



NGO RESILIENCE IN EAST AFRICA

A Tale of Three Troubled Sisters



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1. INTRODUCTION

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in East Africa are the biggest drivers of democracy, human rights, and sustainable development. However, their resilience is continually tested by political, economic, and social challenges. Operating environments are often repressive, international donor support is dwindling, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic linger. These challenges are further compounded by skewed public perceptions, harmful corporate interests, and the rise of pseudo-NGOs that muddle credibility in the sector. In such a complex landscape, CSOs must balance effectiveness with operational sustainability, making their resilience a focal point for scrutiny.

This study examines the factors shaping CSO resilience in East Africa, focusing on their challenges, adaptive strategies, and the role of external support. It explores how NGOs in East Africa have navigated adversity—whether through preparation, adaptation, withdrawal, or closure. The study analyses policy frameworks, administrative decisions, and organisational practices that impact resilience, offering actionable insights to empower CSOs with the tools and strategies for effective operation, resource mobilisation, and management.

Key questions explored include:

- What does resilience look like for CSOs in the East African region?
- What internal and external challenges shape their preparedness, response, and resilience in the face of assault?
- How can institutional and collective solidarity enhance resilience amidst threats to the civic space?
- What leadership qualities enable agility, innovation, and creativity for CSO resilience?
- What are the best strategies for nurturing and growing resilience within CSOs?

In exploring these questions, the paper highlights the socio-economic and political developments and trends affecting CSO resilience, the mechanisms used to respond to these developments, and opportunities for strengthening the sector.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design anchored in case studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of CSO responses to government-sanctioned attacks. Using **process tracing**, the study investigates the sequence of events and decisions that link organisational responses to specific outcomes¹. This method was particularly chosen for its appropriateness in analysing complex social, political, and institutional phenomena where causal pathways are intricate and non-linear.

The study examined ten CSOs across Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, selected for having recent encounters with state-led attacks. These cases offer rich insights into how organisations adapted to the challenges. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with key informants, providing first-hand accounts of pivotal events and decisions. This data was supplemented by a document analysis of policy papers, reports, and meeting minutes, which added context and corroboration to the interview findings. A review of academic and institutional literature on CSO resilience and sustainability further grounded the study's theoretical framework and shaped the research questions.

Finally, the development of this paper greatly benefited from iterative feedback between the consultant and the Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF) staff. Their practical experience and expertise refined the paper's scope, analysis and recommendations.

2.1. Limitations

While this paper offers valuable insights, some limitations should be acknowledged:

- i) *Contextual Variability*: Some recommendations may not apply universally across East African countries due to variances in local contexts.
- ii) *Bias towards Governance and Human Rights Work*: Most CSOs interviewed for this study work in governance and human rights, a major target of state repression. Thus, the service-delivery perspective may be underrepresented in this report due to lower exposure to state crackdowns.

1 Collier, D. (2011). Understanding process tracing. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(4), 823-830.

- iii) *Data Gaps*: There are instances where sparse and incomplete data hindered the tracing of complete causal chains.
- iv) *Time Constraints*: The in-depth interviews required for this study necessitated significant time commitments from participants, which was not always feasible.

3. UNDERSTANDING CIVIL SOCIETY IN EAST AFRICA – ORIGINS AND CONCEPTUALISATION

The concept of civil society traces its roots to classical political thought, with origins in Aristotle's vision of a society governed by laws and shared values. Later, enlightenment thinkers like John Locke and Alexis de Tocqueville² expanded this idea by advocating for an independent space where individuals could associate freely to protect their rights and interests³.

By the 18th and 19th centuries, the rise of capitalism and industrialisation created a need for organised entities like voluntary associations, labour unions, religious groups, and community organisations to address social, political, and economic challenges that neither the State nor the market could fully resolve⁴. These early formations laid the foundation for what we now recognise as civil society organisations (CSOs).

Over time, the term "civil society" has become contested due to its multifaceted and often context-specific nature⁵. Salamon and Anheier (1992) define it as non-profit organisations that are formal, private, self-governing, and voluntary⁶. This definition, however, has been criticised for excluding other informal, grassroots, and culturally embedded groups that constitute civil society.

2 Edwards, M. (2004). *Civil Society*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press

3 Kumar, K. (1993). *Civil Society: An Inquiry into the Usefulness of an Historical Term*. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 44(3), 375–395.

4 Polanyi, K. (2001). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

5 Viterna, J., Clough, E., & Clarke, K. (2015). Reclaiming the "Third Sector" from "Civil Society": A new agenda for development studies. *Sociology of Development*, 1(1), 173–207

6 Salamon, L. M., & Anheier, H. K. (1992). *In search of the nonprofit sector I: The question of definitions*. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 3(2), 125–151.

