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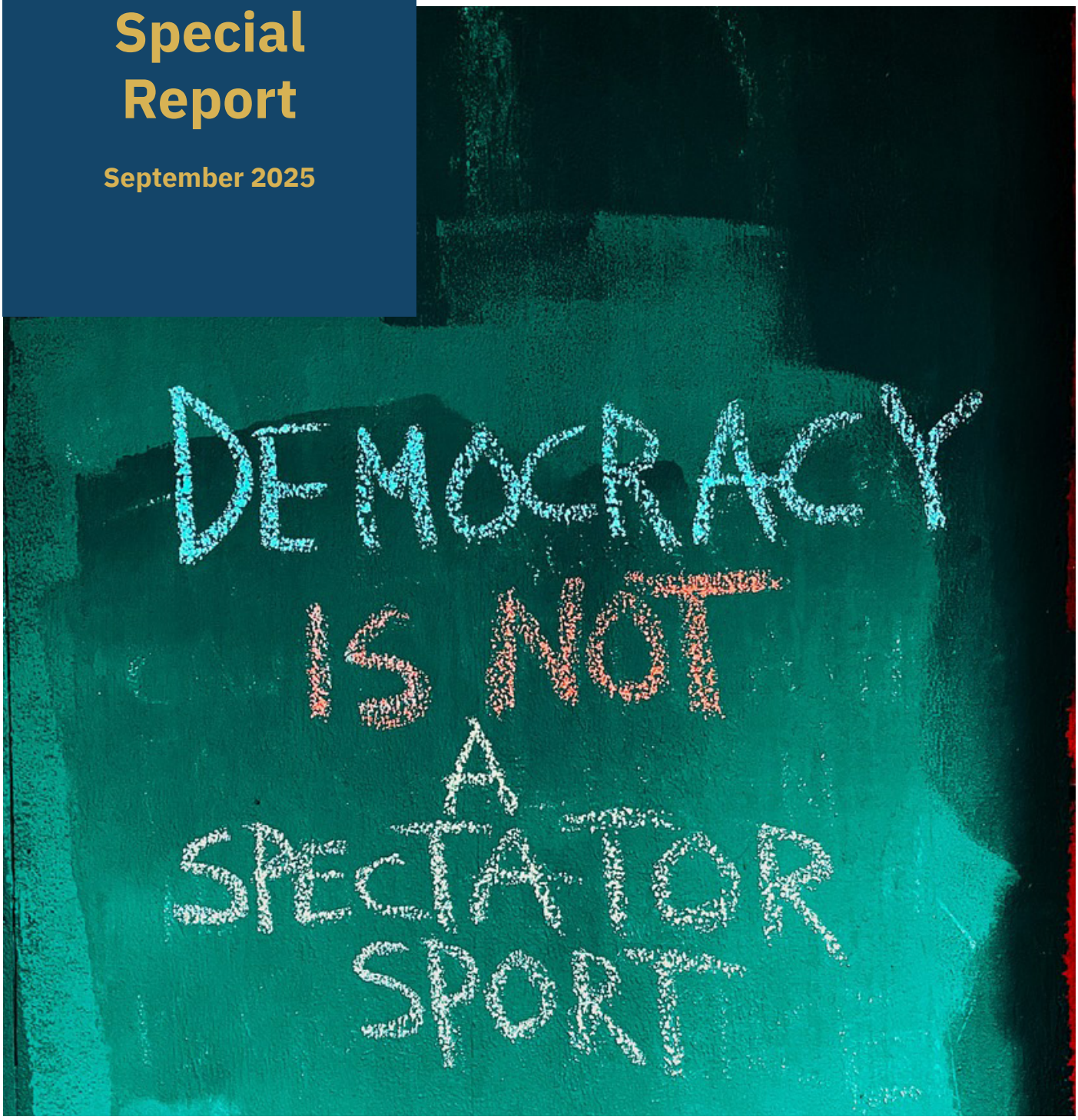

Democracy and Civil Society in Southern Africa: Strengthening Democracy by Bolstering Civil Society Solidarity

ISABEL BOSMAN-BURNETT

African perspectives
Global insights

SAIIA 90 EST.1934

Executive summary

Because of the number of elections that took place across the world in 2024, it was labelled 'the year of democracy'. However, instead of painting a picture of thriving democracy, 2024 only confirmed that democracy is in trouble and elections alone are not a measure of health for democratic governance. In Africa, especially, there is widespread public agreement on the value of democracy and its place as a model of government, yet people are growing increasingly frustrated with the failure of democratic governance over the past few decades to deliver on the socio-economic and human rights it promised.

Noting global democratic backsliding, this special report investigates the role of civil society in strengthening democratic governance and asks whether greater civil society solidarity could lead to greater democratic consolidation. It draws on the opinions of youth, consulted by SAIIA over two days in 2024, to shed light on the future of democracy in Southern Africa and offers insights on whether youth feel that human rights are respected and their opinions on civil society. The report also elaborates on civil society networks working to promote democracy on the continent and elsewhere to answer the guiding question of this publication: does Southern Africa need a dedicated civil society network to strengthen democracy?

Abbreviations & acronyms

AU	African Union
AI	artificial intelligence
APRM	African Peer Review Mechanism
CDD-Ghana	Centre for Democratic Development Ghana
CGE	Commission for Gender Equality
CHARM	Consortium to Protect Human Rights, Civic Freedoms and Media Development
CIHRS	Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
CSO	civil society organisation
ECOSOCC	AU Economic, Social and Cultural Council
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
HRD	Human Rights Defender
IDEG	Institute for Democratic Governance
IEC	Independent Electoral Commission
International IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual and other identities
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MFWA	Media Foundation for West Africa
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PB	participatory budgeting
REDHAC	Réseau des Défenseurs des Droits Humains en Afrique Centrale
SADC	Southern African Development Community
Saf-CNGO	Southern African Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (formerly SADCCNGO)
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
WACSI	West Africa Civil Society Initiative
WACSOF	West Africa Civil Society Forum
WADEMOS	West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network
WAHRDN	West African Human Rights Defenders Network
WANEP	West Africa Network for Peacebuilding

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About SAIIA

SAIIA is an independent, non-government think tank whose key strategic objectives are to make effective input into public policy, and to encourage wider and more informed debate on international affairs, with particular emphasis on African issues and concerns.

SAIIA'S special reports are fairly lengthy analytical papers, usually reflecting on and analysing the findings of field research.

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CHAPTER 1*

Introduction

In 2024 elections were held in more than 60 countries, engaging roughly 49% of the world's population[1] and earning it the moniker 'the year of democracy'. But democracy revolves around more than just elections and the presence of elections does not necessarily equal the full presence of democracy. In the full presence of democracy, elections translate the wishes of voters, whether in favour of incumbents or not. In addition, human rights and the rule of law are upheld and respected; the media is free to investigate, report and critique; people are free to assemble and voice their opinions; and their basic needs and rights are met. In several countries globally, peaceful and well-executed elections mask the fact that freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, transparency, representation and human rights – all fundamental democratic values – are often disrespected. In some instances, incumbents are willing to violate each one of these values for the gain of the political elite. In other cases, violent and badly run elections speak more openly to violations of the core structures of democracy.

> Countries can only be said to be truly democratic when the full array of values associated with democracy is upheld

The value attached to elections on their own as a sign of democratic governance is misplaced. Countries can only be said to be truly democratic when the full array of values associated with democracy (such as those mentioned above) is upheld. For roughly the past two decades, performance on the latter has been poor. A global democratic recession is said to have started in 2005,[2] and the so-called year of democracy did little to stall further democratic setbacks. For researchers at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), the recorded declines in democratic governance 'raise concerns in the context of an elections super-cycle year'.[3]

1 Koh Ewe, "The Ultimate Election Year: All the Elections Around the World in 2024", *Time*, December 28, 2023.

2 Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press, "Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding" (Working Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2022).

3 Global State of Democracy Initiative, *The Global State of Democracy 2024: Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty*, Report (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2024), 14.

Writing on the global state of democracy in 2024, International IDEA notes that 'the plight of democracy continues'.[4] The number of countries recording democratic advances remains lower than the number recording declines – a balance that has remained misaligned since 2017.[5] For example, the institute finds that 82 countries 'suffered a decline in at least one second-level factor of democratic performance' in 2023, while only 52 showed improvement in at least one factor.[6] The biggest declines were found to occur in the 'representation' and 'rights' categories, with 'credible elections and effective parliament', 'economic equality', 'freedom of expression' and 'freedom of the press' registering the biggest declines in the representation and rights categories, respectively.[7] These findings tie in with those of the Ibrahim Index of African Governance 2024, which notes that, over 10 years, progress was recorded 'for just over half (52.1%) of Africa's population, deterioration for the remaining half'.[8]

International IDEA relies on a 'category' (top-level) and 'factors' (second-level) classification system for the indices it draws on. There are four top-level indices: representation, rights, rule of law and participation. At the second level, under each of these categories, the following factors are grouped, plus several 'component indices' included at a 'lower level aggregation'.[9]

TABLE 1 FIRST- AND SECOND-LEVEL INDICES OF DEMOCRACY AS USED BY INTERNATIONAL IDEA FOR ITS GLOBAL STATE OF DEMOCRACY ASSESSMENTS

TOP LEVEL	**Representation**	**Rights**	**Rule of law**	**Participation**
		Access to justice		
		Civil liberties		
SECOND LEVEL (with component indices included)	Credible elections	» Freedom of religion	Judicial independence	Civil society
	Inclusive suffrage	» Freedom of the press	Personal integrity and security	Civic engagement
	Free political parties	» Freedom of association and assembly	Predictable enforcement	Electoral participation
	Elected government	» Freedom of movement	Absence of corruption	
	Effective parliament	» Freedom of expression		
	Local democracy	Basic welfare		
		Political equality		
		» Gender equality		
		» Social group equality		
		» Economic equality		

Source: Compiled by the author based on International IDEA, "About the GSoD Indices", accessed July 25, 2025, https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/about-the-gsod-indices

4 Global State of Democracy Initiative, *Global State of Democracy*, 13.
5 Global State of Democracy Initiative, *Global State of Democracy*.
6 Global State of Democracy Initiative, *Global State of Democracy*, 13.
7 Global State of Democracy Initiative, *Global State of Democracy*, 13.
8 Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *2024 IIAG: Key Findings*, Report (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, October 2024), 8.
9 International IDEA, "About the GSoD Indices", accessed July 29, 2025, https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/about-the-gsod-indices.

Since the mid-2000s, a steady downturn in the percentage of countries advancing democratically is observed, with a notable rise in countries showing a decline. This is captured in the data on countries showing advances and declines at the factor level, gathered by International IDEA over several decades.

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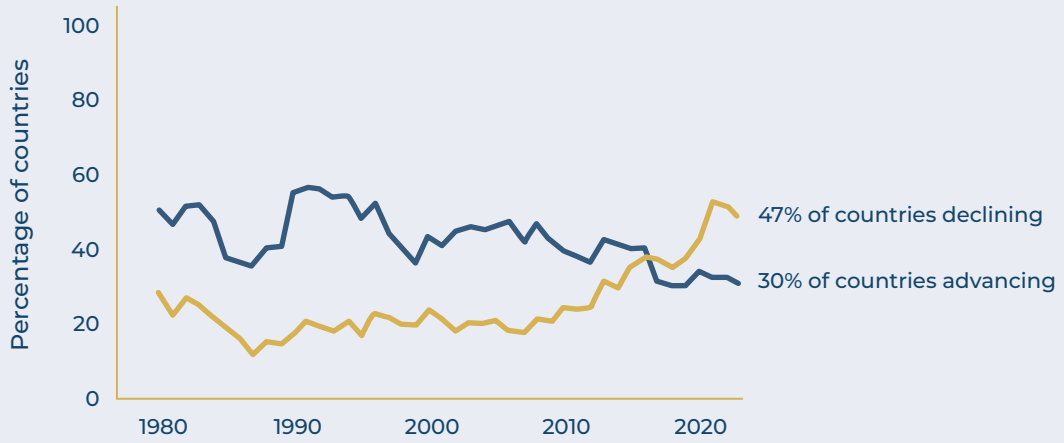
Figure 1 Advances and declines observed by International IDEA at the factor level (1980–)



Source: Global State of Democracy Initiative, *The Global State of Democracy 2024: Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty*, Report (International IDEA, 2024), 13

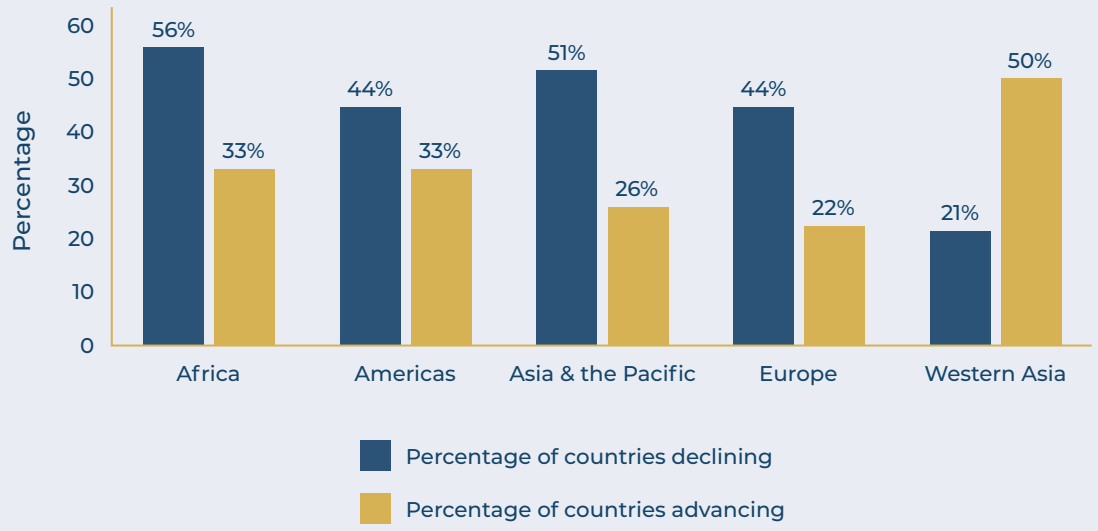
A worrying trend can be observed over the past two decades (approximately), when democratic decline started overtaking progress and democratic consolidation, and consistently so. These changes are not confined to specific regions but observed in every part of the globe. The statistics for Africa speak to the reality of the condition of its democratic structures. In the five years spanning 2018 to 2023, the continent registered the most declines – not surprising given the resurgence of coups in the Sahel and West Africa.[10] The number of popular uprisings against authoritarian policies, such as those in

10 Global State of Democracy Initiative, *Global State of Democracy*.

Kenya and Nigeria in recent years, also indicate democratic decline – and the resolve of the people in response to this. Democratic decline on the African continent is also observed through the growing number of disputed electoral outcomes, questionable electoral administration, narrowing civic space, and coups and term elongations. Other indicators are voter apathy – the result of citizen dissatisfaction with governments' failures to perform the duties for which they were elected – and infringement on democratic freedoms.

The declines in representation recorded by International IDEA are an example of this. According to the *Global State of Democracy Report 2024*, 'mid-range-performing countries' – such as those in Africa – registered the most declines in the factors under this category. Narrowing it down to factors considered part of representation, Africa performed the worst in the area of credible elections. A total of 21 countries, 40% of the total, 'performed at a significantly worse level than they had five years before'.[11] Furthermore, while legal challenges to election outcomes were global in nature, Africa recorded the most. Of all the elections in Africa between 2020 and 2024, only 28.6% were not disputed.[12]

Figure 2 Advances and declines in at least one factor (2018–2023)



Source: Global State of Democracy Initiative, *The Global State of Democracy 2024: Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty*, Report (International IDEA, 2024), 14

While it would be misguided to equate democracy with elections, the conduct surrounding elections is where signs of democratic decline generally become most apparent. It is a phenomenon so prominent that experts refer to developments in

11 Global State of Democracy Initiative, *Global State of Democracy*, 20.
12 Global State of Democracy Initiative, *Global State of Democracy*.

Southern Africa – home to flawed rather than full democracies – as 'electorisation rather than "genuine democracy"'.[13] These democracies are flawed in part owing to the emphasis placed on elections, but also because participation is low and voters are apathetic; rights are not equally accessible; separation of power is not always respected, etc. This is likely what has led many Africans to lose faith in the ability of elections to convey their voices. Afrobarometer data indicates that less than 50% of survey participants from 34 African countries believe elections can remove under-performing leaders (44%) and ensure that government representatives are reflective of the wishes of the electorate (42%).[14]

While it would be misguided to equate democracy with elections, the conduct surrounding elections is where signs of democratic decline generally become most apparent

Table 2 Disputed elections, by region (May 2020 to April 2024)

Region	Percentage of legal challenges
Africa	45%
Americas	23%
Asia and the Pacific	7%
Europe	20%
West Asia	5%

Source: Global State of Democracy Initiative, *The Global State of Democracy 2024: Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty*, Report (International IDEA, 2024), 120

Yet despite these setbacks, African states have also registered democratic advances that should not be forgotten. The number of women in parliaments and the executive is increasing. Consider, for example, Namibia's election of a woman president in 2024, while Ghana's vice president, Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang, is the first woman to hold this position in the country's history. Apart from numerous female acting heads of state, Africa also boasts Ameenah Gurib-Fakim (Mauritius), Joyce Banda (Malawi), Sahle-Work Zewde (Ethiopia), Samia Suluhu Hassan (Tanzania) and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia) as past or present woman presidents. Rwanda and South Africa lead the continent in terms

13 Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance and Kofi Annan Foundation, *Democracy in Central and Southern Africa*, Conference Report (Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance and Kofi Annan Foundation, January 2020).

