

CIVIL SOCIETY ADVOCACY AND MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION FOR INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of civil society advocacy and multi-stakeholder collaboration in promoting inclusive governance in Africa, with specific reference to the African Union's Agenda 2063 and related normative frameworks. Methodologically, it draws on a qualitative approach combining documentary analysis of African Union (AU) legal and policy instruments with grounded insights from five semi-structured interviews conducted in Ghana, involving actors from local government, youth leadership, academia, civil society, and grassroots citizen engagement. The paper argues that civil society organisations (CSOs) operate within a historically contested space shaped by colonial legacies and post-independence governance models that often marginalise civic participation. It presents evidence that, despite persistent structural constraints, CSOs continue to serve as watchdogs, civic educators, and co-creators of public policy, particularly where and when they are institutionally recognised and meaningfully engaged. Key discussion areas include the shrinking of civic space, politicisation of legitimacy, and promising multi-stakeholder models such as participatory budgeting and citizen-led monitoring. Drawing on comparative insights from Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, and Tunisia, the paper demonstrates that inclusive governance is most effectively realised when collaboration is not just symbolic or token but embedded in law, practice, and governance architectural systems. The paper concludes by underscoring the need to move beyond fragmented participation and toward enabling frameworks that secure civil society's long-term role. The paper suggests a need to embed civil society engagement as a core component of governance across AU Member States. Member States should consider the formal institutionalisation of multi-stakeholder platforms and the development of domestic civic endowment funds to reduce donor dependency.

Keywords: Agenda 2063, Civil Society Advocacy, Inclusive Governance, Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration, Institutional Reform.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive governance is central to realising democratic values and to delivering public services that reflect citizens' needs. As African states work to build responsive and citizen centred institutions, civil society and multi stakeholder collaboration are indispensable. This ambition is affirmed in continental frameworks such as Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. Moving beyond a legacy of centralised governance, the continent increasingly recognises that inclusive governance, driven by civil society and diverse stakeholders, is essential to peace, stability, and sustainable development. Inclusive governance ensures that no one is left behind in decision making, policy formulation, and implementation, and it seeks to build systems that reflect the diversity and dignity of Africa's people. With a population of more than 1.4 billion, the need to develop governance structures that represent and serve all Africans across ethnic, linguistic, geographic, gender, and socio-economic lines is both urgent and foundational.

For this paper, inclusive governance refers to institutional arrangements and processes that enable the meaningful participation of all societal actors, particularly those who have been excluded, in shaping public decisions, delivering services, and ensuring accountability. The African Union (2015) promotes participatory governance as a pillar of inclusive development, and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007) affirms that effective governance requires broad based citizen engagement. These positions align with participatory and collaborative governance theories, which emphasise trust building, deliberative processes, and shared responsibility among state and non-state actors as conditions for legitimate and durable outcomes (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Wampler & Hartz-Karp, 2012). This framing positions civil society organisations not as peripheral actors but as essential co-creators of public value in the African governance landscape.

The study adopted a qualitative case study research design. This framework was deemed suitable because as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the role of civil society advocacy and multi-stakeholder collaboration in promoting inclusive governance in Africa. To complement the literature review five key informant interviews were conducted. The key informants comprised of a District Assembly Member, a former Chief Executive Officer of a youth focused nongovernmental organization, the President of the National Service Personnel Association at the Ga West Municipal Assembly, an editorial marketer who spoke to the perspectives of everyday Ghanaians, and a lecturer affiliated with the Ghana National Education Campaign Coalition. The literature review and insights from the informants were analysed in line with the thematic areas examined in the paper. These reflections were integrated with African Union normative frameworks, national cases, and global good practices to inform the policy and practice-oriented recommendations that follow.

2. TOWARDS AN APPLIED MODEL OF INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE THROUGH CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

The analysis presented throughout this paper is anchored on a conceptual framework that integrates both collaborative and participatory governance theories. According to Ansell and Gash (2008), collaborative models explain the value of structured interaction and trust-building among state and non-state actors. On the other hand, Gaventa (2002) highlights how participatory governance actively bridges the gap between marginalized communities and formal state institutions.

Building on these theories, inclusive governance is conceptualised here as institutional arrangements that enable the meaningful participation of all societal actors in shaping public decisions, delivering services, and ensuring accountability. Through this combined lens, civil society organisations (CSOs) emerge not as peripheral observers but as joint governing partners. As recent studies by International IDEA (2019) and Nyanchoga (2020) have established, alongside frameworks from the UNDP (2021), when CSOs fulfil active

roles as watchdogs, civic educators, and co-creators of public value, this robust associational life becomes a critical driver for democratic consolidation across the continent.

Illustrative cases, including the participatory budgeting model in Makueni County and the multi-faith Ufungamano dialogue process in Kenya, will be used to demonstrate how collaboration between CSOs and the state reflects key principles of collaborative governance. These principles include shared goals, trust-building, and sustained, ongoing engagement, as articulated by Ansell and Gash (2008). The paper proposes a conceptual framework that captures these dynamics and guides future application. Figure 1, titled Toward an Applied Model of Inclusive Governance through Civil Society Engagement, presents a visual representation of this framework. It illustrates inclusive governance as the outcome of dynamic, reciprocal interaction among CSOs, state actors, and other stakeholders, shaped by enabling conditions and informed by continental normative instruments.

Frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance provide strategic direction. However, successfully diffusing these continental frameworks into local governance requires an active civil society to translate broad mandates into grassroots development (UNDP, 2021). Furthermore, operational conditions, such as legal recognition, political openness, and access to resources, must be present to support meaningful engagement (Buyse, 2018; Makuwira, 2014). Figure 1 shows how governance outcomes are co-produced through mutual accountability and structured collaboration. Ultimately, the evidence and reflections presented in subsequent sections will be analysed through this model to test its practical applicability across diverse African governance contexts.

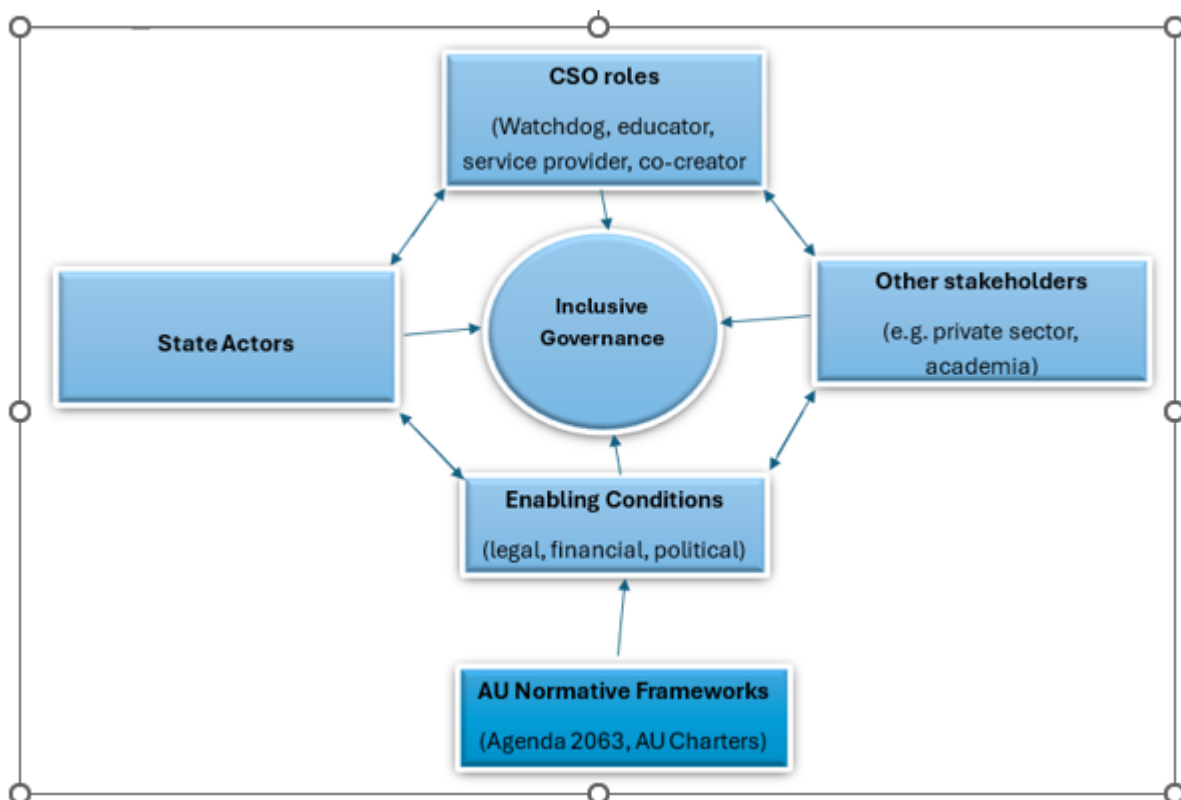


Figure 1: Conceptual Model for Inclusive Government Through CSOs Engagements and Collaboration
Source: Scott (2025)

This multi-actor model of inclusive governance provides the analytical lens through which the historical context, systemic barriers, and case studies will be evaluated. As shown in the conceptual framework,

effective and sustained engagement among civil society organisations, state actors, and other stakeholders depends on enabling conditions such as legal recognition, political openness, and resource access (Buyse, 2018; Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). The subsequent examples of participatory budgeting in Makueni County (Omollo, 2011), constitutional advocacy in Kenya (Katiba Institute, 2020), and citizen monitoring in Ghana (SEND Ghana, 2013) all reflect how inclusive governance can be co-produced through trust-based, iterative collaboration. Rather than isolated successes, these cases highlight a replicable logic of engagement, one that validates the conceptual model and underscores the transformative role of CSOs across the continent (UNDP, 2021). The strategic recommendations in this paper outline how AU Member States and partners can institutionalise this model and scale inclusive governance as a durable and systemic feature of public administration, aligning with the broader aspirations of Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2015).

3. HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN AFRICAN GOVERNANCE

According to the African Union, civil society organisations are non-governmental, nonprofit organisations that are crucial to the continent's social, economic, and political advancement. The Civil Society Division of the African Union has observed that CSOs work on advocacy, policy development, and peacebuilding, coordinating their activities with the Union's strategic goals, including Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2025). Likewise, the African Union's advisory body, the Economic, Social, and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), characterises CSOs as essential to integrating African citizens' perspectives into the decision-making processes, particularly when it comes to advancing democracy and human rights (African Union, 2025). These definitions highlight the importance the AU has placed on CSOs in influencing governance, enhancing civil society, and promoting Africa's sustainable development.