A broader perspective sees civil society as an intermediary space where citizens organise advocacy for democratic values, governance reform, and equity in development. Social movements, for instance, challenge state power to achieve systemic change. These dynamic, and often informal organisations are an underexplored facet of civil society. Their ability to leverage tools like social media to operate in repressed contexts is a paragon of adaptability to contemporary challenges.

The formalisation of CSOs as we know them today began in the mid-20th century, after World War II. CSOs significantly contributed to post-war humanitarian efforts, gaining recognition from international organisations like the United Nations (UN) for their role in addressing poverty, inequality, human rights, environmental concerns and peacebuilding⁷. In the Global South, especially in post-colonial societies, CSOs proliferated in response to service and governance gaps left by weak or authoritarian governments.

Today, civil society has evolved to encompass a diverse array of actors in global governance, from service providers to advocates for systemic change. In Uganda, as in many African contexts, civil society extends beyond NGOs to include social enterprises, cultural institutions, and faith-based organisations (FBOs). For example, Uganda hosts approximately 27,400 social enterprises, outnumbering registered NGOs⁸ by a ratio of 5:1. This highlights the inadequacy of equating civil society solely with NGOs.

The predominance of NGOs in legal frameworks like the NGO Act (2016) misrepresents the diversity of civil society actors.⁹ Godber Tumushabe conceptualises NGOs as “institutions of citizenship” that mobilise communities to pursue collective aspirations. Such civic formations may take the form of political parties, activist groups, religious organisations, cultural entities, and professional associations, among others.

To fully conceptualise civil society, this paper adopts a nuanced view that recognises civil society as a complex ecosystem of actors with unique dynamics and contributions to social, political, and economic life.¹⁰ The terms ‘CSOs’ and ‘NGOs’ are interchangeably used in this paper to reflect civil society’s fluid, context-driven nature. For policymakers and development actors, embracing this diversity is key to fostering inclusive approaches that support civil society’s resilience and adaptation.

7 Charnovitz, S. (1997). *Two Centuries of Participation: NGOs and International Governance*. *Michigan Journal of International Law*, 18(2), 183-286.

8 United States Agency for International Development, FHI 360, International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL) (2021)

9 Nkwatsibwe, C. (2019). *Winning and sustaining space for civil society in semi-authoritarian settings: What works and what doesn't work - The case of Uganda*. University of Cape Town

10 VanDyck, C. K. (2017). *Concept and definition of civil society sustainability*. The Civil Society Ecosystem. Center for Strategic and International Studies

4. CONTEXTUAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE STUDY UNDERSTANDING CSO RESILIENCE

Shrinking and restricting civic space is a global concern. Liberal democratic theory emphasises governance based on popular consent through effective representation, public control over government, freedom of choice, and orderly management of political succession. Civil society resilience contributes to this ideal by expanding space for citizens to drive democratic and governance practice towards collective well-being.

In East Africa, where CSOs have faced legislative, administrative, and even violent repression over the past decade, numerous studies and initiatives have interrogated the factors giving rise to this trend. However, limited attention has been paid to how CSOs have adapted to build resilience in these adverse conditions. This study addresses this gap by focusing on CSO resilience amidst rising threats to democratic governance and civic action.

In repressive contexts, resistance tools are varied and shaped by each entity's origins and mission. While groups of NGOs may share similar or related mission statements, their approaches and methods might differ. This is why the National Dialogue Process, for instance, emerged as a preferred strategy for a coalition of national NGOs in Uganda. As governments increasingly use restrictive legislation, administrative overreach, and outright repression to curtail civil society, the importance of fostering CSO resilience is becoming more apparent.

Resilience, as defined here, goes beyond flexibility and adaptability.¹¹ It comprises the capacity to withstand, adapt, and thrive amid adversity. For CSOs, resilience entails strategic adaptability, resource sustainability, and operational capacity to navigate threats to their survival (Lengnick-Hall et al)¹².

Flexibility, in this context, reflects the ability to rapidly adjust to changes in the environment, while agility encapsulates the organisation's ability to identify and capitalise on emerging opportunities¹³.

11 Ducheck, S., Raetze, S., & Scheuch, I. (2020). The role of diversity in organizational resilience: A theoretical framework. *Business Research*, 13(1), 387–423

12 Lengnick-Hall, Cynthia A., and Tammy E. Beck. 2009. Resilience capacity and strategic agility: Pre-requisites for thriving in a dynamic environment. In *Resilience engineering perspectives, Volume 2. Preparation and restoration*, ed. Christopher P. Nemeth, Erik Hollnagel, and Sidney Dekker, 39–70. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.

13 Ducheck, S. (2019). Organizational resilience: A capability-based conceptualization. *Business Research*, 13.

Adaptability, a focus of this paper, acknowledges the fluid and dynamic nature of the operating context for CSOs. It emphasises key factors that enable organisations to pivot effectively, navigate challenges, and maintain relevance amidst shifting circumstances or threats to their operations¹⁴.