14 Afrobarometer, "Africans Want More Democracy, but Their Leaders Still Aren't Listening" (Policy Paper 85, Afrobarometer, January 2023).

of woman representatives in Parliament with 63.8% and 44.7% respectively.[15] Peaceful transitions of power such as that witnessed in Botswana in 2024, as well as the African National Congress's acceptance of South Africa's election outcome in 2024 when it lost its majority and formed a government of national unity, are further testament that there is yet hope.

The biggest indicator of the future of democracy on the continent is the support it has from Africa's people, the citizens who vote and want to participate in democracy. Although they are sceptical about the true power of elections, as Afrobarometer data indicates, they are not sceptical about the merits of democracy as a form of government. There is overwhelming evidence in Africa that, despite the registered rapid democratic decline, democracy remains the preferred mode of government. Afrobarometer is again instructive here. Data shows that 68% of Africans prefer democracy over any other form of government and 74%, 77% and 82% of survey respondents reject military rule, one-party rule and one-person governments, respectively.[16]

Although they are sceptical about the true power of elections, they are not sceptical about the merits of democracy as a form of government

Africans are demanding greater solidarity to consolidate democratic governance and democratic values rather than closing the door on democracy all together. Existing democracies are therefore expected to be transformed into responsive, accountable institutions. Historically, civil society has been the driver of these efforts, but this once-powerful bastion of democratic values is now also at risk. During a 2019 conference on 'Democracy in Central and Southern Africa', organised by the Kofi Annan Foundation and the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance, former executive director of Section27 Mark Heywood said that civil society is 'becoming the first victim in the democratic recession'.[17] As civic space continues to narrow and government crackdowns on opposition voices increase, civil society and its ability to push for greater respect for democratic values is being threatened. The independence of civil society is waning, ultimately weakening the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) and their ability to function effectively.

15 Faith Omoboye, "Top 10 African Countries with the Highest Number of Women in National Parliaments", *Business Day NG*, March 8, 2025.

16 Afrobarometer, "Africans Want More Democracy".

17 Mark Heywood, cited in Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance and Kofi Annan Foundation, *Democracy in Central and Southern Africa*, 24.

A well-functioning civil society is vital for the health of democracy. CSOs are important platforms for conveying the voice of the people and pushing for government accountability. But it is also true that CSOs – especially in Africa – because of their dependence on donor funds, are viewed as illegitimate by some and accused of interfering on behalf of foreign powers. But bolstering CSOs can be considered an important first step in strengthening democratic governance in Southern Africa. SADC has taken initial steps toward this through its 2022 training programme on electoral assistance and the inclusion of civil society and other non-state actors in its peace and security architecture.[18]

A well-functioning civil society is vital for the health of democracy

Such opportunities for collaboration with regional institutions could enhance the capacity and credibility of civil society. Moreover, civil society has an opportunity to leverage cross-border collaboration to deepen democracy not only in the home countries of CSOs but also at the regional level. Also worth noting is the Southern African Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (Saf-CNGO, formerly SADCCNGO), a body geared towards 'facilitating effective and meaningful engagement between civil society in the region and SADC institutions at both national and regional levels'.[19]

Civil society has an opportunity to leverage cross-border collaboration to deepen democracy not only in the home countries of CSOs but also at the regional level

The observations made in this chapter link to the theme of the Drive for Democracy conference held in Arusha, Tanzania in 2022. One of the main conclusions of this conference was that to 'respond to the growing threats against Democracy in Africa, it is imperative for democratic actors in the continent to come together to co-create action towards democratisation, build solidarity and learning and influence the continental

18 SADC, "SADC Strengthens Its Democratic Processes by Including NSAs and CSOs in Its Peace and Security Architecture", Press Release, February 14, 2023.

19 Southern African Council of Non-Governmental Organisations, "Introduction and Background", accessed July 28, 2025, https://saf-cngo.org/about-us/

agenda on Democracy'.[20] While such solidarity between CSOs can already be observed in Africa, it is not an avenue towards strengthening democracy that is uniformly pursued. West Africa stands out, with democracy more actively promoted at the regional level (through ECOWAS) and through cross-border civil society networks than in other regions. However, with several withdrawals from the regional economic bloc, CSOs in these networks have a more difficult task and could find their efforts undermined.

With all these findings in mind, SAIIA set out, firstly, to identify the specific threats to democracy presenting in Southern Africa. SAIIA approached youth aged 18–35 – the future leaders of the continent – from across the region to share what they saw as the biggest threats to democracy and what changes they would like leaders and other stakeholders to make. The researchers leading this project also considered why cross-border civil society networks – the likes of which can be observed in West Africa – have not taken root in Southern Africa, while also determining whether this is indeed a path worth exploring. Without being steered towards this outcome, youth participants in the informal consultations hosted by SAIIA concluded that Southern Africa needed a cross-border civil society network that would help CSOs in the region push for greater democratic accountability and work to strengthen democratic governance.

This publication is a presentation of the findings from these consultations and subsequent research on cross-border civil society networks that promote and uphold democratic values. This chapter has sketched the background to this study and details the findings with which SAIIA approached both the consultations with youth and further research. Chapter 2 will discuss in more detail the methodology, process and outcomes of the youth consultations. Chapter 3 provides a mapping of existing cross-border civil society networks and other innovations that help CSOs better support democracy in Africa and beyond. Chapter 4 reports on the findings of fieldwork conducted by SAIIA's researchers in Accra, Ghana in 2024, when representatives from several CSOs and civil society networks were interviewed about their experiences and views on democracy in Southern Africa. It ends with conclusions about the value of cross-border civil society networks, civil society solidarity and recommendations for CSOs in Southern Africa to increase their authority and influence.

* This chapter is an extension of the concept note on which the research project that gave rise to this paper was built.

20 Africa Drive for Democracy Conference, "Fighting the Democratic Backslide Through Renewed Action and Solidarity", Concept Note & Agenda, 2.

CHAPTER 2

Youth perspectives on democracy

On 26 and 27 March 2024, SAIIA hosted informal consultations with youth aged 18–35 under the broad theme, 'Does democracy work?' The aim of these discussions was to gauge young people's perceptions of the future of democracy and democratic governance in Southern Africa. Rather than ask the broad question, 'What do you think is the future of democracy in the region?', researchers selected three general themes, each with a set of sub-questions, for the discussion.[21]

TABLE 3 CATEGORIES AND QUESTIONS POSED TO PARTICIPANTS

Democracy	Human rights	Civil society
• What do you think are the biggest threats to democracy in your country or in others? • Do you think people still believe in democracy? Are they included and heard in the current political system? Why? • Do you think there is a viable alternative to democracy? • What do you understand democracy to be? • Do you think democracy has succeeded or failed in your country? Provide a motivation for your answer? • Is democracy more than voting? • How could young people be better included in democratic processes?	• Do you think Southern African democracies uphold human rights • What do you understand human rights to be? Are they universal or Western in nature? • Is democracy the best form of government for promoting human rights? • What can be done to better defend human rights?	• How would you rate voter education by civil society organisations (CSOs) in your country? • Do CSOs cater for your needs and expectations? • What should CSOs stop doing, start doing and continue doing? • Is civil society doing enough to support democracy? • Does civil society need to change the way it does things with regard to strengthening democracy?

Participants were divided into cluster groups, and each group was given one of these three issue areas and questions for discussion. After every cluster group discussion, participants had the opportunity to hear the response of each cluster group to the

21 This chapter draws on the event report (April 2024) compiled by Arvash Sewpaul and Simphiwe Masilo following the youth consultations of 26–27 March 2024.

questions they were given and, as a larger group, contribute to a wider discussion on each question. The next session discusses the insights provided by participants over the two days of the consultations. Although each explanation builds on individual group contributions, the content of this section combines that with the feedback from the larger group discussions. Discussions took place in hybrid format to allow participants not in Gauteng province or in South Africa to take part. The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule and therefore, where direct quotes from the discussions are provided, the name and affiliation of the relevant participant are not revealed. This was done to encourage frank and open conversation.

Democracy

What do you think are the biggest threats to democracy in your country or in others?

Participants reflected on the optimism in Southern Africa following the third wave of democratisation in the late 1980s and 1990s, when it was widely believed that 'democracy will translate into democratic gains'. This is an important observation made by group members: democracy loses value when it does not deliver. Instead of there being democratic gains, participants felt democracy is in recession and referred to the bleak picture painted by the Afrobarometer data. Bad governance, they felt, has compounded issues such as exclusion, narrowing civil liberties and corruption.

> Democracy loses value when it does not deliver

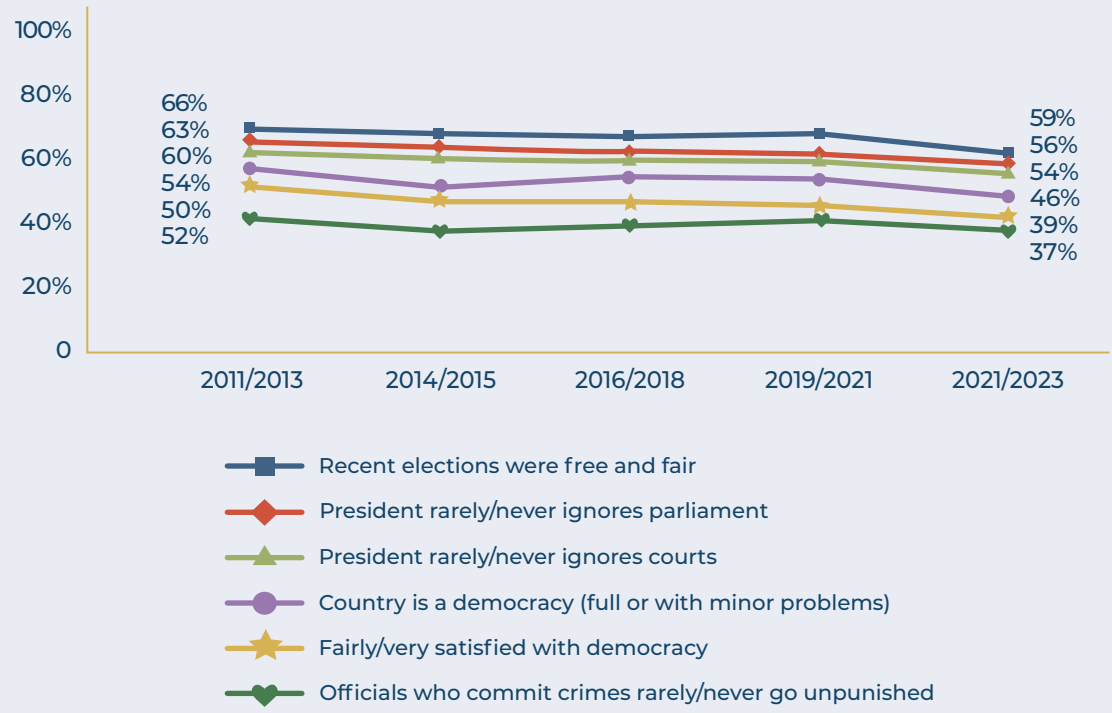
Many of the Afrobarometer findings highlighted in Chapter 1 featured in discussion participants' analogy. The findings of Afrobarometer's flagship report *African Insights 2024: Democracy at Risk – The People's Perspective* support their concerns and analysis. Over the past decade, a steady decline in democracy indicators has been recorded, in particular in the number of people who agree that their country is democratic and the number of survey respondents who feel satisfied with democracy. In the case of the former, a decline from 54% to 46% has been recorded and a decline from 50% to 39% in the latter.[22]

The first factor identified by participants as a threat to democracy in Southern Africa is technology. Participants acknowledged the many benefits and opportunities attached to technological advances, such as artificial intelligence (AI), as well as the reach and

22 Afrobarometer, *African Insights 2024: Democracy at Risk – the People's Perspective*, Report (Afrobarometer, n.d.), 14.

influence of social media and the Internet. However, they strongly felt that these are outweighed by the negative impacts of rapidly developing technology such as AI and the heavy presence of bots on social media. Microtargeting on social media, facilitated by AI, is viewed as particularly concerning. With political parties and other actors seeking public support increasingly relying on social media to reach their audiences, targeted advertising and political messaging are also at the centre of data security debates.

Figure 3 Supply of democratic norms and institutions recorded by Afrobarometer across 30 African countries (2011–2023)



Source: Afrobarometer, *African Insights 2024: Democracy at Risk – the People's Perspective*, Report (Afrobarometer, n.d.), 14. Afrobarometer notes that results for two questions (parliament and courts) do not include the countries in which they were not asked – Sudan and Burkina Faso in the case of the former, and Sudan in the case of the latter

Indeed, as the London School of Economics' Junyan Zhu and Rachel Isaacs write, '[C]oupled with an increase in campaign spending limits, and the introduction of AI in political campaigning, putting online misinformation on steroids, there are serious concerns over the impact all this will have on campaign transparency and democratic accountability.'[23]

23 Junyan Zhu and Rachel Isaacs, "Campaign Microtargeting and AI Can Jeopardise Democracy", *LSE* (blog post), May 29, 2024.

Secondly, participants highlighted transparency and accountability as risk factors, captured as 'a failure to uphold the ethics of democracy'. Reflecting on the large number of African democracies that rely on the proportional representation (PR) electoral system, participants suggested that this links to the low transparency levels and poor accountability measures they see as prevalent not just in the region but also across the continent. Participants believe that the PR electoral system does not support accountability because, rather than voters directly electing candidates, they have to select a party and leave the question of who occupies legislature seats to the parties that perform well in the polls. This emphasis on the party over the individual, participants felt, diminishes transparency. It is easier to pinpoint the source of corruption, for example, when an individual occupies a key position rather than when such positions are dominated by political parties, as governments can 'blanket' dishonest practices this way.

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Thirdly, participants discussed the definition of democracy itself and how democracy is understood. The biggest problem, in their assessment, is that 'democracy assumes equality'; voting rights may be universal, but every vote does not carry the same weight. In the view of participants, this is exemplified by the number of CSOs that are given a larger platform while others are not allowed room to engage. CSOs are meant to be representative of the various voting blocs in society, but it often seems as though their platform for engagement depends on electoral outcomes. Reflecting on South Africa, participants suggested that non-governmental organisations (NGOs, equated here with CSOs) 'are not given the ability to be effective because they're not part of the organs of the state'. They also argued that the definition of democracy undermines liberalism. In their view, democracy is not liberal. Rather, it is more utilitarian in nature, 'because we look for what is [for] the greater good of the community … [undermining] people's perceptions of people's rights'. Based on their inputs, democracy is understood in its classical description as government for the people, by the people, but also extends to encompass active participation by an interested and well-informed citizenry.

Fourthly, participants pointed to a lack of access to development. The cluster group here relied on South Africa to make their argument and posited that, at the dawn of democracy, a 'democratic developmental state' had been promised to voters. However, three decades later this has not been realised, with inequality, high living costs, rising unemployment and poverty denying people the gains democratic governance is supposed to bring. This is true of much of the region and the continent more broadly. Participants maintain that the failure to deliver socio-economic goods has led to

'disillusionment with the idea of a democracy'. One participant issued a warning: 'A democracy that cannot deliver also leaves room for alternative ways of governance.' Related to the issues already listed, participants also identified disputed elections as a threat to democracy in Southern Africa. Elections, they suggested, have lost much of their credibility and are not representative.

> Inequality, high living costs, rising unemployment and poverty are denying people the gains democratic governance is supposed to bring

Finally, participants discussed the exclusion of and limitations on youth participation, as well as the prevailing political apathy among youth, as a combined threat to democracy. Young people are reluctant to trust democratic institutions and feel that elections have few positive results. There was also a generally shared feeling that youth is not politically educated. Much of this has to do with limitations on the functioning of CSOs, which participants felt are not respected by governments. Youth should be active in civil society but have lost interest and become ignorant.

> By addressing socio-economic inequalities, people will be able to participate politically and with strong regulatory frameworks, technology can work for democracy rather than against it

To mitigate these threats, the cluster group proposed dedicated outreach and education programmes for youth, especially in rural areas, to school young people in political participation and create citizens that are active and interested in the politics of their country. To allow this to happen, it is necessary to better support civil society and widen the platform for their engagement. The cluster group also said that socio-economic progress should be prioritised and technology used and governed in a responsible manner. By addressing socio-economic inequalities, people will be able to participate politically and with strong regulatory frameworks, technology can work for democracy rather than against it.

Figure 4 Threats to democracy identified by youth

Source: Compiled by author

Do you think people still believe in democracy? Are they included and heard in the current political system? Why?

In discussing this question, the cluster group and the larger group of participants agreed that, while trust in democratically elected governments is waning, people still believe in the idea of democracy. There is, however, a demographic deficit in this belief. Support for democracy is most at risk of declining among Africa's youth. Trust in public institutions has been eroded and, by extension, trust in democracy is starting to crack.

> While trust in democratically elected governments is waning, people still believe in the idea of democracy

One participant remarked that, in their view, 'democracy as a concept always tends to have a lifespan'. And while the core tenets of democracy should remain in place, it needs to adapt; however, 'you have people who won't let it adapt'. The latter comment was in reference to the high number of liberation leaders in Southern Africa still in power decades later. Older people are clinging to power rather than stepping aside to let a new generation govern. Participants expressed frustration with the status quo and felt that older generations – their parents and grandparents – had experienced working democracy whereas they were living in a failing system where former liberators are now oppressing youth. Another participant suggested that perhaps the problem is not democracy but rather that power corrupts.