Additionally, Makumbe (1998), notes that civil society in Africa can be traced to pre-colonial times, where some societies were run based on consensus. Conversely, in societies where traditional leaders were born or anointed rather than elected or appointed, there was no space for civic groups or structures. Evidence of precolonial civil society activity can be found in traditional songs, proverbs, and folk tales, which praised courage and wisdom in tackling individual and communal problems. Some of these traditional civic groups laid the foundation for African civil society, which later organised resistance against colonial rule (Mati, 2017). Many traditional associations, churches, and ethnic-based community organisations such as the Independent Churches and Schools in Kenya offered a counterpoint to imposed government structures during the colonial era. Often labelled subversive, these indigenous groups were systematically suppressed by colonial authorities (Adebola, 1981).

Highlighting the enduring legacy of this system, the former FAFALI Organisation CEO, observed:

The thing is, our whole governance system is inherited. It's top-down. People are not used to being involved or consulted. You can trace that back to the colonial era — chiefs were replaced with district commissioners who didn't answer to the people. That has continued in different forms till today.

This insight underlines how colonial administrative structures disrupted participatory traditions and entrenched hierarchical governance models, a pattern that continues to influence civil society engagement today. These early civil organisations, however, shaped how Africans began organising around rights, access to justice, and community welfare, laying the foundation for today's structured civil society (Nyang'oro, 1999; Olowu & Wunsch, 2004).

Civil society organisations grew increasingly important during the wave of democratisation sweeping Africa in the 1990s following independence. Trade unions, religious organisations, media groups, and human rights NGOs championed calls for multiparty democracy and constitutional reforms in nations such as Zambia, Ghana, and Benin (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Gyimah-Boadi, 2009). Their activism helped transform military and single-party regimes into more participatory political systems.

CSOs have since acted as mobilising agents for democratic governance, amplifying citizens' voices and demanding political pluralism, the rule of law, and accountability. As the District Assembly Member noted:

You see, back then, it was mostly Trade Unions, churches, or the press who could confront the government. Now, you have groups like IDEG and CDD Ghana that train citizens and youth groups on how to engage with policy.

This evolution highlights how civil society has matured from resistance movements into structured platforms that educate and empower citizens to engage constructively in governance.

Emphasising anti-corruption initiatives, budget monitoring, and openness, CSOs continue to play vital watchdog roles in many African countries today. Regularly publishing corruption perception indices, tracking public procurement, and exposing abuse of state resources, organisations like the Ghana Integrity Initiative and Kenya's chapter of Transparency International provide critical oversight. Civil society groups, including Corruption Watch in South Africa, have initiated lawsuits and public awareness campaigns to hold public officials accountable. Particularly in settings where state institutions lack strong internal checks, these watchdog functions have become indispensable.

Additionally, CSOs lead civic education and grassroots mobilisation efforts, particularly in rural and underdeveloped regions where government outreach is limited. They disseminate information on voter rights, democratic processes, and constitutional literacy. For instance, the civic education campaigns by the Constitution and Reform Education Consortium (CRECO) in Kenya helped shape public understanding of the draft 2010 constitution and encouraged informed participation during the referendum (Mutunga, 2015; Katiba Institute, 2020). These initiatives not only spread knowledge but also build capacity for meaningful participation in governance.

Speaking to this educational function, the President of the National Service Personnel at Ga West Municipal Assembly remarked:

The civic education stuff from NGOs helps us a lot. Sometimes it's hard to know your rights if no one breaks it down. And the government doesn't always do that, but the CSOs do.

Underprivileged and fragile environments often depend on CSOs to provide essential services where state capacity is limited. NGOs and faith-based groups have frequently led interventions in health, education, water, and legal aid. For example, the AIDS Support Organisation (TASO) provides HIV/AIDS support services in Uganda, while in the Democratic Republic of Congo, CSOs are primary providers of basic healthcare and education in conflict-affected zones (World Bank, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2019). This service-delivery role highlights civil society's contribution as a development partner and gap-filler in state governance.

Lastly, CSOs have played a critical role in shaping constitutional and legal reforms. In countries such as South Africa, Tunisia, and Nigeria, civil society coalitions have helped develop rights-based constitutions, repeal repressive laws, and promote gender-sensitive legislative reforms. The Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet which comprised of trade unions, legal experts, and advocacy groups, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 for its contribution to peaceful democratic transition (Nobel Prize, 2015).

Supporting this idea of legal reform advocacy, the former FAFALI CEO added:

You know how long it took us to push for the Right to Information Bill in Ghana? It took civil society almost two decades. Groups like MFWA, Imani Africa, and even journalists' unions kept hammering it until it was passed.

This example reaffirms that civil society's influence extends beyond service delivery and education. It is central to institutional reform and the expansion of civic rights. As voiced by one of the contributors with experience spanning public administration and civil society, this kind of advocacy exemplifies the long-term commitment required to transform governance cultures. It affirms the strategic relevance of CSOs as a bridge

between policymaking and the aspirations of ordinary citizens as an important point to keep in mind as we turn to the challenges civil society faces today.