While flexibility enables organisations to respond to emerging changes, the inclusion of capacity in this context highlights the institutional elements that empower organisations to confront unexpected threats and crises, emerging stronger as a result¹⁵. Organisations can either maintain their essential functions (ensuring survival) or leverage adversity to improve and thrive¹⁶. Resilience, therefore, is a multidimensional concept encompassing organisational capacity, strategic adaptability, and resource sustainability.

Government repression in East Africa manifests in administrative fiat, lawfare, outright violence, and subtle tactics like smear campaigns and co-optation. It has rolled back the modest gains made towards fostering an organic and authentic civil society and systematically eroded advances towards democratisation.

Remarkably, CSOs have endured this harassment despite the high toll on institutions (including closures and failures). This endurance is attributed to adaptive and evasive measures employed by NGOs and like-minded actors both within and beyond the sector. However, self-inflicted challenges, like compromising their missions to secure funding, have compounded their struggles.

This paper links resilience and sustainability, arguing that CSOs must prioritise relevance and mission fidelity over conventional notions of financial viability. In repressive environments, resilience is not just survival—it is the capacity to influence policy, mobilise communities, and maintain independence against all odds.

A clear illustration of this interdependence emerged during the closure of the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF) in Uganda. Many organisations struggled to survive due to their heavy reliance on DGF as their sole funding source. In contrast, organisations that adapted through volunteer integration and resource optimisation demonstrated resilience. This case highlights the need to rethink sustainability in restrictive environments, recognising that self-sufficiency may be neither realistic nor desirable for all CSOs.

14 Wood, G. (2023) "Organizational Resilience: What does it mean and why is it important to civil society organizations working to end violence against women? Part one of a study of practice-based knowledge commissioned by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women

15 Paeffgen, T. (2023). Organisational resilience during COVID-19 times: A bibliometric literature review. *Sustainability*, 15(1), 367.

16 Hillmann, J., & Guenther, E. (2020). Organizational resilience: A valuable construct for management research? *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 23(1), 7–44.

Although CSO sustainability is often associated with financial viability, this narrow focus fails to acknowledge the ability of CSO actors to withstand rapid changes in their operating environment while staying true to their missions¹⁷. In this paper, the two concepts are interconnected to emphasise resilience as a prerequisite for CSO sustainability in a shrinking civic space¹⁸.

5. CHALLENGES TO NGO RESILIENCE IN EAST AFRICA

NGO resilience in East Africa faces four major challenges: the political environment, financial viability, internal institutional arrangements and external pressures.

Political Challenges

East African governments often operate through authoritarian networks, enacting laws that shrink civic space and curtail freedom of association and expression, severely impacting the operational capacity of NGOs. As Maina Kiai notes¹⁹, governments in East Africa are increasingly crafting legislative instruments like the Public Order Management Act (2013), the Anti-Money Laundering Act (2017), and the NGO Act (2016) that appear progressive but function as tools of oppression. These laws impose cumbersome registration processes, and bank account closures, and justify intrusive office searches under the guise of regulation.

Financial Challenges

Financial stability remains a significant hurdle. Many NGOs in East Africa depend on foreign aid,²⁰ which is often unpredictable and tied to donor priorities that may not align with local needs. The reduction in funding for politically sensitive areas such as human rights and governance has forced many organisations to downsize or cease operations.

Institutional Challenges

Internal dynamics like leadership, governance, and accountability also influence NGO resilience. As Niloufer Mermon et al²¹ note, many NGOs struggle with leadership transitions, high staff turnover, and maintaining transparency. These issues weaken organisational cohesion and hinder long-term sustainability.

17 Pact. (2021, July 19). Five ideas for supporting CSOs to be more relevant, resilient, and sustainable.

18 Interview with Chris Nkwatsibwe from the Uganda National NGO Forum.

19 Maina Kiai (2013), From Harassment to Criminalisation: Violations of the Right to NGOs Funding, *Charity and Security Network* (accessed at <https://charityandsecurity.org/counterterrorism-and-human-rights/from-harassment-to-criminalisation-violations-of-the-right-of-ngos-to-funding/>)

20 Ibid., 21

21 Niloufer Mermon, Julia Standish-White, Nkanyiso Hlongwa, Dominique Wells, Mikal Kooiker, Bradley Seeman (2024) How African NGOs Grow, *The Bridgespan Group*

External Pressures

Beyond formal laws, NGOs face harassment, intimidation, and violence from both state and non-state actors, particularly in conflict zones. External pressures include smear campaigns, restrictions on funding sources, and accusations of financial impropriety. Makau Mutua²² highlights the detrimental impact of these pressures, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted funding and limited organisational mobility. The cumulative impact of these forces undermines NGOs' ability to operate effectively and maintain public trust.