> To ensure the longevity of democracy in Africa it is necessary to change tactics and expand initiatives for youth inclusion and political participation

Participants viewed as problematic the abuse of democracy for personal gain, saying that there is a misconception about the nature of democracy and whom it is meant to serve. What faith remains in democracy is put at risk by the failure of many democratic African governments to deliver on the socio-economic needs and basic human rights of their citizens; by democratic declines in some of the world's largest and oldest democracies, such as the US; and by weak accountability measures.

Another participant warned against the trap of comparing Africa's mere decades-old democracies with older democracies like those of Europe or that of the US, saying that

'Africa's institutionalisation of democracy is still too young for us to lose hope at this point'. This comparison is moot, in their analysis, because 'it's not the same barometer, and that's always where we struggle, when we start comparing ourselves to pears but we're bananas'. To ensure the longevity of democracy in Africa – and to spark a change of heart among youth losing faith in democracy – it is necessary to change tactics and expand initiatives for youth inclusion and political participation.

The democratic system is not as inclusive as it should be. Nor is it representative. Youth representation in government is low and participants felt that the issues that matter to them are not often taken up by government. Even when they are, it is only done superficially. Participants added that the modes of communication available to the electorate and government representatives – what they termed 'abstract entities' – are not sufficient and the full potential of their interaction is not realised. Government spending is also not allocated correctly, in their assessment, missing important targets that will improve unemployment rates and inequality. In addition, participants felt meaningful youth participation is prevented because the inclusion of youth in politics is peripheral at best. Civic education programmes targeted at youth were again posited as tools to improve not only youth inclusion but also their interest in participation and views of democracy.

Do you think there is a viable alternative to democracy?

This question, the most provocative on the list, was informed by Afrobarometer data that concluded that Africans still regard democracy as the best form of government. It was posed to gauge how critical participants are of democracy and whether its shortcomings will push them to advocate against it.

Participants agreed that democracy has many faults, but the consensus was that there is no viable alternative. They also suggested that democracy is the only form of government that can balance the interests of different classes of society, suggesting that it creates a type of hierarchy that is respected and that allows it to function.

Exploring the question, though, the cluster group argued that, if democracy were not on the table and they had to choose another form of government, monarchy would be the best choice, as they felt it would offer stability. A monarch could task liaisons with finding out what their subjects wanted and then reporting back. The monarch would then be responsible for making that happen. But even this suggestion was faced with the issue of how to hold that monarch accountable and how to prevent them from outstaying their welcome.

Participants suggested that, rather than overhauling the entire system, making democracy more deliberative would be the better alternative. Deliberative democracy is a form of democratic government where citizens, through reasoned debate and an exchange of ideas, work to create outcomes that advance the common good. So, rather than simply being given the opportunity to comment on proposed legislation – as

participants pointed out, using South Africa as an example – citizens would engage in discourse and the outcomes of such deliberations would then become the action items of politicians. Deliberative democracy would still balance the many interests of a society, but citizens would be more directly involved in shaping the instruments and institutions through which they are governed.

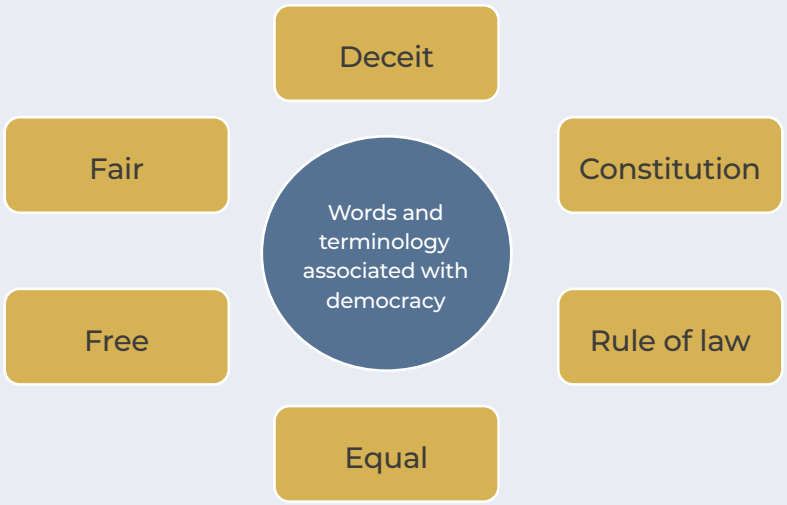
One participant said that 'democracy is the only form of government that may work, based [on] the simple fact that [it] is the only form of government that allows change'. In the monarchy example, an ageing monarch may find it harder to adapt to changing circumstances, for example. In their assessment, democracy aligns with one of the most consistent human characteristics: change. Other forms of government are simply too 'rigid'.

What do you understand democracy to be?

Cluster groups on the first day of the discussions were asked to suggest one word they associate with democracy. The results were largely positive and the responses standard, except for one answer that stood out – 'deceit'. It is no secret that politics is a game of deception, but the association of this word with democracy is concerning. If people feel deceived by elected leaders, will this not erode democracy further?

People may feel deceived by democracy because of the failure to meet the socio-economic needs of citizens; corruption; abuse of power; refusals to step down; disputed elections; and the myriad concerns and threats listed by youth participants. If this is indeed the case, it is even more important to heed their calls and that of the institutions dedicated to studying democracy and commenting on its wellbeing.

Figure 5 What youth associate with the word 'democracy'



Source: Compiled by author

Do you think democracy has succeeded or failed in your country? Provide a motivation for your answer

Members of the cluster group dealing with this question were South African and therefore their answer was informed by the country's democratic experience. Their conclusion was not definitive but can rather be interpreted as suggesting that democracy is failing in some crucial respects and succeeding in others. In terms of progress, participants viewed South Africa's constitution as progressive and exemplary and singled out the value of its 'Chapter 9 institutions' and Bill of Rights.

Chapter 9 institutions, named for the ninth chapter of South Africa's constitution, are independent and neutral bodies established to guard and uphold democratic processes and the Bill of Rights.[24] They are the:

- Auditor-General
- Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)
- Commission for Gender Equality
- Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities
- Office of the Public Protector
- South African Human Rights Commission

The existence of these provisions in the constitution of South Africa is a success but, in participants' assessment, the failure lies in the implementation of several constitutional provisions. The Bill of Rights (Chapter 2 of the constitution), for example, makes provision for democratic rights such as freedom of assembly and of speech, and covers other basic human rights such as housing, healthcare, water, education and social security. However, many South Africans still lack adequate housing, running water and sanitation systems, the public healthcare system is poorly organised and slow, and education – especially tertiary education – remains out of reach for many. South Africa's constitution also makes provision for institutions responsible for implementation, but the country's second African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) Country Review Report of 2022 found that 'access to these institutions and services is still constrained'[25] and implementation of the provisions of the Bill of Rights often lacking. Access to justice is highlighted as a particular concern and corruption in key public institutions leaves citizens feeling hopeless.[26] Here participants referred to protest action, widespread in South Africa, as a sign of democratic progress, but one that highlights the failures of democracy. In their view, protests are the

24 We The People South Africa, "Chapter 9: State Institutions Supporting Constitutional Democracy", accessed July 28, 2025, https://ourconstitution.wethepeoplesa.org/chapter-9-state-institutions-supporting-constitutional-democracy/.

25 African Peer Review Mechanism, *South Africa Second-Generation Country Review Report* (APRM, 2022), xiv.

26 APRM, *South Africa Second-Generation*.

'essence of demanding development, an urge for development, an urge for better and an urge for holding our leaders to account'. To ensure that protests are truly successful, a more intersectional approach is needed. By this, participants meant that political action should be organised to reflect people's social identities and keep in mind issues of gender and race, as well as sexual orientation.

> Protests are the 'essence of demanding development, an urge for development, an urge for better and an urge for holding our leaders to account'

The successes and failures of democracy, participants maintained, are best illustrated by civil society in South Africa. Civil society supports democracy and promotes democratic values, working in communities to enhance political literacy and make their concerns heard. Participants felt that the power of civil society is especially evident in grassroots movements and on social media. They highlighted Project Youth SA, a social media-driven platform for mobilising youth, offering information on what is happening in the country (for example, where and how to register to vote; what is the State of the Nation address?) and providing a platform for youth engagement and bringing youth issues to Parliament. Civil society is viewed as filling the gaps left by political parties, which often fail to speak to the needs of the people and take their voices seriously. However, CSOs also attest to the failures of democracy in that they are limited in what they can do and heavily dependent on external funding, which tends to come with conditions attached.

Funding for civil society was singled out as a particularly serious challenge – participants viewed funding as being directly related to impact. The source of civil society funding also links to how CSOs are perceived by governments. Some are viewed as pushing a particular political agenda based on their funders' priorities, especially if these funders are from the West. Participants view the ideals of many Western funders as contradictory to the interests of African democracy, suggesting that their interpretation of democracy is narrow and rigid. To participants, democracy is evolving and needs to be adaptable, but various Western ideals are being imposed on African CSOs. Participants maintained that the understanding of democracy directly relates to how development is understood and African states and CSOs should have more agency in defining that on their own. Participants' response to this question left much to consider in terms of bolstering homegrown funding for civil society. There are several institutions that support NGOs financially while some CSOs in South Africa, such as AfriForum, rely primarily on membership fees. Additionally, the National Development Agency in South Africa also has funding available for CSOs.

Is democracy more than voting?

Participants concluded that democracy is sometimes conflated with voting because that is when most people feel the most democratically active, ie, when they feel they are participating directly in democracy. In addition, during election periods, political parties become more vocal about issues and campaign more actively for support. However, participants felt that this is misleading, especially in Southern Africa, where campaigning involves empty promises and the handing out of food parcels and T-shirts in rural areas. One participant asked: 'How does that present democracy to the young people? Isn't that showing how corrupt the system is?' This situation is especially disheartening for young people in rural areas and townships who, participants felt,

> are very demotivated when it comes to elections, because they know that when it's election time, that's the only time democracy matters. That's the only time they are being valued. That's the only time where they are seen to exist.

Participants felt strongly that democracy extends beyond voting and justified this by considering actions that demonstrate 'commitment to exercising our democratic right'. This includes 'being law-abiding citizens, being involved in advocacy and activism, our role in civil society and in our communities, our investment and commitment to participating and accountability and transparency factors' as well as 'being able to influence these structures that will probe for more transparency and accountability to also encourage good governance'. They viewed paying taxes as another responsibility that helps individuals and fellow citizens enjoy the benefits of democratic government.

In their analysis, people have a responsibility to themselves and their communities to exercise their democratic rights – not just when it comes to elections but also in their day-to-day lives. When democracy is taken to only mean voting, people neglect their responsibilities and fail to exercise their democratic rights. To function as intended, democracy needs people to support it by participating beyond elections. There are many examples from across the continent (and elsewhere) of elections being manipulated. Voting by itself therefore cannot be considered a true measure of democracy.

How could young people be better included in democratic processes?

In many ways, participants touched on this question in their responses to other questions. What stands out from their feedback is their strong feelings about youth exclusion and youth's disinterest in participation because of how democracy is presented and managed. Youth (generally) have lost interest in democratic engagement because they no longer believe that government can provide for their needs. Corruption, poor service delivery, misguided public spending, underdevelopment, high cost of living, high unemployment levels and representation deficits all contribute to the hopelessness many young people feel about their governments and the future of their countries.

One of the biggest areas that need attention if youth inclusion is to be improved is civic engagement. Youth-driven civic engagement efforts would automatically make it more youth-inclusive and should be encouraged. Awareness raising among youth using platforms and tools familiar and attractive to them is an important step towards this. Another aspect that should be considered is the role that economic inequality plays in keeping youth from participating in democratic processes. It is not always possible for all young people to access the spaces where they can voice their concerns, as their economic situation prevents them from doing so. Things that seem basic to people in Global North countries – electricity access, digital literacy and access to digital technology, data for online participation and affordable public transport – are out of reach for many in Africa and can become serious hurdles to participation and inclusion.

Youth consultations 26–27 March 2024 (image Bulevard Productions)

Youth participation in elections is also declining because of the belief that voting does not make a difference because they do not see change. When support for this most fundamental democratic act has been lost, it is hard to expect participation in other aspects of democracy. Yet this is precisely where the mistake lies. By becoming more actively involved in civil society and engaging with like-minded citizens on solutions to their problems, young people may be more inspired to participate in other ways and begin to see more value in the power of voting. Participants also felt that there is a disconnect between government and citizens and that legislation is not always reflective of the sentiments of society. Laws that are inherently exclusive do not contribute to

creating an environment in which young people can and want to participate. A further concern of participants was that, in Southern Africa, commitments rarely make it beyond the paper on which they are written and leaders over-promise instead of delivering on the commitments they make.

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Human rights

Do you think Southern African democracies uphold human rights?

Participants felt that this was a 'loaded question' and concluded that the answer is complex. To answer the question, the cluster group started with another question of their own formulation – 'Whose human rights?' Their argument was that upholding human rights for one group can come at the expense of the rights of another. Moreover, participants believe that, even in countries labelled as democracies, the rights of marginalised groups such as women, children and LGBTQIA+ persons are not upheld and respected. Legislation surrounding these groups can also be at odds with social norms in a country.

It is also the case that many people are not aware of their rights, meaning that they do not know that they can demand certain things from government or how to do so

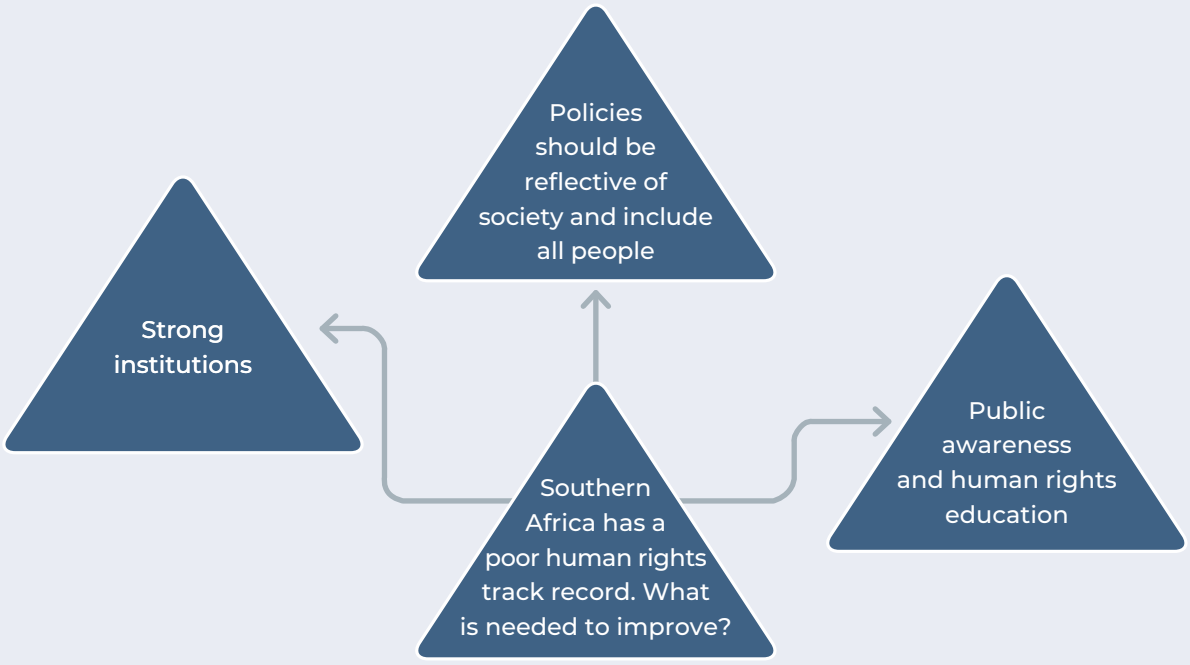
It is also the case that many people are not aware of their rights, meaning that they do not know that they can demand certain things from government or how to do so. This is why civil society is so important – CSOs can educate citizens on their rights. In addition, they can hold governments to account for not upholding rights or for implementing legislation and policies that go against the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the rights contained in states' constitutions.

Furthermore, they maintained, Southern African countries' constitutions typically provide for human rights, but the institutional capacity to uphold and protect these rights is lacking. The reality, in their assessment, is that human rights are recognised but not

adequately implemented. Countries are also not uniform in their practice of democracy. Some are considered flawed democracies or are termed democracies, but is this simply because they have elections? There are still too many instances in Southern Africa and Africa more broadly of opposition candidates being arrested, arbitrarily detained, exiled or even killed. There are also infringements on media freedom and the arbitrary detention of journalists; the killing or other punishments of whistleblowers; targeting of LGBTQIA+ persons; and violence against women and children.

Human rights and democracy generally can be considered idealistic because, in practice, the rights provisions in constitutions, bills of rights and the Declaration of Human Rights itself are not universally respected and practiced. The discussion overall returned to the fact that human rights are undermined in the majority of countries and that more should be done to strengthen institutions tasked with protecting human rights. One participant said that 'upholding the rule of law and democratic governance is inherently linked to the protection of human rights'. Human rights, therefore, are inherent to democratic governance, and the failure to respect and uphold human rights also erodes democracy. There are some good examples of human rights being upheld in Southern Africa, but there are no perfect examples and the countries that fail at implementing human rights sadly outnumber those that have a good track record.

Figure 6 Areas for improvement of Southern Africa's human rights track record suggested by youth



Source: Compiled by author

What do you understand human rights to be? Are they universal or Western in nature?