Ongoing discourses among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers reveal two competing schools of thought regarding the African civic space. The first school of thought holds that digital penetration has democratized advocacy, enabling new forms of networked movements and collaborative governance (UNDP, 2021; Scott, 2025). The second perspective emphasizes a more pessimistic reality, noting that structural legal constraints and state surveillance continue to tighten simultaneously, resulting in a shrinking civic space (Buyse, 2018). Researchers bridging these views note that modern CSOs are increasingly navigating complex political settlements, carefully balancing confrontational watchdog roles with collaborative service-delivery functions to maintain institutional access (Fox, 2015). This broader discourse demands an understanding of civil society not merely as a democratic corrective, but as a highly adaptable institutional partner navigating restrictive environments to co-create public value.

4. SYSTEMIC AND POLITICAL BARRIERS TO CIVIL SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION

Initiatives aiming at inclusive governance in Africa constantly face pervasive political and structural obstacles rooted in the continent's historical and institutional frameworks. Precolonial African societies functioned through community-based participation (Makumbe, 1998). The colonial state's mistrust of autonomous African institutions, especially those perceived as political, set a precedent for post-independence governments to adopt similarly suspicious attitudes toward civil society (Bratton, 1989; Nyang'oro, 1999). As noted in the literature, many African governments reinforced hierarchical governance models, thereby restricting the influence of non-state actors (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004).

The geopolitical separation among Francophone, Lusophone, and Anglophone African countries further exacerbates structural challenges, influencing legal traditions, administrative cultures, and civic space dynamics (Mbondeniyi & Ochieng, 2013). Francophone countries, guided by the Napoleonic administrative model, emphasise state supremacy over associative activities, resulting in highly centralised systems (AfDB, 2021). In contrast, Anglophone countries typically reflect British common law traditions and offer comparatively more enabling legal and civic environments (AfDB, 2021; Mbondeniyi & Ochieng, 2013). This divergence complicates efforts to create unified regional strategies for civil society engagement.

The shrinking civic space remains a major challenge. Governments have passed laws that limit civil society operations through stringent registration rules, foreign funding restrictions, and state surveillance. Ethiopia's Civil Society Proclamation, for instance, once barred foreign-funded organisations from engaging in rights advocacy. Similar laws in Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda are used to control civil society activity under the pretext of national security (Dupuy et al., 2015; CIVICUS, 2023).

One interviewee, a District Assembly Member, captured the politicised stigmatisation of civil society organisations:

Some government people say those CSOs are trying to cause trouble. That's what they always say. But we know they're just afraid of being questioned.

Such narratives are echoed by senior civil society practitioners who have faced direct delegitimisation by government rhetoric. As a lecturer affiliated with the Ghana National Education Campaign Coalition (GNECC) explained:

Sometimes they say we are donor-driven, so our agenda is foreign. But our agenda is education and inclusion. These are constitutional rights. It's just a way to make us look suspicious to the public.

This entrenched suspicion restricts constructive engagement, positioning civil society as adversarial rather than collaborative actors.

Symbolic inclusion further undermines collaboration. Civil society representatives are sometimes invited to stakeholder engagements with no intent to incorporate their input. The editorial marketer pointed out:

They call you for meetings sometimes, but they already have an agenda. Whether you talk or not, they'll do what they planned.

The continued lack of institutional follow through and the use of symbolic inclusion signal a failure of the basic conditions needed for sustained engagement, namely mutual trust, clear rules, and institutional commitment (Emerson et al., 2012). When these elements are missing, participation becomes performative rather than a catalyst for change. This pattern is evident in the Ghana interviews, where CSO representatives described consultations as superficial and lacking feedback channels or legal requirements to act on their input. These obstacles support Ansell and Gash's (2008) view that authentic collaboration occurs only when trust and institutional commitment are reinforced through iterative, transparent interaction.

Another respondent from GNECC stressed the lack of institutional mechanisms for follow-through:

There is no law that compels them to listen to CSOs. Even when we're invited to forums, the feedback loop is broken. No follow-up, no updates... just silence.

Additionally, donor dependency continues to challenge the sustainability and legitimacy of civil society organisations. Funding misalignment with local priorities and inconsistent financial flows hinder long-term planning. Furthermore, punitive tax laws and the absence of government support mechanisms for domestic philanthropy leave civil society fragmented and vulnerable (Makuwira, 2014; Toepler, et al., 2023).

These barriers including historical distrust, rhetorical delegitimization, tokenism, poor institutional follow-through, and financial precarity all work to limit the full realisation of civil society's potential in promoting inclusive governance.

5. CASE STUDIES: SUCCESSFUL MULTI-STAKEHOLDER MODELS

Multi-stakeholder governance systems in Africa are characterised by cooperation among civil society, government agencies, private sector players, and international organisations (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). These partnerships have made remarkable progress in promoting openness, policy reform, and participatory governance across the continent (International IDEA, 2019). The following case studies highlight context-specific policies aligned with AU guidelines described in Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2015) and the African Charter on Public Service (African Union, 2011), while interweaving citizen voices from Ghana that illuminate how such models, or their absence, are felt on the ground

One well-known example of constitutional reform driven by civil society is the Ufungamano Initiative in Kenya. Late in the 1990s, religious leaders, academics, lawyers, and community groups founded an alternative constitutional review forum in response to declining faith in the state-sponsored process. This broad-based coalition successfully mobilized citizens to demand a people-driven framework, ultimately forcing a political compromise that merged the civic and state-led review commissions (Mati, 2012; Murigu, 2003).