6. ASSESSMENT OF CSO RESILIENCE IN EAST AFRICA

6.1. Kenya: A Case of Democratic Gains and Persistent Challenges

Kenya's trajectory²³ can be divided into four distinct phases, referred to by some as "Republics". These include the epic struggle against British settler colonialism, epitomised by the MAU MAU (Land and Freedom) movement; the pursuit of multiparty democracy; the citizen-led ousting of the Daniel arap Moi-led autocracy; and the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution.

Kenya stands out as an exemplar²⁴ of democratic governance. In recent weeks,²⁵ younger generations have led countrywide, sustained protests pushing for a repudiation and overhaul of Kenya's governance architecture—and with it the sitting regime. This new wave of activism reflects a continued legacy of citizen-driven efforts to shape the nation's political and social structures.

Although the country's civic space has nurtured a vibrant NGO sector, systemic issues persist. Restrictive legislation, administrative hurdles, underhand tactics, and outright force are used to stifle non-state actors, be they academic, not-for-profit, media, partisan, religious, cultural, or other associational forms of civic mobilization and organisation²⁶.

22 Stella Cheronu and David Mwere, NGOs: We were shut over plan to contest poll result in court, June 28, 2020, *The Daily Nation* (accessed at <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/ngos-we-were-shut-over-plan-to-contest-poll-result-in-court--438702>)

23 Charles Hornsby (2011) *Kenya: A History Since Independence*, Palgrave Macmillan

24 East Africa is continent's most democratic place, May 02, 2014, *The East African*

25 Kenya's Historic Gen-Z led Protests: The Issues, August 29, 2024, *ACCORD Conflict and Resilience Monitor*

26 *Ibid.*, 25

For instance, the Public Order Act²⁷, a colonial relic, grants the Police broad powers to suppress the freedoms of expression, association, and assembly.

During the 2017 elections, the State-run NGO Board²⁸ launched a deregistration campaign targeting vocal organisations, illustrating the precarious balance between democratic ideals and state restriction²⁹. The retinue of hurdles has multiplied over the years,³⁰ now including burdensome registration requirements, restriction on foreign financing, harassment through smear campaigns, surveillance, malicious prosecution, threats of deregistration, disproportionate penalties for noncompliance, criminalization of dissent (both online and offline), regulatory overreach in enforcing financial impropriety laws, arduous processes for work permits, visas, and securing of approvals for development projects.

Despite these challenges, Kenya's NGOs have shown remarkable resilience, adapting to shifting political dynamics while championing citizen rights. It is worth exploring what the successes and setbacks of this journey signal for NGOs in the region's economic powerhouse,³¹ which also holds the distinction of being East Africa's only non-NATO member³² ally.

6.2. Tanzania: A Fragile Democracy with Historical Foundations

Tanzania is a constitutionally democratic and secular state³³ with a legal regime that largely reflects these principles. Legislative authority is vested in the Parliament of Tanzania. The Executive, through its Cabinet, drafts regulations to implement national laws. Local Government Authorities propose regulations to govern the community conduct,³⁴ and the Judiciary administers justice through adjudicating of disputes.

Since independence, Tanzania has held regular elections. However, their credibility is overshadowed by the fusion of the State with the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) political party, resulting in repressive legislation targeting basic liberties and rights, and a disenfranchised electorate³⁵. Despite these hurdles, younger voters remain enthusiastic and actively participate in democratic processes at all levels, as seen in the recent local government elections and the upcoming

27 Public Order (Amendment) Bill, 2019

28 Civil Society condemns attempted raid and deregistration of human rights NGOs, August 18, 2017, *CIVICUS Global*

29 Restrictions on Foreign Funding of Civil Society: NGO Law in Kenya, *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law, Volume 11, Issue 4, August 2009*

30 Mary Wambui, Why 7000 NGOs risk deregistration after three months, March 14, 2022, *The Daily Nation*

31 Fred Nyongesa Ikanda, East Africa's Economic Powerhouse and Refugee Haven, Kenya Struggles with Security Concerns, July 2, 2024, *Migration Policy Institute*

32 Memorandum on the Designation of Kenya as a Major Non-NATO Ally, June 24, 2024, *The White House*

33 Issa G. Shivji (2013), The Pitfalls of Constitution-making in Tanzania: the lessons so far, *University of Dar es Salaam*

34 Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 of the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania

35 *Ibid.*, 35

parliamentary/presidential polls scheduled for 2025.

Tanzania's democratic credentials include the inclusion of the Bill of Rights (1984) and the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in 1992. Articles 12–30 of the Constitution codified provisions for observing, promoting, and protecting fundamental human rights, strengthening democratic governance despite persistent drawbacks.³⁶

Key reforms, such as the Nyalali Review Commission³⁷ proposals (appointed by President Benjamin Mkapa), aimed to modernise Tanzania's governance structures into a democratic and free market economy. While progress is evident in areas like human rights, persistent challenges, including legislative overreach and a disenfranchised electorate, dampen the country's democratic potential. The legacy of Tanzania's founding father, particularly his advocacy for a distinct form of African Socialism and the successful nation-building project centred on Swahili as the lingua franca, remains deeply embedded in every echelon of Tanzanian society.