Participants concluded that human rights are universal and belong to everyone, but maintained that their application is not universal. Furthermore, how human rights are viewed and understood also differ. Thus, while human rights are universal in the sense that they are for everyone, participants felt that they are also Western in terms of how they are understood in the common discourse. By this was meant that human rights take on an individualistic character, looking at 'your rights as a person'. However, in the context of Africa, human rights take on a different meaning that transcends the realm of the individual. While it is true that there is an individual application of human rights, in Africa human rights have a communal character, explained by participants through the well-known South African concept of ubuntu – 'I am because we are'. Explained in the words of one participant, along this line of reasoning, 'We look at what is the greater good for the community, so human rights, your rights [as] a human, depend on your relationship to the next person… the way you treat the next person.'

> For this communal understanding of human rights to be fully realised, it is first necessary for the individual to have access to the same rights that should apply to the community

For this communal understanding of human rights to be fully realised, it is first necessary for the individual to have access to the same rights that should apply to the community. Much of the discussion involved reflections on and comparisons between democracies and authoritarian countries. In authoritarian contexts, for example, human rights cannot be said to be respected and practised, at least not all rights and not all the time. Authoritarian governments are more likely to violate the right to privacy and other human rights such as the right to freedom from torture, the right to access to justice, the right to a fair trial and the right to freedom from arbitrary detention. This contrast between the community and the individual is important, as it is constantly at play in democracy. Several democratic acts are completed individually (voting, for example) but have implications for society as a whole. It is therefore important that individuals understand both their rights and their responsibilities in a democracy, so that action is taken for the common good.

Participants also maintained that it is important that African countries and African CSOs do not allow Western powers to prescribe the understanding of human rights. Biases and power dynamics in the multilateral system should not influence the enforcement of human rights. A rigid interpretation of human rights implementation also does not allow adaptation to national contexts. At the same time, human rights should not be adapted

to the state of governance in countries; rather, governance should be adjusted in such a manner that human rights are implemented and that all people have access to their rights.

Is democracy the best form of government for promoting human rights?

In answering this question, participants explored alternative governance models to consider to what extent these promote human rights. Dictatorship, or the concentration of power in an individual or a single party, was explored. It was concluded that with such a governance model, there is too big a risk of one ideology being imposed on others and so violating their rights. This model is thus unfit for human rights because the chances of having a benevolent dictator are too slim.

Participants also discussed communism, or a blended type of democracy and communism. They suggested that, if the state is the only entity that owns things and there is no private property, people might be less inclined to act in ways that infringe on other people's rights. However, the state itself may become the infringer, as it would encounter the same problem as in the example of individual rule. People are meant to be 'trustees' of the state in a communist model and should receive what they need from the state. Participants also maintained that, by eliminating private property, corruption could be eliminated. Yet corruption – singled out by participants as one of the elements that contributes to human rights infringements – remains entirely possible in a communist system.

Democracy is flawed, but remains the only governance model fit for promoting human rights

Ultimately, participants concluded that democracy is the preferred form of government and does better than other models at upholding human rights. However, there is no perfect governance model that can be said to be the best for upholding and promoting human rights – even in democracies there are concerns and limited access to rights. Democracy allows for discourse and deliberation, but not all the ideas and wishes of the people can be incorporated. Governments are also not as responsive to the needs of citizens as desired. Democracy is flawed, but remains the only governance model fit for promoting human rights.

What can be done to better defend human rights?

The defence of human rights begins with education, participants suggested. It is important for people to know their rights and to what they are entitled. Furthermore, it is crucial that they know how and through which channels to speak up when their rights are violated. Participants felt that penalties for human rights violations would help to better

defend human rights. When people see that individuals, organisations and entities such as the state are held to account when they infringe on human rights, regard for human rights and the law will improve. Diversity and cultural differences in society should also be considered. Linking human rights to people's everyday lives by finding ways to bind these to their cultural practices would limit the need for external enforcement of human rights, ie, it would become an accepted occurrence.

Participants emphasised that the onus to defend human rights does not lie solely with official bodies and authorities. Such entities have been known to be some of the biggest violators of human rights and therefore the defence of human rights is a shared, social responsibility. Linking back to the earlier argument of ubuntu, people should remember that individual rights are shared by other members of a community and therefore one cannot exist without the other. Individuals working together is what ensures access to rights. Finally, participants highlighted that human rights is the one element of democracy where the majority principle does not apply. They made this argument by referring to the rights and protections of LGBTQIA+ persons. While this may be a minority group, it does not mean that only the majority who does not identify as such, have access to rights. Rights should apply to everyone equally.

A participant engages with other members of a cluster group at the youth consultations on 26–27 March 2024 (image Bulevard Productions)

In this discussion participants also pointed out that human rights have become egregiously politicised. Countries are pitted against each other when it comes to human rights: for example, some countries of the Global South criticise the West for '[using] human rights as a shield for other nefarious aims, like regime change, or undermining the government of a certain country'. The human rights regime itself, they maintained, leaves 'lots of room for being accused of hypocrisy' and therefore it is 'important to recognise that human rights are not apolitical'. But politicising human rights has a price, and it is often the people most in need of the protections of these rights that suffer as a result.

Civil society

How would you rate voter education by CSOs in your country?

Participants agreed that, overall, CSOs play a vital role in voter education and improving electoral participation in Southern African countries. What complicates its efficacy, however, is what is included in voter education: whether it covers registration, the voting process itself and information on the options offered on the ballot – the candidates and parties contesting the election – as well as the role of election observer missions. CSOs have taken on this role in many instances because official voter education is poor or non-existent, but they are experiencing challenges in fulfilling this role.

Another concern is bias and recognising that CSOs may be biased. CSOs also face their own challenges in terms of reaching communities to conduct voter education activities. This can relate to geographic location, language barriers and the availability of digital tools, which are used increasingly by CSOs to reach people. In addition, CSOs may have to jump through various legal and regulatory hoops.

Participants suggested that voter education should not be the responsibility of CSOs alone. Using South Africa as an example, they said that the country's IEC could be more active in voter education, especially since a new voting system was introduced with an additional ballot paper before the 2024 general election. They also felt that voter education programmes should begin earlier and be included at school level, so young people are familiarised with the process from an early age and can become more democratically active.

Do CSOs cater for your needs and expectations?

Participants felt that CSOs mostly meet their expectations and cater for their needs. They also felt that CSOs are often more reflective of the causes that society support than their governments. As a result, they believed CSOs should be a first point of call for citizens. They saw CSOs as more responsive in emergency situations as well, especially where humanitarian aid is required. Because of this, CSOs have a better reputation and higher levels of 'trust, credibility and legitimacy' than governments. Participants maintained that, on the continent, CSOs have a better track record of responding to terrorism and human trafficking and cited South Africa's Gift of the Givers Foundation as one of the best examples of this.

CSOs are better capacitated than governments to respond to situations in the region as they have more people on the ground and have the added advantage of being able to speak local languages, owing to the nature of their work. CSOs, they felt, are the 'source of fact finding' for governments – without them, governments would struggle to perform their tasks. Because CSOs are culturally diverse, communities associate with them far easier than with official government delegations or response personnel.

CSOs are better capacitated than governments to respond to situations in the region as they have more people on the ground

But there are some challenges inherent in this reality. Often, the mandate of CSOs does not align with that of government. Therefore, it is important that CSOs be held to accountability and transparency standards.

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What should CSOs stop doing, start doing and continue doing?

The discussion began with a general overview of what civil society was seen doing in South Africa at the time, as the discussions were held two months before the country's 2024 general election. CSOs, participants said, are active around elections, working to get more eligible voters, especially youth, to register to vote. They provide information on the manifestos and agendas of parties contesting the election and analyse how these parties approach youth and plan to involve them. Apart from this, CSOs are also seen to be advocating for specific issues, working to address them and raising awareness about them.

Participants suggested that civil society needed to become more engaged with what political parties are doing wrong and where they are falling short. It is also necessary for more engagement between CSOs to find shared interests and take joint action. In addition, there should be more direct engagement between CSOs and political parties. The latter point is complicated by perceptions that, because a CSO is engaging a political party, this automatically translates to support for that party when that is not the case.

Political parties could learn a lot from CSOs if they could engage more. CSOs, because they are active in communities and have firsthand knowledge of issues, can even help political parties to write better manifestos. CSOs, ultimately, 'know what people want. They know what people need.'

Political parties could learn a lot from CSOs if they could engage more

Democracy as it is practised in Africa has been influenced and guided by Western models, but CSOs have a role to play in shaping democracy to be more African. Part of this would involve greater domestic capacitation of CSOs. The inclusion of the cultural norms and values of the countries in which they operate will also make CSOs more relatable and help to adapt democracy to African values. Participants suggested that CSOs are too dependent on international donors, particularly Western donors, which could lead them to lose touch with the people they are meant to serve. CSOs should also not do community work with a 'savvy mentality', thinking that they are instantly going to change things.

Participants expected civil society to:

- enhance collaboration among CSOs;
- be careful of using exclusively Western models in their actions and remain true to African democratic values; and
- be realistic about their capacity and influence and not do things for their own benefit and public image.

Is civil society doing enough to support democracy?

The cluster group struggled to come to a definitive conclusion. In their words, 'They [civil society] are doing something, but is it enough?' Beyond elections and voter education, participants wondered if civil society is really doing enough to develop political education and make citizens democratically literate. This group included participants from South Africa and Namibia. Providing insight from Namibia, a participant highlighted efforts to regulate civil society to monitor its work, spending and impact. The group felt strongly that more can be done to make civil society more accessible for people and remove barriers that prevent participation. More action is needed beyond elections and citizens need to be involved throughout the electoral cycle to really get to the bottom of what is happening in their countries and where government is performing and under-performing.

Considering the theoretical and practical aspects of democracy, participants felt that in both countries (Namibia and South Africa) legislation is closer to the ideal than democracy

in practice and implementation often falls short of legislation. The mis- and under-representation of certain groups in society is problematic and civil society can improve its response to this reality.

Does civil society need to change the way it does things with regard to strengthening democracy?

In their understanding of civil society, the cluster group maintained that both individuals and CSOs should be considered, as individuals who do not belong to CSOs are sometimes very influential and do a lot for their communities. To better support their role as watchdogs and promoters of democracy, participants suggested the following initiatives to strengthen civil society.

- Civil society oversight body: An independent body should monitor the activities of civil society to ensure accountability and transparency, and that civil society has the space it needs to work in. Such a body would contribute to public trust in civil society.
- Shared idea pool or the 'cross-pollination of ideas': Civil society should not work only within national borders. Instead, CSOs from different countries should work together and so 'facilitate the exchange of best practices, knowledge and strategies [for] promoting democracy'. This would allow CSOs to learn from each other and 'develop a stronger, unified voice on regional issues'. Participants believed that 'this can be particularly powerful when advocating for human rights, good governance and democratic reforms with regional bodies like SADC, for example'.
- Greater resource mobilisation: Linked to the point above, pooling resources could strengthen civil society and change the way CSOs function in terms of grant applications. This could strengthen solidarity and regional cooperation between CSOs. As one participant argued, 'cross-border solidarity needs to happen… if they can force solidarity among civil society actors in the region they can [show] crucial support for each other in the face of government regression or promote original solutions to shared challenges'. Moreover, such cross-border solidarity can build trust and understanding… so they need to work together on common goals because they will be meeting from different countries, and this can aid in building trust and understanding across borders, so they can also help to break down ethnic or nationalistic tensions and promote regional cooperation.

One of the questions that led to this research project was whether Southern Africa needs a cross-border civil society network that works for the promotion of democratic values. Participants were not directed towards this question, but their response to the final issue discussed above resulted in a spontaneous answer. This was significant and pointed to a clear desire among the young people gathered in the room for more democracy and bigger, more inclusive spaces to make their voices heard. Civil society is key to their vision of democracy and, since they believe that all countries in the region share similar problems, civil society working together across borders could be just what democracy in Southern Africa needs.

Cluster group participants in discussion at the youth consultations on 26–27 March 2024 (image Bulevard Productions)

However, a network like the one suggested would need to be formed strategically and incorporate the experiences of other such networks, both on the continent and beyond. The next chapter discusses the current state of affairs of civil society in the region and on the continent more broadly, and maps existing cross-border and other civil society networks of interest for such an initiative to take root in Southern Africa.

CHAPTER 3

Civil society networks upholding democratic values

Civil society can be seen as the conscience of democracy. Organisations and individuals in this space work to hold democratically elected governments accountable to citizens and promote human rights, although in some cases such institutions are also active in non-democratic states. However, in many countries claiming to be democratic, civil society does not have room to operate and is often restricted by repressive laws and arbitrary shutdowns. In its *2024 State of Civil Society Report*, CIVICUS notes that 'civil society is being tested like never before by a series of multiple and accelerating crises'.[27]

Civil society can be seen as the conscience of democracy

The report finds that conflict, the exclusion of civil society in key multilateral forums, the repression of CSOs standing up for global issues and democratic backsliding are some of the biggest challenges civil society faces. The increase in the number of coups in Africa and resulting authoritarianism has been particularly challenging for civil society. Elsewhere, civil society has felt the pressures of operating in authoritarian contexts, but CIVICUS concludes that 'no matter how bloody the regime or how closed the civic space, civil society kept resisting, even if in subdued and covert ways or by moving operations abroad'.[28]

Sociologist Larry Diamond described civil society as discharging several 'crucial functions for democratic development and consolidation', which include[29]

> limiting the power of the state more generally, and challenging its abuse of authority; monitoring human rights and strengthening the rule of law; monitoring elections and enhancing the overall quality and credibility of the democratic process; educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities, building a culture of tolerance and civil engagement; incorporating marginal groups into the political process and enhancing the latter's responsiveness to societal interests and needs; providing alternative means, outside the state, for communities to

27 CIVICUS, *2024 State of Civil Society Report* (CIVICUS, March 2024), 4.
28 CIVICUS, *State of Civil Society*, 85.
29 Larry Diamond, cited in John Makumbe, "Is There a Civil Society in Africa?", *International Affairs* 74, no. 2 (1998): 305–306.

raise their level of material development; opening and pluralising the flows of information; and building a constituency for economic as well as political reforms.

In his 1998 assessment of civil society in Africa, John Makumbe argued that 'the extent to which civil society in Africa performs these functions is a matter of significant dispute'.[30] The reason for this dispute, Makumbe posited, was because of a tendency to – wrongly – compare civil society in Africa with civil society in the West. As he put it, '[S]ome Western social scientists expect African civil society to develop along the same lines that civil societies in the Western liberal democracies have developed.'[31]

In 2025, this contrast is still at play. The *2024 State of Civil Society Report* details how this dichotomy is particularly evident in the 'anti-rights offensive' in Africa. For example, as CIVICUS explains, this grouping of society 'denounces LGBTQI+ rights as "un-African" and "foreign imports"', but from 'the role of US-based foundations in reinforcing a legacy of British rule' it is clear to see that 'it's the anti-rights reaction that's been imported from the global north'.[32]

Civil society networks can strengthen the ability of organisations and individuals to fulfil their crucial watchdog role. It can also help smaller organisations to join forces with larger ones that work on the same causes and give a voice to organisations in repressive environments to make their voices heard. In answering the overarching question of this study – whether Southern Africa needs a cross-border civil society network to promote democratic values – it was necessary to consider existing networks and other initiatives in Africa and elsewhere so a better understanding of these actors and their influence may be found. This chapter maps out some of the most influential of these networks.[33]

CSO networks in Africa

Civil society in Africa typically comprises 'trade unions; professional associations; church and para-church organisations; resident, student, business and other special interest associations; the media; and various types of non-governmental organisations'.[34] Civil society on the continent is viewed as instrumental to 'the people's struggle against despotic rulers, repressive regimes and governments that violated both their individual and their collective rights' as opposed to 'anti-statism', a common misconception.[35]

In this section, specific civil society networks operating in Africa are highlighted, drawing lessons for Southern Africa. The organisations listed below do not represent the full range of civil society networks or organisations in Africa, but were selected based on their size,

30 Makumbe, "Is There a Civil Society in Africa?", 306.
31 Makumbe, "Is There a Civil Society in Africa?", 306.
32 CIVICUS, *State of Civil Society*, 125.
33 This chapter draws on the research assistance provided by Eddie Kambasha, Ruth Kasanga and Hope Dlamini.
34 Makumbe, "Is There a Civil Society in Africa?", 305.
35 Makumbe, "Is There a Civil Society in Africa?", 305.

reach and engagement on issues related to democracy. To answer the chief question that informed this study – 'Does Southern Africa need a dedicated network of CSOs to promote democracy? – it was necessary to consider existing networks to learn about their funding models and organisational structure and to get a sense of how and where their work has been the most relevant.

Africa Drive for Democracy

Although not strictly speaking a cross-border civil society network, Africa Drive for Democracy was founded in 2022 as an annual conference with the aim of bringing together a range of pro-democracy actors. These include trade unions, scholars, journalists, students, academics, activists, religious leaders and NGOs. It has also high-level input from former heads of state and government.

