



SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# Enabling Environment

## Snapshot

Sierra Leone

March 2026

## Context

Period covered by the report: August 2025- March 2026

Sierra Leone continues to function as a multi-party democracy under the 1991 Constitution. Nevertheless, the political landscape remains dominated by two long-established parties—the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) and the All People’s Congress (APC)—which have alternated in power since independence in 1961. At present, these two parties hold all seats in Parliament and the majority of positions across the country’s 22 local councils. The only exceptions are a few seats held by the People’s Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) in Kono District and the National Grand Coalition (NGC) in Kambia District.

The deterioration of the enabling environment for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) observed [throughout the past year](#) has persisted into March 2026, with little indication of improvement. Since the beginning of 2026, several notable incidents have highlighted the shrinking civic space. These include [slandering remarks](#) by Hon. Gevao of the ruling SLPP, who accused civil society leader Marcella Samba Sesay of being affiliated with the opposition APC; and the [arrest and detention](#) of environmental activist Trevor Young by the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) on cyber-bullying charges after he filmed an alleged police violation. He was detained for more than 24 hours, and upon release, the videos and photographs on his device had been deleted. In addition, journalist Melvin Tejan Mansaray [remains barred](#) from Parliament—now for over a year—by the Speaker, Hon. Sengehpor Thomas, following his criticism of the institution’s handling of the removal of former Auditor General Lara Taylor-Pearce and her deputy, Tamba Momoh. Lawyer Augustine Marrah [faces possible disbarment](#) by the General Legal Council due to his advocacy for a more independent and credible judiciary. Meanwhile, Lawyer Lansana Dumbuya is [currently on trial](#) for alleged incitement after calling President Bio a thief in connection with the disputed 2023 elections.

These incidents reflect a broader pattern of violations over the past 12 months. Continued misuse of the [Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021](#) and the [Public Order Act 1965](#) has already constrained civic freedoms; this environment is likely to worsen with the enactment of the [Counter Terrorism Act 2025](#). The police have increasingly relied on these laws, and the addition of the Counter-Terrorism Act—lacking sufficient safeguards for fundamental freedoms—poses further risks to activists and journalists who criticise the government.

## 1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

[Constitutional](#) guarantees for freedoms of expression, association, and assembly (Sections 25–26) exist, but civic space remains obstructed in practice. Over the past year, authorities have used arrests, detentions, and professional sanctions against journalists and activists, with growing reliance on public order, cybercrime, and counter-terrorism laws to deter criticism and public accountability. Key developments were:

- The 2025 CIVICUS Monitor classifies civic space in Sierra Leone as [obstructed](#).
- Sierra Leone Police (SLP) reportedly [blocked](#) public awareness efforts on the synthetic drug “Kush” slated for Friday 24 October 2025.

- On 20 August 2025, Journalist Thomas Dixon was [detained](#) and subjected to hours of interrogation following a complaint by Leone Rock Metal Group over reporting on its alleged non-payment of social security contributions.
- On 11 October 2025, Admire Bio, the president’s niece, allegedly [threatened](#) journalist Amadu Lamrana Bah over a Kush drug-related investigation.
- Ongoing use of the Cyber Security and Crime Act (2021) and the Public Order Act (1965) to restrict expression and protests.
- On 16 December 2025, the deputy Registrar of the Judiciary of Sierra Leone lodged a [formal complaint](#) with the Judicial Service Council to disbar lawyer/activist Augustine Marah (critic of the judiciary).
- On 8 January 2026, Trevor Young (environmental activist) was [arrested and detained](#) after filming alleged police misconduct.
- On 12 February and 22 February 2026 respectively, Lawyer [Lansana Dumbuya and](#) actress [Zainab Sherriff were](#) tried for alleged “incitement” after public criticism of June 2023 elections; Dumbuya was later granted bail on 16 February 2026 while Sherriff remains on remand.
- In January 2026, journalist Melvin Tejan [Mansaray completed a year banned from Parliament](#) following his criticism of the removal of the Auditor General and deputy.
- Widespread concern over the [Counter Terrorism Act, 2025](#)—alleged lack of safeguards; fears of use to criminalise dissent; reports claim the Act was assented to without public disclosure.

These events have a systematic chilling effect on freedom of expression and assembly and they are mainly driven by policing practices and legal tools (Public Order, Cybercrime, Counter-Terrorism). Targeted arrests, professional sanctions, and institutional complaints against vocal critics create deterrence and self-censorship. The broad scope and opaque application of security legislation heighten risks that legitimate civic activity is conflated with criminality, further shrinking civic space.