6.3. Uganda: A Legacy of Volatility

Uganda's turbulent post-independence history has left a lasting mark on its civic space. Despite having a rich heritage of civil society organisation spanning pre-independence, post-independence and contemporary periods, Uganda has had no peaceful leadership transition since independence.³⁸

Today, civil society in Uganda, as articulated in the anthology *Uganda's Civil Society*,³⁹ challenges long-held assumptions about its role and character. The perception of civil society as possessing an inherently strong value base, garnering unstoppable growth, unwaveringly committed to social justice, advocating for the poor and disadvantaged, maintaining autonomy from the state, and outperforming government agencies in service delivery⁴⁰ has come under scrutiny.

The anthology highlights that Uganda's civil society is as dynamic as the nation's broader socio-political trends. It has evolved in its interactions with both the State and the market, reflecting changing realities. Over the past 25 years, civil society's numbers and influence have grown significantly, bolstered by a political and social climate that initially embraced its presence. This has led to a louder voice in policy matters, driven by an aspiration to hold the government accountable and to ensure effective service delivery.

36 Aikande Clement Kwayu, Tanzania is ruled with impunity—four key issues behind constitutional reform, February 16, 2023, *The Conversation*

37 Nyalali Review Commission Report, published by the Law Reform Commission of Tanzania

38 Godfrey Sseruwagi Mitch (2024), Our Greatest Fear is the Transition of Power, *College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University*

39 John De Coninck and Arthur Larok (Eds) 2021, *Uganda's Civil Society: History, Challenges, Prospects*, Fountain Publishers

40 Ibid

However, defining civil society remains contentious, given the diverse schools of thought involved in the discourse. One perspective views it as a Western liberal construct that requires re-conceptualisation to be meaningful in Uganda. Another focuses on civil society's identity and composition, while a third links it to the promotion of democracy and specific civic organisations, particularly NGOs⁴¹. This convergence of ideas and debates reflects the complexity of Uganda's civil society landscape and offers valuable insights into the resilience and adaptability of NGOs within the East African region.



7. DETAILED ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDIES – SUMMARY OF FINDING

The study identifies five key types of government-led attacks on NGOs: legislative, administrative, financial, coercive, and propaganda. Each type undermines organisational resilience in specific ways, often creating overlapping challenges.

Legislative Attacks

Legislative attacks involve the enactment, implementation, or interpretation of laws to hinder NGO operations. These laws often target registration, licensing, incorporation, funding, and scope of activities. For example, Uganda's Public Order Management Act (2013), Anti-Money Laundering Act (2017), and NGO Act (2016) are ostensibly progressive but function as tools for restricting freedoms, enabling the state to weaponise regulation, suppress dissent, and erode civic space.

Administrative Attacks

Administrative attacks often manifest in the form of discretionary use of public authority to block or frustrate NGO activities under vague justifications like "public interest" or "public order". For instance, **Respondent 6**⁴² in Tanzania received a letter threatening de-registration from the Registrar of NGOs, soon after filing a public interest case against the Director of Public Prosecution. Security operatives have twice questioned his citizenship.

Financial Attacks

Financial attacks are often framed as measures to ensure compliance with due diligence norms and regulations but often serve to paralyse NGOs. Common tactics include freezing bank accounts, restricting foreign funding, and imposing arbitrary tax assessments and cumbersome accounting requirements. **Respondent 4** described how their organisation and other Somali-affiliated entities were targeted after the Garissa University massacre, which gave authorities a pretext to freeze accounts and disrupt the operations of bothersome NGOs.

41 *Ibid.*, 41

42 Civil Society Organisation in Tanzania

Coercive Measures

Coercive actions range from unlawful arrests, detention, and office search-and-seizure raids to less visible methods like cyber harassment, surveillance, and smear campaigns. These attacks aim to demoralise and delegitimise CSOs by portraying them as ‘foreign interests’, ‘inciters of violence’ or ‘threats to national security’.

Respondent 3⁴³ highlighted subtler forms of repression, like cajoling, appeasement, and censorship, which lead NGOs to dilute their visions and missions to avoid state backlash. Propaganda attacks extend to ostracisation within the NGO community itself, as noted by **Respondent 2**.⁴⁴ Fear and disassociation within the sector further isolate targeted organisations, exacerbating their vulnerability.

As shall be seen in the analysis, a recurring theme in the study is the need to distinguish resilience from mere survival. Resilience, as articulated by Respondent 1⁴⁵ and Respondent 8⁴⁶, signifies the capacity to withstand and push back against government-led attacks while remaining true to an organisation’s mission. This stands in stark contrast to survival strategies such as self-censorship, appeasement, or shifting focus to less contentious areas.