The initiative itself fits into a broader effort to achieve a 'Pan-African Movement on Democratisation'.[36] It was launched as a response to the recorded democratic decline on the continent, manifest in coups and strongman rule, for which 'strong civil society collaboration and networks' are presented as the remedy.[37] The inaugural conference was held in Arusha, Tanzania from 20–21 July 2022 and brought together pro-democracy actors from more than 30 African countries. The conference was envisioned as a 'safe space' for these organisations and individuals to 'discuss trends, exchange lessons and experiences and strengthen networks of solidarity'.[38]

The second such conference was again held in Arusha, Tanzania (in a nod to the pan-African motivations behind it) from 17–21 July 2023. This time, more than 45 African countries were represented, with pro-democracy actors gathering to 'assess the role of social movements in promoting democracy'.[39] Conference organisers described the event as offering 'a valuable platform for policymakers and democracy activists to hear each other's views, learn from shared experiences and collaborate to strengthen democratic values and practices'.[40]

In its third year, the Africa Drive for Democracy Conference moved online, with four virtual sessions held between 14 October and 4 November 2024 on the theme 'Rediscovering Africa's Soul: Renewing Commitment to Democracy'.[41] This conference was organised by AfricTivistes, AGORA, the Center for Strategic Litigation, Democracy Hub, PAWA254, Rivonia Circle, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Agora Institute (not to be confused with AGORA,

36 Judie Kaberia, "African Renaissance: Towards a Pan African Movement on Democratisation", Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, August 7, 2023.
37 Institute for Security Studies, "Africa Drive for Democracy Conference Aims to Tackle the Democratic Downturn", Press Release, July 14, 2022.
38 ISS, "Africa Drive for Democracy".
39 ISS, "Africa Drive for Democracy Conference Explores the Power of Social Movements", Press Release, July 17, 2023.
40 ISS, "Africa Drive for Democracy Conference Explores".
41 AfricTivistes, "Africa Drive for Democracy 2024: Rediscovering Africa's Democratic Soul", October 10, 2024.

so called for being 'an online digital Public Square')[42] and the West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS), supported by the Ford Foundation, IMS Foundation and AkinaMama wa Afrika.[43]

Each of the four virtual sessions had a unique topic linked to the broader theme:[44]

- The African Origins and Prospects for Democracy in Africa
- Beyond Elections: Democracy, Dignity and Inclusive Growth
- Digital Colonialism and Democratic Opportunity in Africa
- Financial Resilience for Africa's Pro-Democracy Movement

The Africa Drive for Democracy conference is supported by the MS Training Center for Development Cooperation (Tanzania), the Center for Strategic Litigation (Tanzania) and the Institute for Security Studies (South Africa), and has received financial support from the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.[45] Support for the conference also came from the Ford Foundation, Freedom House, Humanity United, Open Society Foundations Africa and the Swedish government.

It is not clear what the exact outcomes of these gatherings were or whether they resulted in any concrete action by the parties in attendance. Outcome documents have not been published or, if they were, are not readily available to the public. Because the conference is a recent initiative, it is also difficult to track its impact. However, as a platform for gathering pro-democracy actors from different sectors so that they can expand their networks and discover similar interests, it is an important initiative and should be encouraged to continue. That the conference brings together pro-democracy actors from different countries also speaks volumes. African democracies are experiencing the same problems, and such events give actors an opportunity to exchange lessons and share knowledge, possibly laying the foundations for formal network formation.

African Defenders Network

The Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network, or African Defenders Network, consists of five organisations representing each of the regions on the continent. It works for the promotion and protection of human rights defenders in Africa.

Northern Africa – Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS). The CIHRS represents Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Sudan and Tunisia (its work also covers countries in the Middle East). The CIHRS, an NGO, was founded in 1994

42 AGORA, "Our Story", accessed July 28, 2025, https://agoraug.org/social-justice-for-all/.
43 AfricTivistes, "Africa Drive for Democracy 2024".
44 AfricTivistes, "Africa Drive for Democracy 2024".
45 Kaberia, "African Renaissance".

and aims to 'promote respect for fundamental freedoms, democratic values, and human rights principles in the Arab region'.[46] It does this through analysis of issues that hinder the implementation of international human rights law, establishing dialogue between different cultures in the region so the contents of human rights treaties are widely disseminated and the human rights framework respected.[47] The organisation also works on 'developing, proposing, and promoting changes to policy and practice in the Arab region in order to bring them in line with international human rights standards'.[48] The CIHRS is engaged in capacity building and setting up networks between organisations, 'striving for better representation in international human rights mechanisms that influence policies towards human rights and democracy issues in the Arab region'. The 'Arab region', it notes, is its preferred terminology because the standard term – the Middle East and North Africa, or MENA – excludes Sudan, a country on which the organisation focuses much of its work, and encompasses countries that do not feature in its work, such as Iran, Israel and Türkiye.[49] The term Arab region thus describes 'Arabic-speaking countries, while emphasising the value of diversity and seeks to promote the defense of the rights of all non-Arab majorities and minorities across the region'.[50]

The CIHRS has offices in Egypt and Tunisia, as well as in Switzerland, Belgium and France. According to the organisation, its overseas offices contribute directly to 'promoting transnational cultural and human rights cooperation'.[51]

West Africa – West African Human Rights Defenders Network (Réseau Ouest Africain des Defenséurs des Droits Humains [WAHRDN]). The WAHRDN represents Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. It was established in 2005 and advocates for the defence of human rights and the organisations that do so. The WAHRDN is made up of 'national coalitions for human rights and individual focal points'.[52] The organisation is an observer at the African Commission of Human and Peoples' Rights and is on the executive committee of its NGO Forum. In addition, it is a member of the Human Rights Council Network, a collaborative NGO platform that engages with the UN Human Rights Council and works with diplomatic missions and foreign ministries. On the continent, the WAHRDN works to 'shape the domestic and foreign policy of West African countries in line with human rights standards, and to strengthen the rule of law'.[53]

Central Africa – Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Réseau des Défenseurs des Droits Humains en Afrique Centrale [REDHAC]). The REDHAC represents Cameroon,

46 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, "About Us", accessed July 2, 2025, https://cihrs.org/about-us/?lang=en.
47 African Defenders, "Northern Africa: Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies", accessed July 28, 2025, https://africandefenders.org/members/northern-africa/.
48 African Defenders, "Northern Africa".
49 CIHRS, "About Us".
50 CIHRS, "About Us".
51 CIHRS, "About Us".
52 African Defenders, "West Africa: West African Human Rights Defenders", accessed July 28, 2025, https://africandefenders.org/members/western-africa/.
53 African Defenders, "West Africa".

the Central African Republic, Chad, the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and São Tomé and Príncipe. It is dedicated to raising awareness on the state of human rights in Central Africa while offering training and other support for the work of human rights defenders. The REDHAC is an umbrella body that represents more than 200 members which, apart from human rights defenders, also include legal professionals and journalists.[54] Its work covers four broad themes: security for human rights defenders; capacity building for human rights defenders; advocacy; and conflict resolution.[55]

East Africa and the Horn of Africa – DefendDefenders. This organisation represents Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, Somaliland, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. DefendDefenders doubles as secretariat for the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network and works to better capacitate human rights defenders in the region to conduct their activities and '[reduce] their vulnerability to the risk of persecution'.[56] It plays a strong advocacy role and has participated in the 52nd, 53rd and 54th sessions of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) – in the five years preceding 2023 it had a success rate of 75% when calling for special sessions of the council.[57] Following the 52nd session of the UNHRC, DefendDefenders successfully saw through the adoption of a resolution to extend the mandate of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, 'the only mechanism tasked with collecting and preserving evidence of violations of international law with a view to ensuring accountability'.[58]

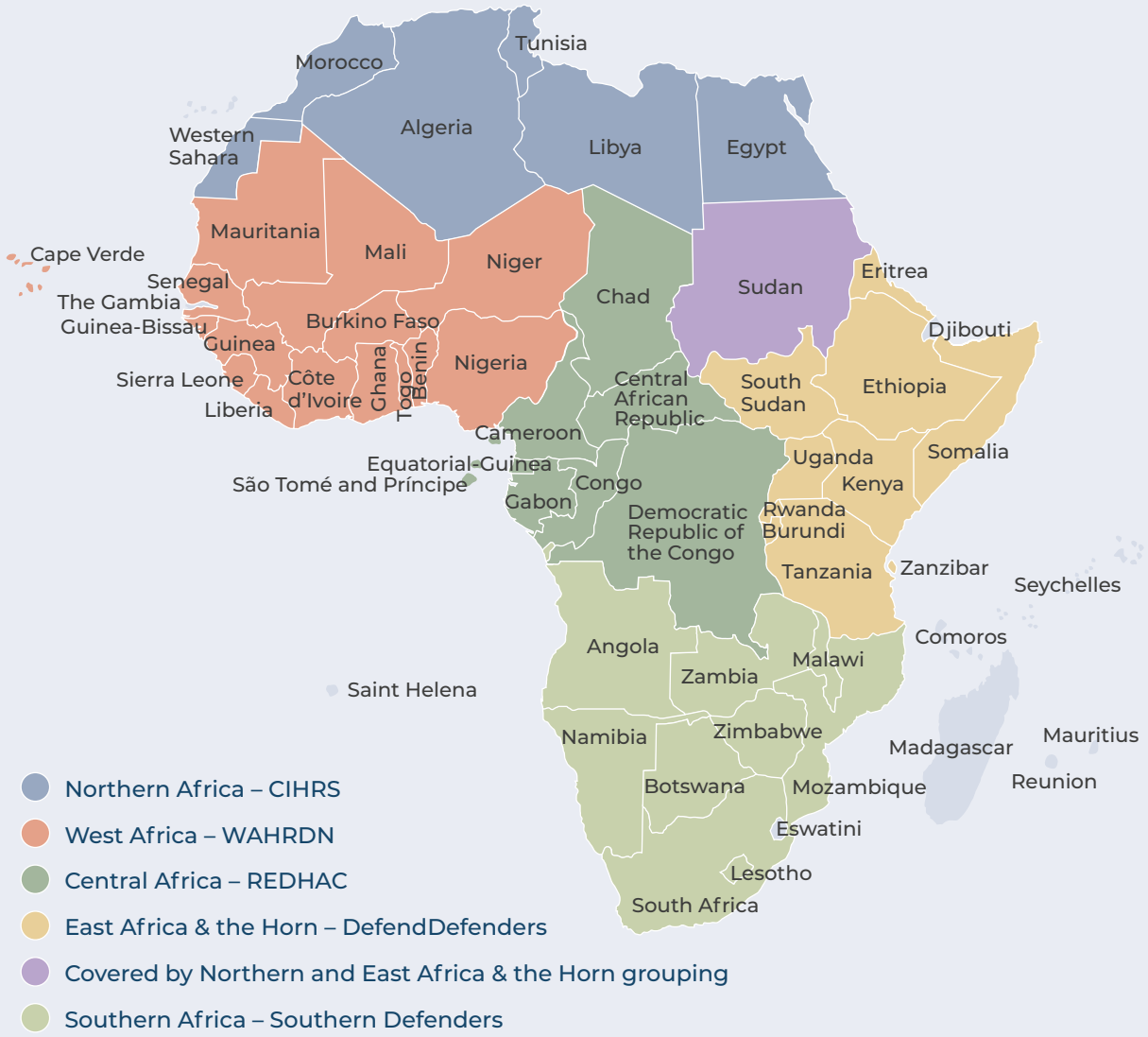
In the run-up to the UNHRC's 53rd session, DefendDefenders and 34 other organisations petitioned the council to 'extend the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, and to maintain focus on Eritrea's continued human rights violations'.[59] One of the outcomes of this session was a resolution aligned with the demands and recommendations of DefendDefenders. The organisation also engages the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the AU and the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions.[60]

Southern Africa – Southern African Human Rights Defenders Network (Southern Defenders). Southern Defenders represents Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. It was founded in 2013 to empower human rights defenders to work in challenging and restricted environments and execute their mandates.[61] At its inception in 2004 it was 'a loose network' and was only formally institutionalised in 2017. This organisation was born from the recognition

54 African Defenders, "Central Africa: Réseau des Défenseurs des Droits Humans en Afrique Centrale", accessed July 28, 2025, https://africandefenders.org/members/central-africa/.
55 REDHAC, "Four Areas of Work", accessed July 28, 2025, https://redhac1.org/en/four-areas-of-work/#.
56 African Defenders, "Central Africa".
57 DefendDefenders and African Defenders, "Foreword", *Annual Report 2023*, June 28, 2024, 18.
58 DefendDefenders and African Defenders, *Annual Report 2023*, 18.
59 DefendDefenders and African Defenders, *Annual Report 2023*, 19.
60 DefendDefenders and African Defenders, *Annual Report 2023*.
61 African Defenders, "Southern Africa Southern African Human Rights Defenders Network", accessed July 28, 2025, https://africandefenders.org/members/southern-africa/.

that a regional network dedicated to supporting human rights defenders would benefit the entire Southern African region.[62] As part of its work, Southern Defenders aids national coalitions of human rights defenders, providing assistance with 'conducting local networks capacity assessments, co-creating network strengthening plans, and facilitating scenario-based strategic planning processes'.[63] It was instrumental in the creation of national platforms for human rights defenders in Angola, Eswatini, Mozambique and South Africa.

Figure 7 African countries engaged in the African Defenders Network



Source: Created by author

62 Southern Defenders, "About Southern Defender: History and Heritage", accessed July 28, 2025, https://southerndefenders.africa/about/#aboutus.

63 Southern Defenders, "Programme Areas", accessed July 28, 2025, https://southerndefenders.africa/about/programme-areas/.

The Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network grew out of the All Africa Human Rights Defenders Conference of 2009. After a decade of conference gatherings, participants (88 human rights defenders, 33 international partners, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders and the African Commission Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders) evaluated the progress and setbacks of human rights defenders on the continent. Networks of human rights defenders from Central Africa, East Africa and the Horn, and West Africa who attended the All Africa Human Rights Defenders conferences inspired the creation of similar networks in North and Southern Africa.[64]

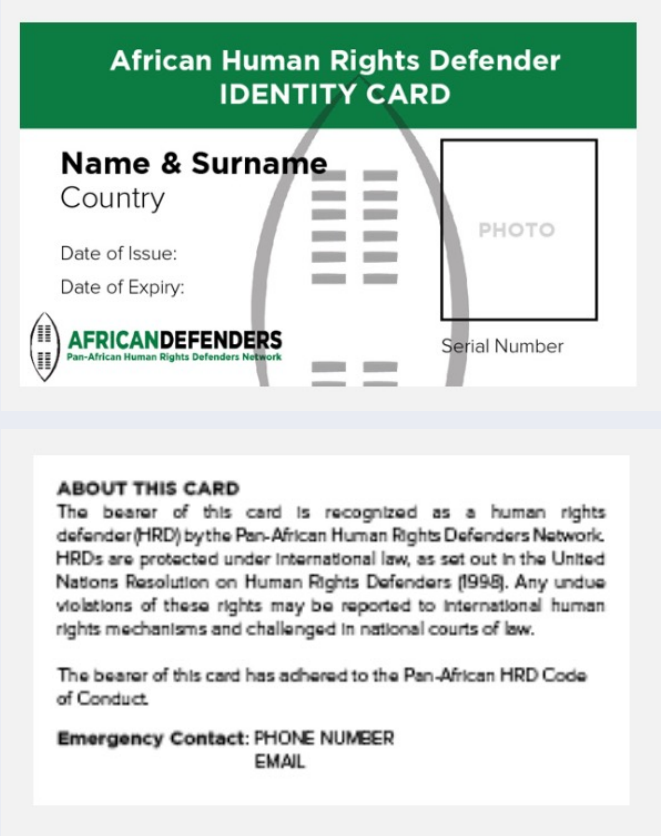
According to African Defenders, such networks are 'powerful tool[s] to create a more enabling environment for [human rights defenders] in the pursuit of their legitimate work'.[65] In the reflection on the work of human rights defenders since the first conference of 1998, attendees of the 2009 conference concluded that 'sub-regional networks had been influential in helping to promote the very notion of [human rights defenders]' and fostering a human rights culture through awareness raising.[66] The establishment of a parent organisation responsible for bringing together and supporting the work of human rights defenders at the sub-regional level was recognised as vital for mitigating an environment that often fails to protect human rights organisations. As a result, the Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network came into being.[67] The full motivation for its creation and its goals are captured in the Kampala Declaration of Human Rights Defenders of April 2009. The Kampala Plan of Action for Human Rights Defenders was drafted shortly afterwards and formally adopted in Banjul, Gambia on 12 May 2009.

Some of the practical ways in which African Defenders accomplishes its vision are highlighted in its various campaigns and initiatives. It has an ongoing partnership with Meta through which it established the Digital Defenders Fund, 'a microgrant program tailored to support [human rights defenders] impacted by their online activism'.[68] At a time when digital spaces and tools are becoming central to engagement with institutions, governments and fellow citizens – as well as the targeting of these spaces by authoritarian governments – the protection of human rights defenders online is crucial. Related to this initiative, African Defenders established Ubuntu Hub Cities, a programme focused on 'city-based relocation of at-risk [human rights defenders] across Africa'. With the help of the Digital Defenders Fund, individuals who have been relocated through this initiative can continue their work remotely and apply for funding to cover 'legal fees, relocation assistance, and digital security services'.[69]

64 African Defenders, "About Us: Our History", accessed July 28, 2025, https://africandefenders.org/about/.
65 African Defenders, "About Us: Our History".
66 African Defenders, "About Us: Our History".
67 African Defenders, "About Us: Our History".
68 African Defenders, "Online Hub Cities", accessed July 28, 2025, https://africandefenders.org/what-we-do/online-hub-cities/.
69 African Defenders, "Online Hub Cities".