By merging state and civil society approaches, Ufungamano effectively influenced Kenya's 2010 Constitution, one of the continent's most participatory and progressive legal documents. Specifically, this collaborative effort ensured that public participation was formally entrenched as a binding national value under Article 10 of the constitution (Constitution of Kenya, 2010; Katiba Institute, 2020). This process exemplifies the collaborative governance framework by establishing a structured forum where adversarial relationships were transformed through trust-building and sustained dialogue (Ansell & Gash, 2008). The

initiative proved that when CSOs unify their advocacy, they can compel the state to adopt inclusive legal frameworks that permanently alter the governance architecture.

The Ufungamano case demonstrates how sustained civil society pressure can transition from oppositional advocacy into structured, collaborative policy-making. This necessity for long-term resilience is mirrored across the continent. As noted by the former CEO of the FAFALI Organisation in Ghana, organisations like IEA-Ghana, CDD, and Imani Africa were instrumental in shaping public discourse around legal reforms such as the Right to Information Bill:

You know how long it took us to push for that? Almost two decades. Civil society kept at it – MFWA, Imani, journalists' unions. That's the power of advocacy, even when the government drags its feet.

Participatory budgeting enables citizens and civil society to help shape fiscal decisions. In South Africa, the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) requires municipalities to engage with communities during budget formation. In Makueni County, Kenya, citizen forums and budget hearings link grassroots input to resource allocation (Rwigi, Manga, & Michuki, 2020). This model has shown success because it moves beyond symbolic consultation to fulfil Ansell and Gash's (2008) criteria for shared responsibility and institutional commitment. By legally mandating community input before funds are disbursed, the county effectively bridges the gap between marginalized communities and formal state actors, which directly applies Gaventa's (2002) principles of participatory governance. Lagos State in Nigeria also runs budget consultative forums involving citizens, CSOs, and private sector leaders. While these legal frameworks exist on paper, their actual impact relies on moving beyond token consultation. Highlighting the stark difference between symbolic assemblies and genuine engagement, a District Assembly Member in Ghana noted that true oversight requires early inclusion:

Sometimes, you only see these assemblies when it's time to share contracts. But if you involve people in budget talks, then they will hold you to account.

Beyond initial budget allocations, accountability tools such as Community Score Cards have empowered citizens to evaluate public services after the fact. In Uganda, these cards improved immunisation and drug availability (Björkman & Svensson, 2009). Ghana's SEND-Ghana used scorecard findings in education and agriculture to influence national budget decisions (SEND Ghana, 2013). This evidence-based approach highlights the role of CSOs as essential knowledge brokers. By utilizing community scorecards, SEND-Ghana created an iterative feedback loop that forced institutional responsiveness. This demonstrates how empirical data can neutralize political resistance and foster objective multi-stakeholder collaboration, ensuring that governance outcomes remain citizen-centred (Fox, 2015).

Continental platforms have also helped structure civil society engagement. The AU ECOSOCC offers a forum for civil society to contribute to policy discussions, shaping frameworks on tax justice, climate, and social protection (Jonas & Seabo, 2015). Professional associations such as the African Association for Public Administration and Management (AAPAM) expand this engagement from policy formulation to practical governance. AAPAM brings together public/private officials and CSOs through knowledge-sharing platforms, spotlighting co-designed models for service innovation and reform (AAPAM, 2023a,b). Odiyo and Chiira (2017) demonstrate that AAPAM's targeted training programs directly influence and enhance public service delivery by equipping administrators with the capacity to drive impactful collaboration across the continent.

In the environmental governance arena, the Green Belt Movement, founded by Wangari Maathai, is exemplary. It advanced environmental restoration and women's civic participation by combining grassroots mobilisation, state coordination, and international support, planting more than 50 million trees (Maathai, 2004). Community-led environmental actions redefine traditional administrative boundaries. A Lecturer at the University of Education in Winneba (Ghana) captured this expanded definition of public service:

We don't have to wait for government. When communities plant trees, clean gutters, or run clinics, that is governance too, but it needs recognition and support.

These cases show collaborative governance at work when civil society and government pursue shared goals, use structured and inclusive forums, and maintain ongoing dialogue (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). This pattern aligns with the framework proposed by Ansell and Gash (2008), which holds that durable outcomes arise when stakeholders create solutions together in settings defined by trust, clear institutional mandates, and shared responsibility. Examples such as Kenya's Ufungamano process (Mati, 2012), Makueni County participatory budgeting (Rwigi, Manga, & Michuki, 2020), and Ghana's community scorecards (SEND Ghana, 2013) demonstrate that when civil society organizations are formally recognized and adequately resourced, collaboration moves from token participation to genuine joint ownership of public policy.