In their view, resilience is a positive and energising term but requires tools that go beyond compliance or adapting to repressive conditions. **Respondents 6 and 9** extended their case by arguing that resilient CSOs do not compromise their mission and values to acquiesce to external pressures like funding restrictions or unjust policies. **Respondent 1**, on the other hand, warned against “valorising suffering” as a misinterpretation of resilience, while **Respondents 9**⁴⁷ and **10**⁴⁸ criticised the widespread fear that isolates frontline organisations, especially in natural resource governance. For them, resilience is rooted in the conviction and determination to advocate for justice, even under dire circumstances.

7.1. Diverse, intersecting factors

We have seen from the preceding sections the resilience of NGOs in East Africa is shaped by a diverse mix of historical, political, and socioeconomic forces unique to each country. While Kenya boasts the longest history of multiparty politics, followed by Tanzania and Uganda, Lilian Alex⁴⁹, head of the region’s civil society umbrella platform cautions against sweeping assumptions about any country. She holds that resilience is deeply influenced by the environment in which NGOs operate.

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- 43 NGO Development Practice/Governance Consultant in Tanzania
 - 44 Civil Society Organisation in Tanzania
 - 45 Civil Society Organisation in Uganda
 - 46 Civil Society Organisation in Uganda
 - 47 The Environment Shield
 - 48 Africa Institute for Energy Governance
 - 49 East Africa Civil Society Forum (EACSOFF)

Kenya: A Shifting Landscape

Kenya's transition from the Moi era to the 2010 Constitution marked a significant shift with the integration of many NGO leaders into government roles. However, this period of progress has been disrupted by protests over high taxation that evolved into a groundswell against the political system. This period has seen the highest incidence of government attacks on CSOs since the Moi era.

Tanzania: Ujamaa and Restriction

Tanzania, which many respondents tagged a *de facto* single-party state, operates under a peculiar model of African Socialism (*Ujamaa*⁵⁰) that subsumes all aspects of civil society⁵¹, including NGOs, into the state. While there's been a surge in NGO visibility in recent decades, this growth has been overshadowed by restrictions, particularly in the Magufuli era when self-censorship and state control intensified.⁵² At the time of publication (September 2024), Tanzania continues to experience attacks against dissenting voices, political opposition, the media, and NGOs.

One respondent, a lawyer, had her practising certificate arbitrarily revoked after expressing dissenting political views. Similarly, the Chief Executive of a popular radio station received successive warnings from the communications regulator⁵³ over their talk shows featuring CSO leaders, and once broadcasting a speech by the General Secretary of the opposition party, CHADEMA. The radio station's bank accounts were temporarily closed during that period.

Uganda: A Legacy of Repression

Government-led attacks against NGOs are most frequent and severe in Uganda, despite a long tradition of non-state organising predating the postcolonial era. These organisations persisted through the turbulent 1970s, 80s, and mid-90s, gradually shifting from economic and charitable causes to governance-oriented advocacy. However, the longstanding incumbency of the National Resistance Movement has entrenched NGO suppression through policy, legislative, administrative, political, and coercive measures.

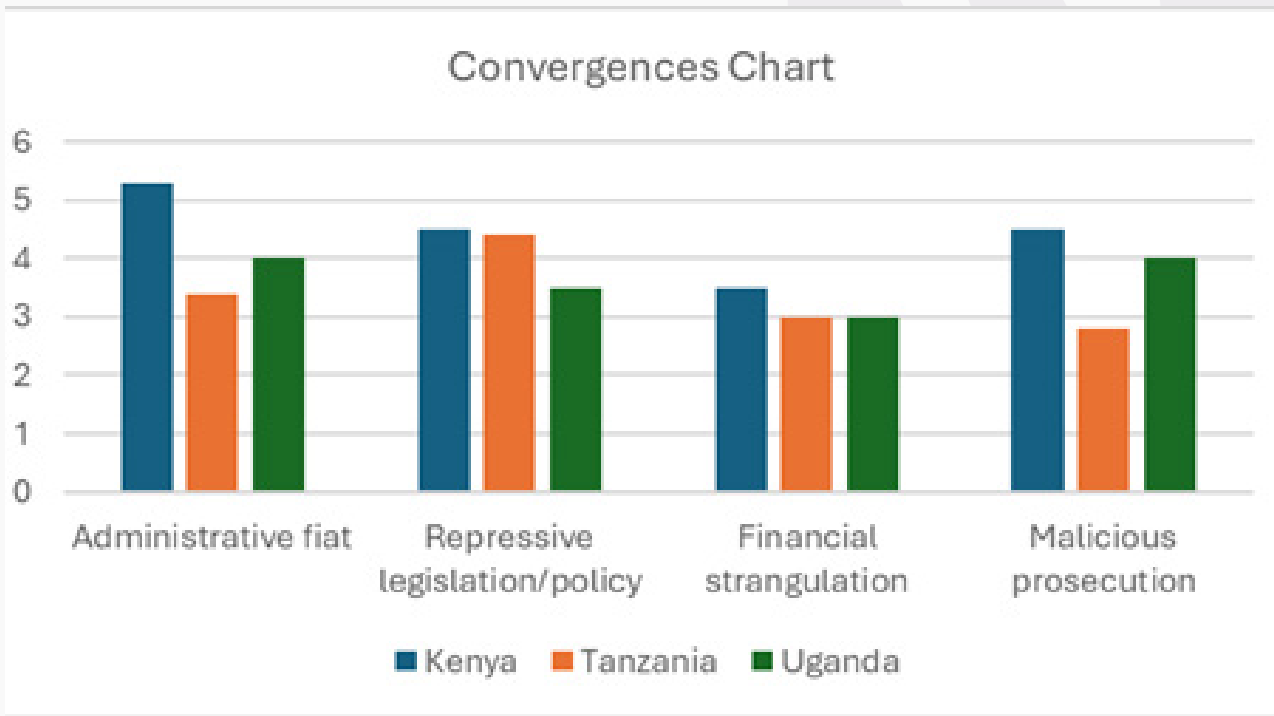
50 Alistair Boddy-Evans, What was Ujamaa and how did it affect Tanzania? August 02, 2019, *Thought Co.*