To protect human rights defenders and improve their security, African Defenders also created a Human Rights Defender (HRD) Identity Card, viewed as 'a tool to assist African [human rights defenders] in reminding duty-bearers of their rights under international law, and to demonstrate that their human rights work is recognised and supported by the national, regional and international networks'.[70] The HRD Identity Card works on the premise that by 'increasing the profile of [human rights defenders] and demonstrating their connections with wide networks outside their immediate location can, in certain circumstances, increase the "political cost" of attacking [human rights defenders] or violating their rights'.[71]

Figure 8 The African Defenders HRD Identity Card



Source: African Defenders, African Defenders, "HRD Identity Card", accessed July 28, 2025, https://africandefenders.org/what-we-do/defender-id/

70 African Defenders, "HRD Identity Card", accessed July 28, 2025, https://africandefenders.org/what-we-do/defender-id/.

71 African Defenders, "Defender ID Card Agreement", accessed July 28, 2025, https://africandefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/HRD-ID-Card-Agreement.pdf.

The African Defenders Defender ID Card Agreement describes the card as 'a tool to improve the protection and effectiveness of human rights defenders in Africa, in conjunction with other security measures' while serving as a 'reminder to duty-bearers of their obligations under international law to protect the rights of human rights defenders'.[72] The card displays emergency contact information and verifies that the bearer is a known human rights defender at both the African Defenders Network and other regional and international networks.[73] African Defenders is very clear also about the limitations of the ID card and reminds bearers that it does not replace the identifying documents of the organisation to which they belong; does not excuse criminal acts; 'is not an exclusive measure of an individual's status as a human rights defender'; and 'is not issued by an intergovernmental body'.[74] Bearers of the HRD ID Card are also required to sign a code of conduct whereby they must adhere to the following principles:[75]

- non-discrimination;
- non-violence;
- no criminal behaviour;
- no conflict of interests;
- good faith; and
- transparency and integrity.

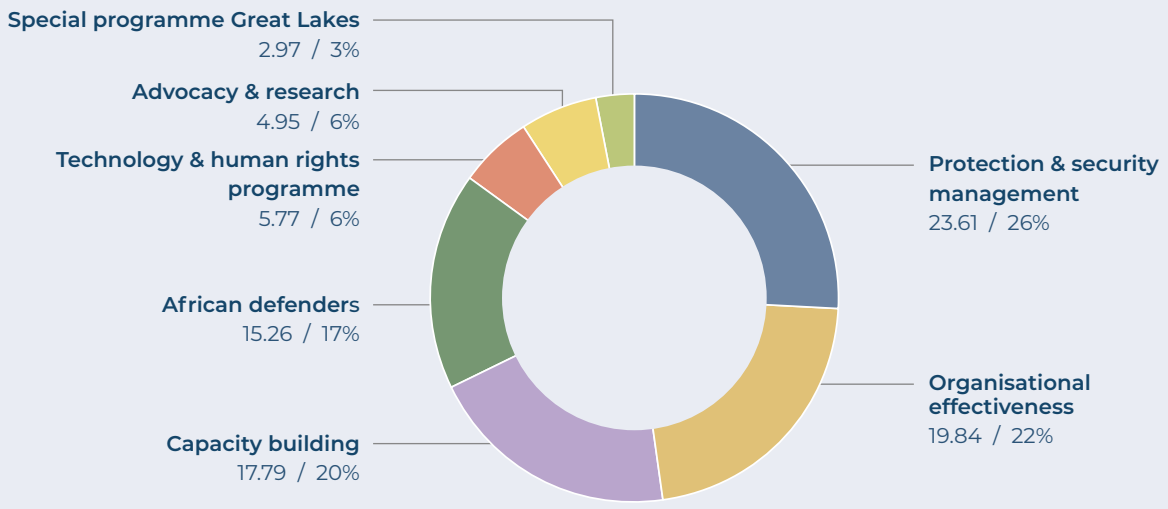
In addition, African Defenders has undertaken several advocacy campaigns to raise awareness of the work of human rights defenders and the problems they encounter. During the COVID-19 pandemic, one such campaign, #FreeHRDsNow, was instrumental in advocating for the release of human rights defenders detained in prisons, identified by the network as high-risk environments for the spread of the virus, and in calling out governments that used the pandemic to target human rights defenders and journalists.[76] In 2024 the organisation also campaigned for the release of Mamadou Billo Bah and Oumar Sylla (also known as Foniké Menguè), two human rights activists in Conakry, Guinea. A press release signed by 18 human rights organisations was made public on 10 July 2024.[77]

DefendDefenders acts as the host of the African Defenders Network and much of the information regarding the funding and activities of the network can be sourced from its annual reports. The 2023 DefendDefenders annual report announced the signing of 'a historic memorandum of understanding' between the organisation and Justice for Peace, a Dutch organisation, for a collaboration between the Ubuntu Hub Cities

72 African Defenders, "Defender ID Card Agreement".
73 African Defenders, "Defender ID Card Agreement".
74 African Defenders, "Defender ID Card Agreement".
75 African Defenders, "Defender ID Card Agreement".
76 African Defenders, "Free Human Rights Defenders Now! They Should Have Never Been Detained", May 26, 2020.
77 African Defenders, "Guinea: The Return of Arbitrary Arrests", July 19, 2024.

(African Defenders initiative) and the Netherland's Shelter City Initiative for 'better all round expertise in relocation of [human rights defenders] at risk'.[78] DefendDefenders' total budget for 2023 was about UGX[79] 38.85 billion ($10.57 million), of which 15.26% was allocated to the African Defenders Network, indicative of the value attached to it. In the first six months of 2022, the organisation received 17 requests for protection from human rights defenders in Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, Somalia and Uganda.[80]

Figure 9 Budget breakdown for DefendDefenders (2023)



Source: Created by author using data from DefendDefenders and African Defenders, "Foreword", Annual Report 2023, June 28, 2024

CHARM Programme

The Consortium to Protect Human Rights, Civic Freedoms and Media Development (CHARM) Programme (founded in 2019) is a network of seven African partners. These partners work together to 'strengthen the effectiveness and build the resilience of journalists, media practitioners, social media producers, human rights defenders, and civil society activists and their organisations, to advance more democratic and free societies'.[81] Its founding is captured in some detail by CIVICUS in the document '18 Months of CHARM'. The consortium conducted its first activity, the Annual African Investigative Journalism

78 DefendDefenders and African Defenders, Annual Report 2023.
79 Currency code for the Ugandan shilling.
80 CIVICUS, "Outcomes Harvesting", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.civicus.org/index.php/what-we-do/enabling-and-resourcing/charm-africa.
81 CIVICUS, "About CHARM Africa", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.civicus.org/index.php/what-we-do/enabling-and-resourcing/charm-africa.

Conference, in October 2019, an event incorporated under the CHARM umbrella. It hosted 353 delegates from 36 countries and offered extensive opportunities for networking and learning.[82]

The consortium partners in the CHARM network are:

- CIVICUS
- Fojo Media Institute
- Civil Rights Defenders
- Réseau des Femmes Leaders pour le Development (RFLD)
- Wits Journalism
- DefendDefenders
- Magamba

The CHARM Programme receives financial support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), a Swedish government body. It focuses primarily on sub-Saharan Africa, especially those countries where democratic freedoms are under threat from 'power holders who impose a combination of legal and practical constraints on the full enjoyment of fundamental rights'.[83] In these contexts, CSOs are present but 'state authorities undermine them, including through the use of illegal surveillance, bureaucratic harassment and demeaning public statements'.[84]

The CHARM Programme has six broad goals:[85]

1 build up civil society and the work of activists through association at the national, regional and global levels, especially marginalised groups, and include CSOs and journalists in decision-making spaces;

2 provide support (capacity building) and protection (limiting the risks they face, protection from persecution) for women and CSOs that work on women's rights issues;

3 ensure inclusion, gender equality and gender mainstreaming so that marginalised groups and those facing discrimination are heard;

4 promote media freedom by supporting independent journalists, especially from societal groups that are often under-represented, and connect media experts and journalists to facilitate mutual exchange of information and experience learning;

82 CIVICUS, "18 Months of CHARM", April 2021.
83 RFDL, "Consortium for the Promoting of Human Rights, Civil Liberties, and Media Development in sub-Saharan Africa (CHARM Africa)", accessed July 28, 2025, https://rflgd.org/charm-africa/.
84 RFDL, "CHARM Africa".
85 RFDL, "CHARM Africa".

5 expand digital activism by supporting content creators and activists (especially youth) who use online and digital media for their work, and improve freedom of expression online; and

6 deepen the consortium's reach by intensifying regional collaboration and collaboration between organisations in different countries to address shared problems and those that one organisation cannot address on its own.

It has tackled pressing local issues in some countries, including decreasing dependence on coal as a source of energy in urban areas in Uganda (where dependence was estimated at 65% in 2015).[86] The CHARM Programme is coordinated by CIVICUS, a global alliance of CSOs (discussed further in the next section).

Over the past few years, the CHARM Programme has had an impact on several fronts, achieving noteworthy practical outcomes. In the area of social inclusion, it was linked to the implementation of a gender-mainstreaming programme in Eastern Equatoria State in South Sudan in 2022, with the government making 36% of cabinet positions available to women.[87] Wits Journalism and the Fojo Media Institute have developed a network of African journalism schools, the African Journalism Educators Network, with meetings held annually since 2020. The Network of Sustainability Journalism was also established, acting as a 'partnership for sustainable journalism comprising… like-minded individuals and organisations'.[88] In addition, members of the CHARM network play active advocacy roles, such as the #DefLaw campaign, launched in June 2022 by People's Action for Accountability and Good Governance in Zambia and the Magamba Network from Zimbabwe. The initiative was aimed at policy overhaul, targeting laws instituted to criminalise defamation of the president.[89]

West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS)

The West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS), a 'non-partisan, independent civil society-led transnational democracy solidarity network', comprises more than 30 CSOs from 15 countries[90] in West Africa.[91] It received financial support from Sida. Through this network, it 'mobilises, coordinates, and leverages the collective power of civil society and other pro-democracy actors, resources, and opportunities within the West African Region to advance, defend, and reinvigorate democracy and promote democratic norms and reforms in the sub-region'.[92]

86 CIVICUS, 'About CHARM Africa".
87 CIVICUS, "Outcomes Harvesting".
88 CIVICUS, "Outcomes Harvesting".
89 CIVICUS, "Outcomes Harvesting".
90 Benin, Burkina-Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.
91 West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network, "About WADEMOS", accessed July 28, 2025, https://wademosnetwork.org/about/.
92 WADEMOS, "About WADEMOS".

According to its mission statement, WADEMOS hopes to achieve 'a West Africa with a clear pathway to stability, peace, open, accountable, and democratic governance'.[93] As a cross-border civil society network, it aims to 'build and sustain solidarity with and within civil society, media, and social movements, as well as women and youth-led activists and organisations, to strengthen action on pro-democracy initiatives'. It considers 'freedoms, the rule of law, and constitutionalism; peace and security; elections', and 'gender, diversity, and inclusion' as part of the latter.[94]

Organisations in the WADEMOS network are:

Benin

- Social Watch (a civil society network that works to address poverty and the causes of poverty, discrimination and racism)
- RFLD

Burkina-Faso

- Le Balai Citoyen

Cabo Verde

- Forum Cabo-Verdiano da Sociedade Civil
- Instituto Pedro Pires

Côte d'Ivoire

- Centre de Recherche et de Formation sur le Développement Intégré (CREFDI)

Gambia

- Centre for Research and Policy Development (CRPD)

Ghana

- Africa Centre for International Law and Accountability (ACILA)
- Council on Foreign Relations Ghana
- Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana; this institute is also responsible for hosting WADEMOS)
- Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG)
- Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)
- West Africa Civil Society initiative (WACSI)
- West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)

93 WADEMOS, "About WADEMOS".
94 WADEMOS, "About WADEMOS".

Guinea

- Citoyen Pour la Paix et Justice
- Statview International

Guinea-Bissau

- Sindicato de journalistas e Tecnicos de Comunicacao Social (SINJOTECS)

Liberia

- Institute for Research and Democratic Development (IREDD)
- Centre for Democratic Governance (CDG)

Mali

- Reseau ONG d'Appui au Processus Electoral au Mali (Reseau APEM)
- Association Femmes Leadership et Development Durable (AFLED)
- Youth Association for Active Citizenship and Democracy (AJCAD)

Niger

- Coalition Des Organisations Nigériennes des Droits De l'Enfant (CONIDE)
- Alternative Espace Citoyen (AEC)

Nigeria

- Women in Politics Forum, Africa (WIPF)
- Yiaga Africa
- Transition Monitoring Group (TMG)
- Centre for Democracy and Development West Africa

Senegal

- Africtivistes
- Rencontre Africaine Pour La Défense des Droits De l'Homme (RADDHO)
- West Africa Citizen Think Tank

Sierra Leone

- National Election Watch (NEW) – Sierra Leone
- Campaign for Good Governance (CGG)
- Institute for Governance Reform (IGR)

Togo

- National Civil Society Consultation of Togo (CNSC Togo)
- Clinique d'Expertise Juridique Et Social (CEJUS)

WADEMOS has been quick to respond to regional crises and political events and has several ongoing initiatives tailored to the needs of citizens and governments in West Africa. In terms of political transitions, it has addressed the spate of coups in the region, most recently through an assessment of Guinea's delayed transition to civilian power and an outreach event under the theme 'Strengthening Response to Democratic Recession in West Africa: The Role of the Diaspora'.[95] Under its 'Democreatives' initiative, WADEMOS highlights the role of the arts in shedding light on democratic concerns and building greater democratic resilience. Most recently, members of the initiative were involved in the 12th Global Assembly of World Movement for Democracy in South Africa in November 2024.[96]

WADEMOS also has several initiatives related to elections and has issued statements on election observer missions in West African elections (most recently Ghana) and elections more broadly; issued briefing papers on elections in the region; and, in December 2024, sent its own observer mission to monitor elections in Ghana.[97] Through its Next Gen Program, the network empowers and capacitates youth to promote democracy, giving the next generation the tools it needs to lead and improve democratic governance.[98] Finally, WADEMOS speaks out against human rights violations and advocates for the protection and freedom of human rights defenders.[99]

International CSO networks

CIVICUS

CIVICUS is described as 'a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists working to strengthen citizen action and civil society throughout the world'.[100] The alliance was established in 1993 to reinforce and support 'people's willingness to participate in public affairs, actuate positive change and tackle challenges together, in every region of the globe'[101] and has more than 15 000 members in 189 countries.[102] Nearly 70% of CIVICUS members are from low- and low-middle-income countries and youth (30 years and under) make up 30% of its membership.[103]

Individuals and organisations can apply for CIVICUS membership through a dedicated online portal or, when Internet access is not available, an offline application form. Prospective members must comply with its mission, vision, values and code of conduct, and adhere to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Applications for membership

95 WADEMOS, "Political Transitions", accessed July 28, 2025, https://wademosnetwork.org/category/publications/political-transitions/.
96 WADEMOS, "Democreatives", accessed July 28, 2025, https://wademosnetwork.org/category/democreatives/.
97 WADEMOS, "Elections", accessed July 28, 2025, https://wademosnetwork.org/category/elections/.
98 WADEMOS, "Next Gen Program", accessed July 28, 2025, https://wademosnetwork.org/category/next-gen-program/.
99 WADEMOS, "Human Rights", accessed July 28, 2025, https://wademosnetwork.org/category/human-rights/.
100 CIVICUS, "Who We Are", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.civicus.org/index.php/who-we-are.
101 CIVICUS, "Membership Policy", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.civicus.org/index.php/membership-policy.
102 CIVICUS, "Who We Are".
103 CIVICUS, "Who We Are".

Figure 10 CIVICUS membership statistics

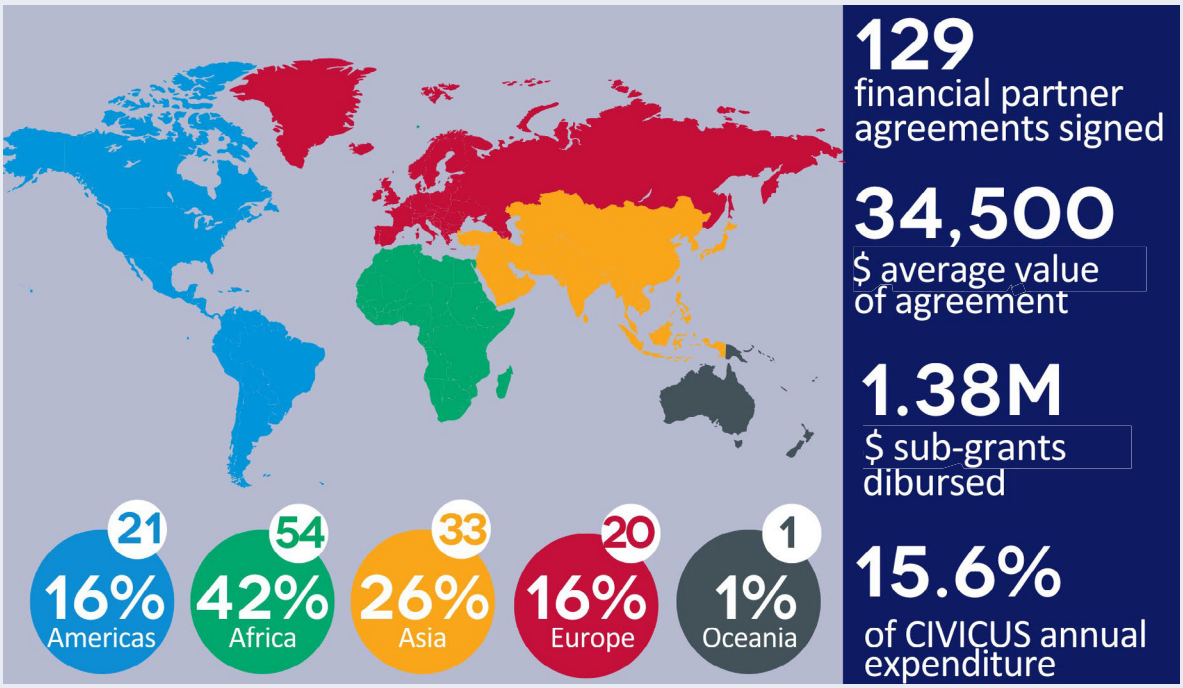
Source: CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*, 32, accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/annual-reports/annual-report-2023-2024.pdf

are reviewed by the CIVICUS Membership Team.[104] Membership is divided in two categories: associate membership and voting membership. Associate membership has no expiration date and is free of charge while voting membership lasts for three years (subject to renewal depending on meeting responsibilities) and such members contribute to a Member Solidarity Fund.[105]

The organisation has 14 individual funders, comprising multilateral and bilateral government bodies as well as private funders.[106] According to the CIVICUS 2023/2024 Annual Report, the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ford Foundation and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs were its biggest funders with a total of $6,555,464.[107] Other funders include Auxilium, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Conrad N Hilton Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Fund for Shared Insight, European Commission, Lifeline Embattled Fund, Norad, Open Society Foundations and Sida.[108] CIVICUS has signed 129 financial partner agreements, the majority of which (54) are in Africa, according to its 2023/2024 Annual Report.