Beyond national and continental models, voices from Accra and Ga West underscore the uneven application of multi-stakeholder inclusion at the local level. This was exemplified by the following sentiments from the key informants:

You see churches organising clean-ups that should be done by the assemblies. That tells you something when civil society has to do the basics, it shows what's missing from the system. (National Service Personnel, Ga West).

The government always talks about 'stakeholders,' but it's always the same people in the room. Community voices are often left out unless it's just for show. (Editorial Marketer, Accra).

The reviewed case studies and the responses from key informants indicate that effective multi-stakeholder governance depends on more than just legal frameworks, and includes political will, openness of the institutions, predictable funding, and the actual ownership of the community. These cases collectively validate the conceptual model introduced earlier in this paper. They confirm that inclusive governance is not a spontaneous occurrence but a deliberately co-produced outcome. It is evident that real progress is felt when local voices and agency are included from design through delivery, when feedback loops lead to concrete actions, and when responsibilities and resources are shared and publicly tracked. As the African Union advances its inclusivity agenda, these practical aspects should guide governments and civil society in measuring results and adjusting course.

6. CIVIL SOCIETY AS WATCHDOGS, KNOWLEDGE BROKERS, AND CO-CREATORS

Civil society organisations play an essential role in African governance, not just as advocates and service providers, but also as watchdogs, knowledge producers, and collaborators in the development of public policy (UNDP, 2021). Their contributions go far beyond mere protest or dissent; they are central to shaping data, dialogue, and decision-making processes. These roles are especially important in nations where institutional oversight is fragile and lacks transparency (AfDB, 2021).

CSOs act as impartial evaluators of government actions, generating data-driven evaluations to hold public officials accountable (Fox, 2015). Tools such as citizen report cards, community scorecards, and household surveys have proven effective in evaluating the quality and accessibility of public services (Björkman & Svensson, 2009; SEND Ghana, 2013). The President of the National Service Personnel at Ga West highlighted this critical educational function:

The civic education stuff from NGOs helps us a lot. Sometimes it's hard to know your rights if no one breaks it down. And the government doesn't always do that, but the CSOs do.

This highlights the crucial gap-filling role CSOs play in educating citizens about their rights, especially in areas where government services may not be comprehensive or accessible.

In Uganda, the implementation of community-based monitoring using citizen scorecards in the health sector resulted in a remarkable 33% increase in child immunisation rates and a significant 20% reduction in under-five mortality, as healthcare providers responded to performance feedback from the community (Bjorkman & Svensson, 2009). Similarly, in Tanzania, the NGO HakiElimu has utilised citizen report cards to assess the delivery of education services, sparking a national conversation on resource distribution and the issue of teacher absenteeism (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). These tools allow CSOs to generate empirical evidence that might otherwise be overlooked by governments, amplifying the voices of local communities through verifiable data.

Furthermore, CSOs play a pivotal role in shaping public policy, engaging in consultations, and providing expert legal reviews. The University of Education, Winneba Lecturer (GNECC), who represents civil society in technical policymaking committees, stated:

As part of GNECC, we don't just campaign; we sit on technical committees and working groups at the Ministry. We give input on draft policies and budgets, especially on education.

This reflects how CSOs are deeply embedded in the formal policymaking process, contributing expert insights and influencing important national discussions. Similarly, the District Assembly Member added:

CDD and IDEG are not just shouting from the outside. They help shape bills and proposals. Sometimes, Parliament invites them to hearings.

This reinforces the active role CSOs play in legislative processes, demonstrating that their participation extends beyond advocacy to directly shaping national policy and governance.

At the continental level, civil society organisations are indispensable collaborators in the execution of the African Union's Shared Values instruments (Jonas & Seabo, 2015). The University of Education, Winneba Lecturer further noted:

Our campaigns at the local level involve training parents and teachers on what's in the education policy so they can ask questions during district stakeholder meetings.

This reflects CSOs' grassroots engagement, where they empower local communities to actively participate in governance and policy discussions.

Civil society organisations also have a significant role in election observation and democratic engagement. For example, the Former FAFALI CEO observed:

You know how long it took us to push for the Right to Information Bill in Ghana? It took civil society almost two decades. Groups like MFWA, Imani Africa, and even journalists' unions kept hammering it until it was passed.

This example highlights the critical role that CSOs play in pushing for legal reforms that enhance transparency and government accountability. By engaging in long-term advocacy, CSOs help create institutional frameworks that allow citizens to demand greater government openness and responsiveness.

In addition to their watchdog and policy advisory roles, CSOs are also instrumental in facilitating civic education and capacity-building. In Senegal, youth-led organisations have effectively utilised digital platforms to inform young voters about electoral processes and democratic rights, thereby boosting youth engagement in elections and public discussions (YouthLink Senegal, 2020). The Lecturer opined that:

Our campaigns at the local level involve training parents and teachers on what's in the education policy so they can ask questions during district stakeholder meetings.

This highlights how CSOs empower citizens to hold the government accountable and participate in democratic processes.

Moreover, CSOs are often intermediaries in settings marked by conflict and instability, facilitating dialogue and peacebuilding. The Former FAFALI CEO emphasised:

Sometimes, in places where the government does not reach or people don't trust the system, the local NGO becomes the bridge. They understand the people.

This speaks to the role of CSOs as trusted intermediaries, particularly in conflict zones or fragile governance environments where the state's reach is limited.