51 Jaclynn Ashly, Tanzania: Remembering Ujamaa—the Good, the Bad, and the Buried, December 17, 2020, *African Arguments*

52 Marielle Harris, Unfinished Business: Magufuli's Autocratic Rule in Tanzania, February 5, 2021, *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*

53 Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority

7.2. Convergencies



The study identified several commonalities across Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, particularly in systemic issues that transcend individual country contexts.

a) Arbitrary administrative decisions and actions

Public authorities across the three countries frequently abuse discretionary power to suppress NGOs. This overreach often manifests in threats of deregistration, or actual deregistration, as reported by Organisations 3, 7, and 9. Common perpetrators are the Internal or Home Affairs ministries, NGO regulators, and local governments.

b) Repressive policy and legislation

All three countries have enacted laws that directly constrain NGOs, including Uganda’s NGO (Registration) Act of 2016, Kenya’s NGO Coordination Act of 1990, and Tanzania’s NGO Act No. 24 of 2002. These laws share similarities in language, prescription, and penalties, granting enforcement bodies sweeping powers to stifle NGOs under the guise of oversight.

c) Financial strangulation

Governments in the three countries leverage legal frameworks to disrupt NGOs’ financial stability by imposing caps on funding, closing bank accounts without probable cause, and intimidating donors. Two (2) organisations in Uganda, Four (4) in Tanzania, and Six (6) in Kenya have experienced account closures by the government.

d) Malicious prosecution

Governments in the region have targeted NGO leaders through allegations designed to disrupt and discredit them. Common charges include disrupting public order, financing terrorism, or dabbling in partisan politics. The weapon of choice appears to be criminal offences that attract public attention and create significant bureaucratic burdens, such as prolonged court processes. Such lawfare is often accompanied by allegations of unpaid taxes or compulsory remittances like NSSF.

7.3. Divergencies

While common challenges exist, the study also highlights unique factors in each country that shape the operating environment for NGOs. These divergencies are outlined below in order of severity and frequency:

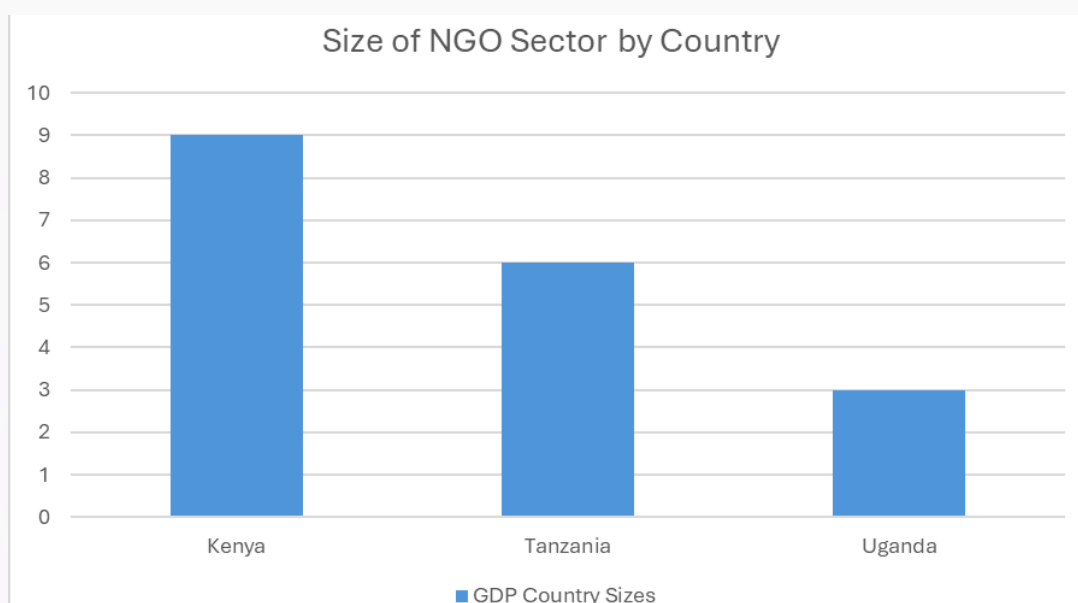
a) Civic competence, colonial history, and political consciousness