104 CIVICUS, "Membership Policy", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.civicus.org/index.php/membership-policy.
105 CIVICUS, "Membership Policy".
106 CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*, 33, accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/annual-reports/annual-report-2023-2024.pdf.
107 CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*, 33.
108 CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*.

Figure 11 CIVICUS financial partnerships



Source: CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*, 32, accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/annual-reports/annual-report-2023-2024.pdf

CIVICUS drives several advocacy campaigns, distributes grants to support the work of civil society and produces various research publications. Key publications include the *CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report*, CIVIC Lens (providing analysis and commentary) and CIVICUS Monitor, which presents data collected by regional research partners and activists with good local knowledge and networks.[109]

The CIVICUS Monitor is a particularly effective advocacy tool and 'tracks the state of civic space – freedoms of association, expression and peaceful assembly and the state's duty to protect – in 198 countries and territories'.[110] The data collected by CIVICUS is used by a variety of organisations and individuals, most notably the Global Fund, International Service for Human Rights, Amnesty International, Global Witness and Save the Children.[111]

CIVICUS Monitor is an online tool and rates the state of civic space in countries, ranging from 'closed', 'repressed', 'obstructed' or 'narrowed' to 'open'. Liberia, Namibia and Botswana are the only African countries with a 'narrowed' rating, while the others are 'obstructed', 'repressed' or 'closed'.[112] CIVICUS has also submitted reports to the UNHRC

109 CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*.
110 CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*, 9.
111 CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*.
112 CIVICUS, "Monitor: Tracking Civic Space", accessed July 28, 2025, https://monitor.civicus.org/.

ahead of its Universal Periodic Review on Afghanistan, Cambodia, Côte d'Ivoire, the DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Qatar and Vietnam.[113]

At both the 54th and 55th sessions of the UNHRC, CIVICUS highlighted concerns around shrinking civic space and gross human rights violations globally. It advised the UN body and human rights bodies more broadly to keep a watchful eye on the countries on the CIVICUS Monitor watchlist, focusing especially on 'cases of arbitrarily detained [human rights defenders]'. It also advocated for urgent action to address ongoing human rights violations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.[114]

As host of the CHARM Programme, CIVICUS is involved in its activities and regards it as one of its biggest impact areas. Throughout 2023–2024, CIVICUS offered support to partner organisations in Mali, Nigeria and Uganda to commemorate International Women's Day and Human Rights Day through activities such as 'community dialogues highlighting the struggles of women [human rights defenders], particularly indigenous women, young women, women from grassroots communities and those fighting for land rights'.[115]

CHARM also supported civil society in Zambia through a project in March 2024 to 'capture the results and lessons learned from 15 years of work and identify the resources needed for sustained impact'.[116] This involved bringing together the Human Rights Committee of the Zambian National Parliament, the Ministry of Justice, the Zambian Human Rights Commission, local government, policymakers and other stakeholders.[117]

National Endowment for Democracy

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a bipartisan, non-profit, independent foundation established in 1983 in the US and works for the global support and strengthening of democratic institutions, including trade unions, political parties and civil society.[118] Its independence gives the NED 'a flexibility that makes it possible to work in some of the world's most difficult circumstances, and to respond quickly when there is an opportunity for political change'.[119]

The NED is funded primarily by the US Congress and makes more than 2 000 grants annually to support democratic institutions across the globe.[120] It currently works in 100 countries and grants are given to 'independent organisations promoting political and economic freedom, a strong civil society, independent media, human rights, and the rule

113 CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*.
114 CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*, 12.
115 CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*, 13.
116 CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*, 13.
117 CIVICUS, *Annual Report 2023–24*.
118 National Endowment for Democracy, "About the National Endowment for Democracy", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.ned.org/about/.
119 NED, "About".
120 NED, "About".

of law' in both existing democracies and countries in transition.[121] In 2024, the NED was working on 274 projects in 28 African countries with a total value of $40.9 million. West and East Africa are particular focus areas, but it also works with organisations in Central and Southern Africa.[122] The NED funds 10 projects in Angola, four in Burkina Faso, 35 in the DRC, 17 in Ethiopia, 18 in Nigeria and 18 in Sudan.[123] In its own assessment, its support to countries outside the US 'sends an important message of solidarity to many democrats who are working for freedom and human rights, often in obscurity and isolation'.[124]

The NED understands that democracy 'evolves according to the needs and traditions of diverse political cultures' and operates on the premise that 'freedom is a universal human aspiration that can be realised through the development of democratic institutions, procedures, and values'.[125] Apart from its involvement in the activities of democratic institutions, it also supports and conducts research on democracy. Related to this, it founded the Journal of Democracy in 1990 and established the International Forum for Democratic Studies in 1994. Through this forum it hosts conferences and seminars on democratic development, publishes books, manages a library and online resource centre, and manages its Visiting Fellows Program and network of democracy research centres.[126]

Furthermore, the NED established the Worldwide Movement for Democracy in 1998, described as 'a dynamic network of democrats, both individuals and organisations, who aspire to work in a coordinated way to address proactively the toughest challenges to the advancement of democracy and human rights in the world today'.[127] The Worldwide Movement for Democracy directly contributes to one of the NED's strategic objectives, namely[128]

> to create a community of democrats, drawn from the most developed democracies and the most repressive autocracies as well as everything in between, and united by the belief that the common interest is served by the gradual expansion of systems based on freedom, self-government, and the rule of law.

Some of the areas in which its work has had a notable impact were highlighted in its 2023 annual report. These include mobilising democracy institutions for the release of Vladimir Kara-Murza, a critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin and a political prisoner; working with Ukrainian human rights defenders to monitor and document war crimes and to push for transparency and credible reporting on the war; and shedding light on the human rights conditions and closed civic space in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover in 2021.[129]

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121 NED, "Where NED Works", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.ned.org/regions-2/.
122 NED, "Africa", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.ned.org/region/africa/.
123 NED, "Africa".
124 NED, "Africa".
125 NED, "About".
126 NED, "How We Work", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.ned.org/about/how-we-work/.
127 NED, "How We Work".
128 NED, "How We Work".
129 NED, *2023 Annual Report*, accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.ned.org/2023-annual-report/.

Under the second term of US President Donald Trump, the NED has fallen victim to the foreign aid reductions introduced by the administration.[130] US funding cuts, as well as the shift in budgeting in Europe to prioritise defence and security priorities, have left civil society and NGOs in uncertainty about future funding for their work. For a large number of African organisations in particular, the funding cuts pose existential challenges and, in the absence of alternative funding sources, many have to close their doors. Organisations such as the NED – a grant-giving institution, in essence – will also have to adjust their operation models and downscale in terms of projects and funding.

People Powered (Global Hub for Participatory Democracy)

People Powered is a transnational organisation promoting the values of participatory democracy through community-level projects such as 'participatory budgeting, participatory policy-making, participatory planning, and citizen assemblies'.[131] People Powered views itself as a 'global union for participatory democracy workers'.[132] It kicked off its activities with the Global Participatory Budgeting Hub (Global PB Hub) in 2019, which was designed to 'improve and expand participatory budgeting (PB) around the world by addressing common challenges and opportunities faced by PB implementers and supporters'.[133]

Until 2023, the Global PB Hub 'coordinated research, shared learning, and developed resources, building on the expertise of the PB community'.[134] PB was chosen by People Powered as an entry point for global participatory democracy advocacy due to its global character. Over the past three decades, PB has been applied in one form or another in over 7 000 cities in the world, making it the most used participatory democracy model.[135] Together with Reboot, one of the challenges People Power identified was that, despite the global interest in PB and the practical experience gained over the course of 30 years, PB 'resources are often inaccessible to local implementers and advocates'. It also found that PB still encounters shared issues, such as 'limited guidance for implementers, limited participation, labour-intensive coordination, empty top-down mandates, and slow implementation of winning projects'.[136] People Powered's efforts to promote participatory democracy now extend beyond just PB. In 2023, members decided to transition away from the Global PB and to return to the organisation's original focus, a 'broader approach of supporting diverse participatory democracy methods'.[137]

130 Joshua Kurlantzick, "Trump's Cuts to Democracy Promotion Like the NED Already Hit Asian Organisations Hard", Council on Foreign Relations, March 3, 2025.
131 People Powered, "About Us", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.peoplepowered.org/about.
132 People Powered, "About Us".
133 People Powered, "Global PB Hub", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.peoplepowered.org/global-pb-hub.
134 People Powered, "Global PB Hub".
135 People Powered, "Global PB Hub".
136 People Powered, "Global PB Hub".
137 People Powered, "Global PB Hub".

The People Powered network consists of more than 120 CSOs in over 50 countries, including 28 organisations in Africa. The latter are located in Angola, Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, Gambia, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. There are also several individual members of People Power from African countries.[138] In terms of funding, People Powered receives financial support from the following partner organisations:

- ACLS
- Bertelsmann Stiftung
- Ford Foundation
- Friedrich Naumann Foundation
- International Republican Institute
- mySociety
- National Endowment for Democracy
- National Democratic Institute
- Open Society Foundations
- One Project
- Porticus
- Waverley St Foundation
- William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
- World Resources Institute

People Powered also partners with Open Government Partnership, International Observatory on Participatory Democracy, Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency and the *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*.[139] In its *2024 Impact Report*, it describes its work as helping to 'expand people's power to participate in democratic decision-making, beyond elections' – important in a year that saw a record number of elections and continued democratic decline.[140] During 2024, the organisation offered support and training to 604 'democracy advocates and government reformers' and launched 40 participatory government programmes. In the case of the former, 62% of these initiatives were in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe or Latin America and half of all participatory government programmes were launched in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe or Latin America.[141]

138 People Powered, "Our Members", accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.peoplepowered.org/about/members.
139 People Powered, "Partners".
140 People Powered, *People Powered: Impact Report 2024*, accessed July 28, 2025, https://drive.google.com/file/d/15CoUSvtTqqyfwJWikpjNggxCvx0qVSp5/view.
141 People Powered, *Impact Report 2024*.

Through its work, People Powered has helped communities address the challenges they experience as a result of climate change through its Climate Democracy Accelerator, launching 55 climate justice coalitions in 2024. It also launched the Inclusive Democracy Accelerator, aimed at making democratic processes more inclusive and involving marginalised communities. In addition, it worked on improving digital governance and policymaking related to AI, data privacy and digital inclusion.[142]

Analysis

From the activities and focus areas of the networks and other initiatives considered in this chapter, two things stand out. Firstly, civil society in Africa attaches great value to networks and, secondly, human rights and protecting human rights defenders are high priority areas central to democracy. It would appear that human rights is an important entry point for advocacy and work promoting democratic values. Indeed, without respect for human rights, the work of civil society would be moot, as the existence and ability of CSOs to operate are directly related to and impacted by many of the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On their own, CSOs are not as strong as when they join forces through either formal or informal networks. Even banding together to support statements, petitions and other forms of calling governments and international organisations to action is efficient, as evidenced by the work of DefendDefenders in mobilising support from the UNHRC.

On their own, CSOs are not as strong as when they join forces through either formal or informal networks

At the continental level, the AU also has mechanisms in place for civil society engagement and inclusion, linked to the ideals of the AU Constitutive Act.[143] The AU Commission has a dedicated Civil Society Division, created with the aim to 'mainstream all contributions from [CSOs] into AU programs, policies, and principles'.[144] The Civil Society Division is responsible for organising periodic 'workshops to enlighten CSOs on understanding the AU and its organs'; scheduling 'sectoral dialogues such as the African Union interfaith dialogues, diaspora engagement and the AU/OATUU Trade Union Partnership forum, where CSOs can make their contributions towards influencing decision making regarding the Continent's integration and development agenda'.[145] The AU also engages CSOs

142 People Powered, *Impact Report 2024*.
143 Amani Africa, *The Role of Civil Society Organisations in African Union's Decision-Making Processes: Agenda Setters, Participants, Collaborators and Shapers?*, Special Research Report 18 (Amani Africa, December 2023).
144 Amani Africa, *Civil Society Organisations*, 3.
145 Amani Africa, *Civil Society Organisations*, 3.

through the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) established under AU Constitutive Act. ECOSOCC plays an advisory role to the AU and 'is centred on the engagement of the CSOs in the processes and work of the AU'.[146]

Civil society networks are therefore not unusual in Africa or unknown to CSOs in Southern Africa. With Southern Defenders already active in the region, a dedicated network focusing more on governance and the protection of democratic values outside of human rights does not seem far-fetched. To this end, the region houses the Southern African Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (SAf-CNGO), a body that incorporates national NGOs from all 16 SADC member states. SAf-CNGO differs from Southern Defenders in that human rights (while linked) are not its specific scope. Rather, SAf-CNGO has four strategic objectives:[147]

- 'Contribute to the promotion of democracy, peace, and good governance in SADC and beyond in line with national, regional and continental instruments.'
- 'Strengthened and consolidated Public Policy Research and Advocacy in the region for poverty reduction and sustainable development programmes at regional and national levels.'
- 'Strengthening members' and civil society partners' capacities, partnerships, and networks for influencing SADC Member States towards inclusive, equitable, and people-centred regional integration and development.'
- 'Institutionalised engagement and coordination on SADC programmes to fulfil objectives contemplated by Article 23 of the SADC Treaty.'

Article 23 relates to stakeholders, and under its provisions SADC is expected to be inclusive, as it deepens regional integration, engaging the citizens of the region and key stakeholders from the private sector, CSOs, NGOs and 'workers and employers organisations'.[148] In January 2024, SAf-CNGO held what is to become an annual High-Level Stakeholder Symposium, where it highlighted the importance for 'SADC Member States to work together with national civil society in the domestication of SADC policies and SADC programmes and to enhance the visibility of SADC at national level'.[149] In this spirit, SAf-CNGO was encouraged to 'continue and accelerate the sharing of experience, knowledge and information on best practices in promoting sustainable human and social development'.[150]

146 Amani Africa, *Civil Society Organisations*, 3.
147 SAf-CNGO, "Strategic Intervention Areas", accessed July 28, 2025, https://saf-cngo.org/program-intervention-areas/.
148 SADC, "Article 23: Stakeholders", in "Consolidated Text of the Treaty of the Southern African Development Community, as Amended", 20, accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.resakss.org/sites/default/files/SADC%202014%20Consolidated%20Text%20of%20the%20Treaty%20of%20the%20Southern%20African%20Development.pdf.
149 SAf-CNGO, "High-Level Stakeholder Symposium: Catalysing Effective Civil Society Engagement in the SADC Regional Integration and Development Agenda", 3, accessed July 28, 2025, https://saf-cngo.org/resources/.
150 SAf-CNGO, "High-Level Stakeholder Symposium", 3.

Parties resolved that SAf-CNGO will work on 'a framework that seeks to formulate a robust engagement mechanism between civil society and parliamentarians at national and regional levels'. In turn, it pledged to reconsider 'the CSO's "SADC We Want" Vision to ensure it meets the evolving context and repositions civil society priorities for constructive engagement with the development agenda over the next five years'.[151] Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, SAf-CNGO has had to overcome several financial and capacity challenges, but it has put forward a strategic action plan for 2023–2026. Under this action plan, the organisation hopes to achieve its strategic objectives by 2026 and notes that it 'aims to fortify and consolidate [its] position in the facilitation of civil society engagement within the SADC integration and development processes, Pan-African development initiatives, and the broader global development landscape'.[152]

SAf-CNGO has conducted a detailed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis and identifies financial limitations and the resulting staff turnover, as well as civil society fragmentation, as some of the biggest weaknesses hindering its ability to reach the objectives of the strategic plan.[153] Along the same lines, restrictive environments for civil society, scanty engagement between SADC organs and CSOs and low levels of support for regional and local CSOs from their host governments are recognised as the biggest threats to the work of SAf-CNGO and its ability to meet its objectives.[154]

The foundations of the regional civil society network that youth participants called for are already in place, as evidenced by SAf-CNGO. Based on the SWOT analysis conducted by SAf-CNGO, greater buy-in from regional governments and stronger support from the SADC organs can boost the organisation's profile and impact. The paradox is that civil society can find itself constrained by the actions of government. Civil society, meant to be a buffer and go-between for citizens and government, is part of a healthy democracy but nevertheless remains dependent on the good graces of those in power. In the case of regional CSOs headquartered in one country while serving multiple countries, host governments can make or break their work. Furthermore, not all democracies in the region are healthy, which means that CSOs in these more restrictive environments will have a harder time than their counterparts in more open settings.