In conflict-affected areas such as the Central African Republic (CAR), civil society coalitions have played a key role in fostering peacebuilding efforts, helping to mediate dialogue between conflicting communities and government representatives (International Crisis Group, 2024). This shows how CSOs not only promote governance inclusivity but also foster social cohesion, ensuring that the governance frameworks represent diverse societal needs.

At both regional and continental levels, the impact of civil society is substantial, especially in advocating for governance reforms and ensuring institutional accountability. The Pan-African Parliament Civil Society Forum (PAP-CSF) offers a platform for CSOs to engage with legislative processes throughout Africa, facilitating citizen participation in policymaking (PAP, 2023). Furthermore, the Green Belt Movement, established by Wangari Maathai in Kenya, represents a cooperative model between grassroots women's organisations, government agencies, and international sponsors, successfully advancing environmental restoration and women's rights (Maathai, 2004).

These case studies underline the essential roles that civil society organisations play as watchdogs, knowledge brokers, and co-creators. Their capacity to hold governments accountable, enhance public participation, and shape inclusive governance models demonstrates their central role in Africa's democratic future.

7. INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL REFORMS TO STRENGTHEN ENGAGEMENT

Robust multi-stakeholder engagements in Africa require deliberate institutional and legal changes that support and sustain the involvement of CSOs (UNDP, 2021). A critical challenge facing civil society is the mismatch between national legislation and the AU frameworks, including the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (African Union, 2007), and the African Charter on Values and Principles of Public Service and Administration (African Union, 2011). These tools commit member states to inclusive public service delivery, transparency, and participatory governance. However, many domestic laws either contradict or remain silent about these African Union responsibilities, which limit the official involvement of civil society in governance processes (Buyse, 2018; Mbondenyei & Ochieng, 2013). This was emphasised by the Lecturer at the University of Education, Winneba:

CSOs work with marginalized communities to identify their needs and priorities and advocate for policies and programs that benefit them. They also provide capacity-building support to empower these communities to participate in decision-making.

The absence of legal recognition and support for these roles leaves many CSOs struggling to operate effectively, often lacking the legal backing necessary to influence policy and engage meaningfully with governmental bodies (Buyse, 2018; UNDP, 2021). This situation is exacerbated by government rhetoric, which can either support or undermine the operating environment for CSOs. As an Editorial Marketer pointed out,

Government policies and rhetoric can either support or undermine the operating environment for CSOs. So, depending on the tone and content of their advocacy, when CSOs are too forceful in their advocacy or against the government, sometimes governments restrict some of these things.

This highlights how political rhetoric and inconsistent enforcement of legal frameworks contribute to a climate of uncertainty and distrust, which undermines civil society's ability to engage effectively in governance.

Furthermore, one critical reform area that needs to be pursued is legal protection (Mbondenyei & Ochieng, 2013). Many CSOs, particularly those advocating for transparency and accountability, operate in hostile environments where their activities are punished or threatened with reprisals (AfDB, 2021). In countries such as South Africa and Ghana, some progress has been made with progressive laws designed to protect CSOs, including freedom of association and access to information (International IDEA, 2019). However, while digital tools have theoretically improved the capacity for oversight, these laws are inconsistently applied, and gaps remain in the comprehensive protection of whistleblowers who utilize such platforms (Scott, 2025). The former CEO of the FAFALI Organisation, emphasized that these modern legal shortcomings are often tied to deep-seated historical attitudes:

The colonial legacies have contributed to a culture of mistrust and limited civic engagement. CSOs need to navigate these historical dynamics to build trust and promote inclusive governance.

This quote underscores how the historical legacy of colonial governance has shaped institutional responses to CSOs and the challenges these organizations face when advocating for governance reforms.

Additionally, the legal and institutional frameworks in many African countries fail to create the necessary platforms for multi-stakeholder engagement (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). Legislative acts, executive orders, or constitutional amendments could create formal channels for citizen involvement, ensuring that participation is neither optional nor merely symbolic (Ansell & Gash, 2008; International IDEA, 2019). The president of National Service Personnel at Ga West highlighted this need for governmental support:

The government can make it easier or support the creation and the partnership of these CSOs, give them an environment to thrive, and then connect them for funding and other things like that.

Such reforms would institutionalize participatory governance, making it a regular feature of policy development and service delivery, rather than a sporadic or optional process.

The role of CSOs in contributing to governance can be further strengthened through digital government initiatives (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025). The development of digital platforms for public consultation, such as e-governance systems, SMS polling, and virtual town halls, allows governments to bypass traditional barriers of geography or bureaucracy (International IDEA, 2019). These platforms have shown promise in countries like Rwanda, where digital initiatives have improved transparency and increased citizen accessibility (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025). Digital tools also facilitate citizen whistleblowing as a mechanism for addressing public-sector corruption, although the effectiveness of these systems depends on consistent legal application (Scott, 2025). The paper appreciates that digital inequality remains a critical barrier that must be addressed (Voufo, Gala, & Barron Rodriguez, 2025). Governments must thus continue increasing funds allocations for digital literacy programs, especially targeting women, youth, and rural areas, while improving internet infrastructure to ensure equitable access to these platforms (International Telecommunication Union, 2023).

