information, including the Law on Access to Public Information (Law 1712 of 2014). However, its implementation remains uneven. Initiatives such as the [Binding Regional Dialogues](#) (2022-2023) and the National Participation Committee (2024) have expanded consultation efforts, but [concerns](#) remain about their inclusiveness, transparency, and real influence on decision-making. Another example of improved dialogue and participation is [the agreement](#) signed in May 2024 with the ELN to include more than 8,500 leaders and 3,200 organisations in the National Participation Committee, as well as direct meetings between human rights platforms and the executive branch to discuss the security situation and conditions for humanitarian dialogue. However, feedback mechanisms are limited and civil society contributions often lack formal recognition or integration into policy outcomes.

EITI Colombia has promoted tripartite dialogue since 2014, but [recent tensions](#) and weak institutional leadership have undermined its effectiveness. Furthermore, a Constitutional Court [ruling SU-095 of 2018](#), which called on the State to guarantee citizen participation in decisions regarding the development of extractive projects, remains unimplemented, reflecting broad discrepancies between legal mandates and practice.

While the government has collaborated with social organisations on key issues, it tends to [favour](#) politically aligned actors, marginalising independent or critical voices. This undermines pluralism and weakens civil society's deliberative potential. In summary, despite institutional

advances, Colombia faces persistent challenges in ensuring meaningful, inclusive and sustained civil society participation in public decision-making.

5. Political culture and public discourse on civil society

Political culture and public discourse on civil society in Colombia are characterised by deep polarisation, which significantly influences the enabling environment for civic actors. Media [representation](#) is [ambivalent](#): while community and alternative media tend to highlight civil society's contributions to peacebuilding, environmental protection and human rights, mainstream media tend to focus on internal disputes, disruptive protests and accusations of politicisation. This dual framing positions civil society organisations as both essential actors and potential destabilisers, undermining their legitimacy and effectiveness.

The government's [discourse has oscillated](#) between recognising the historical role of civil society in promoting rights and territorial peace and advancing polarising narratives that delegitimise dissenting voices. Calls to [organise](#) 'the people' and strengthen 'popular power' have sometimes marginalised independent CSOs, reinforcing [the perception of a fragmented](#) civic space.

Public opinion reflects this clash of narratives, in which liberal democratic values compete with populist and exclusionary rhetoric. Citizen participation remains active, especially in transitional justice processes and peace negotiations, but the overall political culture tends to discourage pluralism and critical participation.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

The Colombian legal framework recognises digital rights, including internet access and freedom of expression, through data protection laws ([Laws 1266](#) and [1581](#)), cybercrime ([Law 1273](#)) and Constitutional Court [ruling T-372](#) of 2023, which addressed the protection of digital space as part of the full exercise of citizens' rights, an issue that still needs to be developed and strengthened in the country. However, shortcomings in implementation and emerging threats undermine a secure digital environment for civil society.

In 2024, a [bill](#) allowing the suspension of social media during cyber threats raised concerns about censorship and discretionary state control. Surveillance remains a serious problem: in May 2025, nine military personnel [were sanctioned](#) by the Attorney General's Office for illegally intercepting the communications of more than 130 journalists and human rights defenders, echoing long-standing concerns expressed by civil society observers.

Digital [vulnerability is serious](#). Colombia recorded more than 36 billion cyberattack attempts and more than 22,000 critical vulnerabilities in 2024, ranking fourth in Latin America in terms of exposure. Armed groups have [turned](#) digital platforms such as TikTok and WhatsApp into weapons for recruitment, intimidation and territorial control, especially in rural areas affected by conflict, further limiting the safe digital participation of civil society.

Internet [penetration in Colombia reached](#) 77.3% in early 2025, with more than 41 million users online, but marked disparities between urban and rural areas persist. While urban centres such as Bogotá and Medellín benefit from robust infrastructure and extensive mobile coverage, [only 28.8%](#) of the rural population has access to the Internet and less than 13% of rural households have fixed broadband. This digital divide limits civil society's ability to

mobilise, monitor and engage communities in peripheral regions. Data costs further exacerbate exclusion, particularly for grassroots organisations operating in remote areas, where connectivity is often [unreliable or prohibitively expensive](#). These structural inequalities limit equitable participation in digital empowerment and hinder access to essential online tools and platforms.

Digital and AI literacy among civil society actors is growing but remains uneven. Limited access to training and tools hinders the strategic use of digital technologies for advocacy, protection and innovation.

Challenges and opportunities

In the next four months, the enabling environment for civil society in Colombia will face critical turning points. Persistent threats against social leaders, journalists and human rights defenders, especially in conflict-affected regions, will continue to undermine citizen participation. Armed violence, corruption and institutional fragility will continue to jeopardise the reduction of civic space unless urgently addressed. Formal mechanisms for participation and access to information will remain underutilised, and their effectiveness will depend on strengthening public institutions and ensuring territorial equity through deeper decentralisation. However, opportunities are emerging. The ongoing formulation of public policies on citizen participation and access to information by the government represents a strategic opportunity for civil society to shape inclusive frameworks. Substantive dialogue between CSOs, donors and allies, driven by common concerns about polarisation and sustainability, will continue to foster more horizontal cooperation and collective advocacy.

The run-up to the 2026 presidential elections, which will take place in May, offers a platform to promote democratic values, alternative leadership and strengthen civil society's role as a political actor, continuing the struggle for the political inclusion of sectors that have historically been excluded from the exercise of power. Thus, new forms of citizen expression—through digital media, grassroots mobilisation and informal networks—are expanding civic space beyond traditional structures, revitalising democratic engagement from the bottom up. To take advantage of these opportunities, civil society must navigate a complex landscape: demanding that the state fulfil its duties in relation to participation and access to information as fundamental rights, which are also "bridge" rights insofar as they enable citizens to access other rights. Furthermore, the sustainability of social organisations requires favourable political and financial environments; only then can these organisations be key players in public dialogue and the co-production of transformative public actions. The state and the governments in power – at both the national and subnational levels – must regain trust and legitimacy through the exercise of power based on integrity, transparency and accountability. It is also necessary to remove violence from the exercise of politics: no more murders or threats against social, political and community leaders. The coming months will test Colombia's commitment to pluralism, respect for diversity, participation and the protection of those who defend the public good.

This publication has been funded/co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



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