It is also very difficult to track the impact of CSOs without transparent data. Annual reports from these organisations go a long way in contributing to this and helps to paint a clear picture of their activities. Yet SAf-CNGO, like many other CSOs and civil society networks reviewed, does not have annual reports that are readily accessible to the public. Listing a mission, vision and areas of work is useful, but to put meat on the bones, annual reports should ideally detail activities, successes, failures and information on partners and funders. Such documents can also help garner support for these organisations and draw in potential funders. Governments should not view civil society as the enemy but should

151 SAf-CNGO, "High-Level Stakeholder Symposium", 4.
152 SAf-CNGO, "Strategic Plan 2023–2026", 3, accessed July 28, 2025, https://saf-cngo.org/resources/.
153 SAf-CNGO, "Strategic Plan 2023–2026".
154 SAf-CNGO, "Strategic Plan 2023–2026".

be encouraged to deepen their engagement with CSOs in order to improve their own standing. CSOs are closer to the people than governments are and can connect citizens with those who govern in meaningful ways. The only way for government and civil society to let go of the stigmas attached to them is to engage in dialogue and bridge the gap between them.

CHAPTER 4

Learning from practice

The previous chapter acknowledged that a cross-border civil society network dedicated to strengthening democracy and good governance in Southern Africa is already in place. However, based on the views of youth expressed in consultations with SAIIA researchers, this network – and civil society in general – can do more to make itself known and relevant and raise its impact. From the civil society mapping exercise conducted in the previous chapter, it is clear that networks – both national and regional – are preferred forms of mobilisation for civil society in Africa. West Africa, in particular, hosts many such networks and have established good working relationships with ECOWAS and the AU. And with SAf-CNGO identifying the lack of such engagement as one of its biggest weaknesses, learning from these organisations in West Africa could be beneficial.

In August 2024, a team of SAIIA researchers therefore travelled to Accra, Ghana where several national and regional civil society networks that focus on democracy or democracy-related issues are hosted. SAIIA conducted interviews to learn first-hand what makes these organisations impactful and how they connect with regional and continental bodies. Researchers spent time with representatives from WADEMOS, the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and the Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG). The questions they raised dealt with the founding of the organisations, why they deemed this work to be necessary and what lessons they could impart from the successes and challenges they had experienced. From these discussions it became clear that civil society in the region grew in response to the regional political situation, in particular the era of one-party and military rule in West Africa. What the IDEG representative interviewed aptly described as 'exclusion [having] become the dominant definition [of democracy] in practice' gave rise to the region's organisations and networks of civil society.[155] The transition from military rule to democracy in many West African countries in the late 1990s meant that civil society could establish itself as an important stakeholder to sustain democratic change and prevent reversal to authoritarian contexts.

While the situation in West Africa is by no means perfect (democratic consolidation is still ongoing and coups halt democratic progress), civil society has played a significant role in bringing about democratic gains in the region and championing human rights. It has also worked to protect those who work in defence of human rights and democracy, including the media. In conversation with IDEG, the research team learned that elections and election observation was the central convening point for many CSOs during this time of

155 Interview with IDEG representative, August 8, 2024.

transition. This gave organisations that would later form big networks, such as WADEMOS, the leverage to focus on other issues and make themselves known and useful to ECOWAS.[156] The IDEG representative noted that, because of the continued engagement of regional CSOs in election observation, international observer missions are becoming 'less prominent'. Furthermore, 'organised labour' and student movements, prevalent in the civil society mobilisation of the late 1990s, remain important stakeholders.[157]

> While the situation in West Africa is by no means perfect civil society has played a significant role in bringing about democratic gains in the region and championing human rights

All the representatives consulted agreed that one of the most important ways to ensure that they are able to form working relationships with regional government bodies is by taking the initiative. The representative from WANEP suggested that the organisation grew because it made itself relevant to ECOWAS. WANEP was formed at a time when civil war was ravaging West Africa, and from the recognition that it had become a regional crisis. As the WANEP representative put it, '[W]e needed [to] focus not only at the national but also the regional level.'[158] WANEP has since its founding in 1998 grown into a regional network of more than 700 CSOs, including women, youth and community-based organisations, according to its representative.

> One of the most important ways to ensure that they are able to form working relationships with regional government bodies is by taking the initiative

Solidarity is the thread that links all the organisations interviewed by the research team. Countries in the region had at the founding of these organisations experienced identical or similar issues, and civil society recognised that it could have more influence and impact if CSOs worked together to address the problems of society at the regional level. WADEMOS representatives described the young organisation as 'a transnational civil mobilisation' institute for protecting 'democratic norms and values in West Africa'.[159]

156 Interview with IDEG.
157 Interview with IDEG.
158 Interview with WANEP representative, August 6, 2024.
159 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana representatives, August 5, 2024.

Solidarity is the thread that links all the organisations interviewed by the research team

The creation of WADEMOS, they said, 'was driven by the fact that we noticed the democratic threats and challenges' in the region and observed that these were not 'country specific, they cut across borders'. At the same time, the quality of elections in the region was deteriorating.[160] Representatives also mentioned that shrinking civic space, often through legislation, was becoming more common in the region around the time of the founding of WADEMOS. From this came the realisation that civil society could no longer operate on its own at the national level but had to find regional 'common grounds for identifying'. It was necessary to engage one another on shared issues across borders to boost influence and potential impact.[161]

WADEMOS has established strong links with ECOWAS – a process, representatives noted, that had already begun while organisations in the network were still focusing only on the national level. To break through to the regional level and engage ECOWAS, they had to find 'common issues and common campaigns' that could be leveraged to 'break that kind of silos and share experiences in our work'.[162] One such area that allowed WADEMOS to 'mobilise strategically' is elections, where the work of the West Africa Election Observation Network was central. WADEMOS could support 'high level civil society technical expertise to Nigeria… Liberia, [and] Sierra Leone where we undertook an update of the electoral processes and systems and engaged extensively with the election management bodies in these countries'.[163]

Also with regard to elections, representatives of WADEMOS noted 'abuse of electoral processes, abuse of incumbency' as additional common issues: '[O]ne of the tools to push back these kinds of abuse was to enhance civil society resilience and to amplify the issues that threatened elections and also regionalise the issues beyond the borders of these countries.' To address these issues and strengthen the voice of civil society on such matters, WADEMOS has relied on 'consultative dialogue, where civil society organisations across Member States of West Africa convene online to build… a communiqué… similar to what ECOWAS and Heads of State release at the end of their summit'.[164]

Southern Africa experiences many issues similar to the ones noted by WADEMOS representatives, especially in recent years, with elections in Zimbabwe having come under

160 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana.
161 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana.
162 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana.
163 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana.
164 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana.

fire for misconduct and the inconsistent response of SADC leaders to the outcome and statements of observer missions. The strategy used by WADEMOS – of finding common ground and releasing shared statements on key issues – can help SAf-CNGO in cementing its position and strengthening civil society solidarity. Statements submitted directly to the SADC Secretariat also bring issues that are important to the civil society network to the attention of the regional bloc's leadership.

The relationship between ECOWAS and WADEMOS is such that the latter is engaged in working groups on 'key areas for democratic reforms and democratic renewal' that regularly meet and report to the bloc.[165] A critical issue on this agenda around the time of the interviews was the impending exit of three states from ECOWAS – Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger – to form the Alliance of Sahel Countries. The representatives interviewed said this development 'will cause further instability'. This has become a focal point of mobilisation and research outputs produced by WADEMOS.[166] Apart from elections and governance, WADEMOS also engages on terrorism and violent extremism in West Africa. The organisation uses a bi-weekly newsletter (Eye of West Africa) to shed light on the threats and situations it monitors. WADEMOS also conducts work on the state of human rights defenders in the region.

Importantly, this ties in with the work of WANEP. The representative interviewed highlighted that WANEP's formation was crucial since few CSOs worked on peacebuilding at the time, instead focusing on democracy and good governance. By choosing to concentrate on peacebuilding, WANEP has been able to demonstrate its relevance to democratic progression, which is what 'gives WANEP leverage'.[167] The organisation can also 'access areas that are hard to reach for other organisations [and] people', contributing to its continued relevance for ECOWAS and national governments. In this spirit, WANEP has established the National Early Warning System, consisting of national focal points that provide data. As a result, it has become an important part of ECOWAS's peace and security support.[168] The WANEP representative said that the partnership with ECOWAS has been forged 'because of our strategy'. WANEP has several actors in the network that 'are far from the capital', meaning that they have better access to information, especially in 'areas where even the state structures are non-existent'. The representative mentioned that 'no single entity can address the kind of challenges' the region has experienced and currently faces, therefore all stakeholders are valued and engaged.[169]

Collecting their own data and conducting their own research are also viewed as ways in which to inform WADEMOS's programming, 'specifically deepening our solidarity, protect strength and protection of human rights defenders, where the evidence shows

165 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana.
166 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana.
167 Interview with WANEP.
168 Interview with WANEP.
169 Interview with WANEP.

that there is some state sponsored [violations] of human rights defenders'.[170] With its Next Gen programme, WADEMOS also engages youth through online tools 'to support and build the capacity of young people as human rights activists as future… leaders and as democrats in their region'. Youth engagement is a key strategy of the organisations consulted, even on peace and security, as it is viewed as vital to ensuring the future of democracy. To 'engage their government on issues of employment', representatives said they are looking into constitutional reforms 'using the civic mobilisation agenda at national level so that the civic space continues to be open'.[171]

WADEMOS and CDD-Ghana representatives felt strongly that solidarity has been the key to success for the various initiatives undertaken by both institutions. Solidarity, they maintain, 'promotes learning and experience sharing, as well as protections for CSOs and activists working in closed spaces and extreme environments of suppression'.[172] It offers 'some kind of safeguard or security or assurance [to CSOs] that they are not alone'. Speaking more from the CDD-Ghana perspective (WADEMOS is hosted by CDD-Ghana, so representatives were commenting in both capacities), Afrobarometer data indicating that citizens are demanding more democracy is telling for the region and the continent. The democracy demand–supply gap, they felt, 'is creating a lot of disappointment and the solution for citizens, especially young people… [is] about the level of governance'.[173]

Researchers were also able to learn from WACSI about the conditions in West Africa that make this region such a hub for cross-border civil society networks and CSOs in general. WACSI was founded in the early 2000s and has been operating since 2007 'to respond to capacity gaps of civil society across West Africa'.[174] The representative noted that the institute does not have country offices; it is based in Ghana with a node in Nigeria, and works across West Africa with CSOs and networks. One of the most impactful WACSI initiatives has been the West Africa Civil Society Policy Dialogues, through which civil society is mobilised to consider 'international issues, cross-border, issues of security, development issues'. Through these dialogues, the network aims to 'get issues to the agendas of governments' – at one stage, because of the severity of the issues in the region, such meetings were held monthly.[175]

West Africa and Ghana in particular have become a kind of hub for civil society and researchers wanted to know to what this could be attributed. From discussions with the representative from WACSI, it became clear that the regional leadership, ECOWAS, despite its recent issues, is stronger and more formally organised than most other regional organisations. The ability of CSOs to mobilise and form the type of cross-border networks visible in West Africa links directly to 'the presence of strong regional entities'.[176] ECOWAS,

170 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana.
171 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana.
172 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana.
173 Interview with WADEMOS/CDD-Ghana.
174 Interview with WACSI, August 5, 2024.
175 Interview with WACSI.
176 Interview with WACSI.

through the creation of the West Africa Civil Society Forum (WACSOF), also demonstrated that it values cooperation with civil society. The WACSI representative explained that WACSOF was born out of an ad hoc committee established after consultations between ECOWAS (leading the consultations) and civil society leaders in West Africa, with the aim of cementing relations between the regional body and civil society. Notably, the WACSI representative highlighted that West Africa operates first as a region and then as individual countries, without devaluing national sovereignty.[177] This high-level recognition of a regional identity cannot be said to be present in Southern Africa. Despite West Africa facing more linguistic differences, it is more integrated than other regions, and not just on the economic level. This no doubt affects the willingness and ability of CSOs to extend beyond national borders. In a similar fashion to how APRM country reviews give rise to best practices, civil society on the continent can benefit from peer learning and sharing best practices.

Researchers also asked representatives about West African civil society's leverage of technology. Several organisations mentioned the use of online meetings to convene on important matters and streamline outputs. The WACSI representative said technology has given civil society a 'platform to speak' but has also created a new threat realm. In addition, many organisations are unable to access technology, neither software nor hardware.[178] The MFWA highlighted the advantages of technology in building up a kind of institutional memory on websites and convene and mobilise partners. However, at the time of the interview the organisation was recovering from a hacking incident that had crashed its website, drawing attention to the threats posed by digital technology.[179]

The MFWA is deeply engaged in fact-checking and fighting mis- and disinformation. This is complicated by developing digital technologies, especially AI. As one MFWA representative said, '[W]ith dependence on technologies comes new threats.'[180] The attack on the MFWA has not been attributed to a specific source but representatives noted that it came at a time when the organisation was preparing to make public findings on corruption. The website was lost and one MFWA representative lamented this situation, saying that an organisation's website is like a sales catalogue, an 'archive' – 'when it is lost, all the work and evidence of [that work] is lost'.[181] Both the MFWA and WACSI noted a link between the impact of civil society and its ability to leverage technology. Technology has also contributed to the changing nature of civil society, where, as the WACSI representative highlighted, CSOs are no longer only brick-and-mortar institutions, with many embracing technology rapidly and choosing to operate solely online.[182]

177 Interview with WACSI.
178 Interview with WACSI.
179 Interview with MFWA, August 8, 2024.
180 Interview with MFWA.
181 Interview with MFWA.
182 Interview with WACSI.

Both organisations brought up the independence of the media and civil society, with the MFWA noting that some major media outlets are owned by politicians or affiliates and therefore risk losing independence. WACSI said that politics is rife in the civil society space and the risk of having 'politically penetrated organisations [that] just exist in name' is very real. Finally, the WACSI representative brought another important aspect to the attention of the research team: civil society accountability. CSOs, the representative said, 'are responsible for ourselves and for consistency', but there is an inherent danger in civil society becoming political. While civil society undertakes to hold governments accountable for their actions, CSOs also have to be accountable for their actions and to citizens. The WACSI representative said citizens share the same commitment to the progress of West Africa as civil society. Civil society has the responsibility to change the current negative perceptions of democracy.[183]

The number of coups in West Africa in recent years that had popular support is sobering and linked to generational divides, according to the WACSI representative. The youth demographic showed higher levels of support for alternative modes of government because democracy is all they have known 'their entire adult lives and have nothing else to compare it to', especially in terms of improving living conditions, economic prosperity and security.[184]

The conditions in West Africa are markedly different from those in Southern Africa. From the discussions with representatives of cross-border civil society networks in West Africa, it is clear that these CSOs navigate their differences efficiently to establish networks that go beyond linguistic similarities and ideology to serve a common purpose. And while the networks and their constituent organisations continue to face challenges, they also have an impact in the region, and this is recognised by ECOWAS. Civil society coalition building has proved to be an asset to the many CSOs in West Africa. Smaller organisations have been able to engage in platforms that otherwise may have been inaccessible to them and so have strengthened their own work and found new opportunities.

Conclusion

As indicated in Chapter 1, while popular support for democracy remains high, serious governance and procedural issues need to be addressed to ensure a future for democracy in Africa. Civil society can play a big role in this process and has a responsibility and critical opportunity to bring citizens and governments closer together and work towards meaningful solutions. In Chapter 2, the views of youth on the future of democracy were highlighted. Youth see many threats to democracy and expect civil society to treat these as a priority. The youth consulted felt strongly that democracy is the only viable form of government for development. Chapter 3 considered existing civil society networks

183 Interview with WACSI.
184 Interview with WACSI.

dedicated to democratic progress and the lessons that can be drawn from them. The chapter also considered SADC's own civil society network, Saf-CNGO, but noted that it still has some way to go to reach the point of deep impact. Finally, Chapter 4 presented key takeaways from interviews with civil society networks based in Accra, Ghana, detailing the reasons why these organisations were formed, why they continue to work in the areas they do and how they have had to innovate and adapt to overcome the threats they face.

Solidarity between CSOs is empowering. Civil society in Southern Africa is vibrant and an important presence in the region's democracies and more closed spaces alike. Because democratic consolidation is not uniform in the region, it is all the more important for CSOs across the 16 SADC member states to stand together. It is crucial that, under Saf-CNGO, civil society identifies gaps in its own work and finds common ground for issues on which to make their relevance clear and nudge regional leadership in the right direction. The conduct of elections is one such avenue that could be leveraged, as has been the case with WADEMOS. The response of individual leaders in the region to Zimbabwe's much contested elections in 2023 was not consistent. Several international observer organisations declared the elections not free and fair and highlighted multiple discrepancies. A stronger observer presence by regional CSOs and united discourse on future elections could be beneficial. Civil society in Southern Africa should come together to find common positions, identify shared issues and work together towards solutions that will benefit the region.

Recommendations

- Many of the issues experienced in individual countries in the region have spill-over effects and should be treated as regional, not national, concerns. Civil society can collectively raise these issues with SADC organs.
- Youth input should be prioritised at both the national and the regional level in Southern Africa. Civil society can be the vehicle through which this takes place.
- Civil society should adapt creatively to digital technology to overcome the threats it poses and make it work for it.
- There is strength in numbers. Small CSOs should partner with bigger organisations and bigger organisations should provide a seat at the table.

African perspectives.
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