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

While the [Constitution](#) affirms the right to form/join associations and unions (Section 26), the [National NGO Policy Framework](#) (2023–2028) and related administrative practices create gatekeeping, duplication, bureaucratic complexity, high compliance costs, and discretionary control, undermining CSO independence and predictability.

- Registration with the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED) is contingent upon prior [registration](#) with the Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (SLANGO), adding a gatekeeping layer critics say undermines independence.
- Organisations not with MoPED must register as companies limited by guarantee ([Corporate Affairs Commission](#)) and again with district councils, causing duplication and legal uncertainty.
- “Improvements” (sector coordination meetings; [online portal](#)) have not eased operational burdens; often creating new bottlenecks.
- A harmonised service-level agreement reduces ministry-by-ministry signing, but requires alignment with government priorities.
- Section 14 of the [National NGO Policy Framework](#) grants MoPED broad sanction powers (suspension, deregistration, refusal of re-registration) on vague, subjective grounds.

The framework centralises control and enables selective enforcement, exposing critical or independent CSOs to heightened risk. Mandatory affiliations and alignment clauses compromise autonomy, while ambiguous sanction grounds invite arbitrariness. The result is a constrained enabling environment with legal uncertainty and reduced space for pluralistic civic action.

## 3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Financial sustainability of CSOs in Sierra Leone is weak, with heavy reliance on a narrow pool of international donors, recent reductions in external aid, and bypass of local CSOs by INGOs. Government incentives reportedly favour service-delivery groups aligned with authorities, while most CSOs lack diversified revenue streams.

- Key funders in early 2026: EU, Irish Aid, UNDP, GIZ; intermediaries include Trócaire, International IDEA, Christian Aid.
- On 25 February 2025, the UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced [UK aid cuts](#) from 0.5% to 0.3% of Gross National Income and refocusing (e.g., to defence/climate) with [reduced or ended assistance](#) in education, health, and energy by end-2026; US support to CSO activities is described as minimal for the near term.
- Multiple INGOs/IGOs implement directly, limiting local CSO funding roles (e.g., Welthunger Hilfe, CRS, NDI, Plan International, Save the Children, UNFPA).
- [NGO Policy Art. 9.1.2](#) allows for government financial incentives, reportedly channelled to [non-critical](#), service-delivery organisations.
- Many CSOs lack capacity to compete for grants; only a few diversify income (room rentals, small enterprises, farms). Example: Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) rents meeting rooms to cover operating costs; other local groups pursue [agriculture/production](#) to sustain operations.

The shrinking and externally driven funding base presented above undermines resilience. Donor realignments and INGO direct delivery crowd out local leadership, while incentive structures disincentivise accountability work. Without capacity strengthening and revenue diversification, many CSOs will struggle to maintain advocacy and service delivery, threatening the sector’s long-term viability.

## 4. State openness and responsiveness

Government–CSO engagement is selective and inconsistent, often shaped by political convenience. While there are islands of collaboration (e.g., NGO Week, IWD planning), access to information is uneven, and security-related laws are used to constrain critical participation.

- Legal anchors: [Access to Information Act](#) (2013); [Constitution Section 5\(2\)\(e\)](#) and Section 13(i).
- Centre for Human Rights and Democracy International (CHRDI) requested court records on appeals from the Commissions of Inquiry (2020) since August 21 2025—illustrating transparency gaps in the judiciary system.
- The State collaborates with aligned CSOs; discretion in partner selection persists.
- Melvin Tejan Mansaray remains [banned from Parliament](#) for critical reporting.
- Trevor Young [was arrested](#) in January 2026 over a police-related video and charged with cyber-bullying.
- The Ministry of Information and Civic Education’s [press briefings](#) and Presidential town halls reportedly restrict who can question/participate.
- Passage of Counter-Terrorism Law regardless of [CSO/media objections](#) fuels [concerns](#) of shrinking space for dissent.
- MoPED [partnered](#) with local and international Non-Governmental Organisations such as [Forum for African Women Educationalist \(FAWE\)](#), [Green Scenery](#), and [Defence for Children International](#), etc. to celebrate the [NGO Week](#) (Feb 2026) which featured health walks, workshops and meetings to showcase the contributions of CSOs and NGOs across the country.
- The Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs engaged CSOs including CGG to plan and organise a series of events in commemoration of International Women’s Day on 8 March.
- Platforms like the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI) and Open Government Partnership (OGP) signal openness but suffer weak enforcement and limited redress for denied requests.
- [Counter Terrorism Act 2025](#), [Public Order Act 1965](#), and [Cyber Security & Crime Act 2021](#) (Section 44) are cited as restricting space for transparency and critical engagement.