8. TRANSITIONING TO SUSTAINABLE CIVIL SOCIETY FUNDING MODELS

The long-term impact of inclusive governance in Africa will depend heavily on financial independence and the shared capacity of Afrocentric governments, public institutions, and civil society to mobilize local resources. When these entities generate their own financial support, they will be better positioned to

collaborate and respond directly to the immediate needs of their communities. The UNDP (2021) emphasized that sustainable domestic funding remains essential for empowering these diverse actors to pursue genuinely localized agendas rather than externally imposed priorities.

Despite this recognized need for collective financial sovereignty, a key obstacle to sustaining meaningful civic engagement remains the chronic financial dependence of many African CSOs on foreign funding. As pointed out by the District Assembly Member:

The barriers may be financial constraints because it might be difficult sometimes to raise funding to do things. So, I think financial constraints would be the barrier I can think of.

This highlights a critical need to pivot toward dedicated national funding mechanisms that could support civil society's work without relying heavily on external donors. Establishing localized financial frameworks is essential to building grassroots resilience (Toepler, et al., 2023). This strategic shift will allow CSOs to operate more independently and ensure their work is directly aligned with national priorities, rather than being dictated by donor-driven agendas.

The role of local businesses and philanthropic networks in catalysing and funding African CSOs cannot be overstated. These sources of domestic funding can significantly reduce civil society's reliance on foreign donors and improve the sustainability of their work. As Makuwira (2014) suggested, the use of tax incentives for corporate social responsibility (CSR), national endowment funds, and blended finance strategies could create more sustainable funding sources for CSOs, particularly in sectors like health, education, and environmental conservation. Public-private-CSO collaborations could co-finance projects that address common societal needs, ensuring that civic participation becomes a permanent and well-resourced feature of inclusive governance.

9. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

To move from scattered practice to sustained impact, deliberate institutional choices must be made. The strategic recommendations that follow are targeted, scalable, and mindful of cost, design, and implementation realities. They speak directly to the interests and capacities of member states, public administrators, civil society leaders, and development partners, ensuring that collaboration is not only encouraged but enabled.

i. Enabling Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

Member States may consider undertaking deliberate reforms that rebuild trust between civil society and public institutions. This includes critically reviewing funding architectures and engagement mechanisms that may inadvertently reproduce elite capture or politicised participation. Governments and AU bodies, in collaboration with CSOs, could co-develop codes of engagement that clarify roles, expectations, and accountability processes in participatory spaces. Trust-building also requires consistent follow-through on commitments, structured feedback loops, and recognition of CSOs as equal partners, not peripheral actors. Platforms such as ECOSOCC and CIDO could support this by developing tools that promote transparency, dialogue, and mutual accountability across all levels of engagement.

ii. Advancing Sustainable and Locally Anchored Civil Society

There is scope for Member States and partners to strengthen CSO resilience by diversifying funding and fostering ownership beyond external donors. National strategies might include tax incentives for corporate social responsibility (CSR), public-private co-financing mechanisms, and the establishment of civic endowment funds. Additionally, diaspora capital and local philanthropic networks may be mobilised to support civic infrastructure. CSOs themselves may wish to adopt multi-pronged strategies including civic education, policy co-creation, and service delivery as a way of building broader legitimacy and securing

sustained buy-in from state actors. Such hybrid approaches also position CSOs as developmental partners embedded in national priorities.

iii. Equitable Digital Transformation and Civic Inclusion

As digital platforms reshape governance, Member States and regional bodies may be encouraged to address emerging divides in access, design, and participation. E-governance systems such as Kenya's Huduma and Rwanda's Irembo should be assessed not only on efficiency but also on inclusivity. Proactive investment in digital literacy, rural access infrastructure, and pro-poor design principles can help mitigate digital elitism. Governments, in partnership with CSOs, the private sector, and development agencies, could co-create digital engagement models that prioritise marginalised groups, particularly women, youth, and rural communities. Examples of such models can be shared through AU-affiliated knowledge hubs and best-practice platforms.

iv. Institutionalising Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

To embed inclusive governance, Member States may explore establishing or formalising multi-stakeholder platforms that involve CSOs, academia, private actors, and government agencies in structured dialogue and co-governance. These platforms could be supported by clear mandates, legal recognition, and integrated policy feedback mechanisms. Regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the EAC may play a greater role in harmonising civic norms and promoting civic engagement protocols across linguistic and geopolitical divides. AAPAM's triad approach linking administration, policy think tanks, and civil society may be institutionalised to create a continental model of collaborative policy co-creation, supported by periodic learning forums and regional peer-review mechanisms.

v. Embedding Inclusive Leadership and Representation

Inclusive governance depends on representation that reflects the diversity of Africa's societies. AU institutions and national public service academies may expand initiatives like AAPAM's Young Professionals Network and gender equity programs to ensure underrepresented groups, particularly women, youth, and persons with disabilities, can access leadership pathways in governance. National and regional institutions may also consider inclusive leadership benchmarks or certification schemes to encourage equitable practices. In parallel, CSOs may adopt internal diversity goals and leadership pipelines to mirror the inclusive governance norms they advocate. These efforts would reinforce mutual legitimacy and long-term investment in the culture of inclusive governance.

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