Overall, government engagement with CSOs appears performative in parts, with symbolic openness but limited structural access for independent oversight. Weak compliance with

information rights and reliance on security legislation erode trust and accountability. The net effect is narrowed participation, particularly for watchdog and governance-focused CSOs.

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

Public discourse towards accountability-oriented CSOs and journalists is frequently adversarial, featuring smear campaigns, bans, and legal pressure. Despite this, civil society remains active, networked, and inclusive in many thematic areas.

- Government messaging tends to valorise service delivery CSOs while questioning those demanding accountability.
- The Chairperson of National Elections Watch (NEW) and Executive Director of the Campaign for Good Governance Marcella Samba Sesay [faced public attacks](#) from supporters of the SLPP since the [release of the PVT](#) by NEW in the June 2023 elections, including as recently as 4 March 2026 from MP Hon Gevao [accusing her](#) of being an opposition party member.
- NEW was subjected to heightened scrutiny by Parliament's leadership, including by the Deputy Speaker of Parliament [Hon Ibrahim Tawa Conteh](#) who, on 27 February 2026 requested proper scrutiny by Parliament of its [governance and operations](#); NEW also reported being marginalised in key electoral processes (census planning, EMB reforms).
- Nonetheless, CSOs [operate across diverse sectors](#) with coalitions and inclusion (gender, disability rights) limiting internal marginalisation.

An official public narrative that casts critics as partisan or destabilising encourages self-censorship and discourages citizen engagement with watchdog CSOs. Institutional gatekeeping (e.g., bans, selective access) narrows deliberation. The sector's collaborative networks and inclusion norms provide resilience, but cannot fully offset the hostile discourse.

## 6. Access to a secure digital environment

The digital environment has deteriorated, with arrests/detentions tied to online expression and selective enforcement of cyber laws. The [Counter Terrorism Act 2025](#) risks further conflating civic speech with security threats, amplifying self-censorship.

- Cases include Thomas Dixon's CID [invitation/detention](#) on 20 August 2025 over Leone Rock Metal Group reporting.
- Notwithstanding Constitutional and international commitments (UDHR, ICCPR, African Charter), the [Cybercrime Act](#) of 2021 and the [1965 Public Order Act](#) are frequently used to target activists, journalists, and CSOs critical of the government online.
- Jan 2026: Trevor Young arrested after posting a video of police interaction; later released on bail pending investigation.
- On 4 February 2026, All Peoples Congress (APC) Secretary-General was arrested/detained following remarks at a party meeting. He was initially charged for "[cyber bullying](#)" the President but he was released, only to be rearrested and charged later for incitement.
- Section 44 of the Cybercrime Law has reportedly been applied selectively to protect officials/families while [ignoring pro-government harassment](#); cited in cases like Lansana Dumbuya, who was first arrested and detained on 4 February 2026 on [cyber bullying allegations](#), for comments he made on 31 January 2026.
- The Counter Terrorism Act 2025 lacks a clear line between protected civic activity and terrorism; social media activism is seen as a target for clampdowns.

Digital governance tools are being weaponised to deter and punish critical expression. The selective and expansive application of cyber and counter-terrorism provisions fosters legal



uncertainty and self-censorship, undermining safe online participation and reducing the effectiveness of digital accountability campaigns.

## Challenges and Opportunities

In the months ahead, CSOs in Sierra Leone are likely to face continued pressure as government scrutiny and the use of restrictive laws—particularly the Cyber Security and Crime Act 2021, the Public Order Act 1965, and the Counter-Terrorism Act 2025—intensify. Activists and organisations engaging on governance, rights, and accountability are expected to remain at heightened risk. Financial constraints will also persist as global development funding contracts, forcing many CSOs to scale down or adjust their activities.

Despite these challenges, opportunities remain. Resilient networks—such as the Budget Advocacy Network and National Election Watch—are well-placed to sustain accountability work. CSOs can explore alternative financing through crowdfunding and social enterprise models, while leveraging international platforms to draw attention to civic-space restrictions. Domestically, renewed engagement with government on regulatory reforms, including the NGO Framework, and advocacy for legislation protecting human rights defenders could help gradually reopen space for more transparent and inclusive civic participation.

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