Colonial histories have influenced unique turns in the political consciousness and civic landscape of each country:

- Kenya, as a settler colony had to wage war to win their freedom.
- Uganda was under indirect rule, leading to a negotiated transition with organised groups that resulted in a less confrontational civil society.
- Tanzania had more than one colonial master, resulting in a unique socio-political environment that seeded the idea of *Ujamaa*.

The study found that these divergencies in colonial experiences have had lasting impacts on the structure, focus, and resilience of NGOs in each country.

b) Economic size and sources of funding

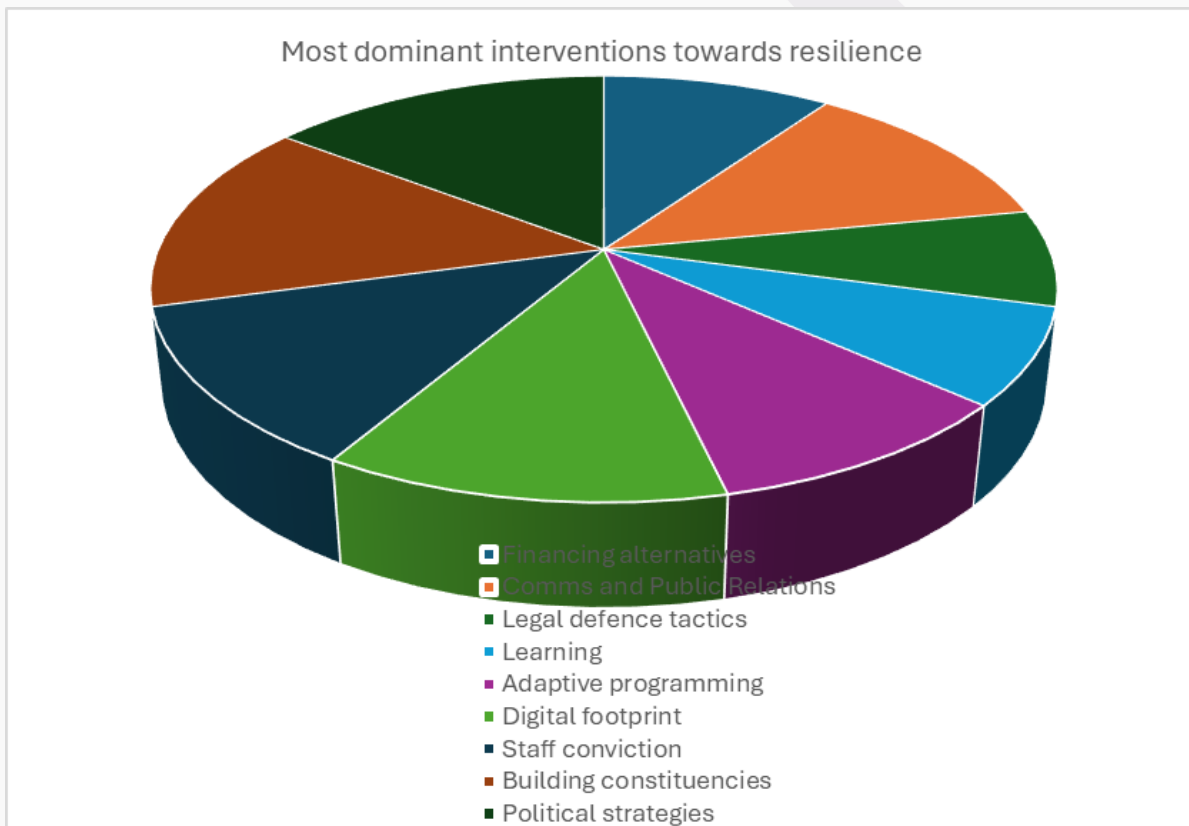


Economic disparities play a key role in NGO sustainability. Kenya, with a GDP of \$113 billion offers a more conducive environment for social enterprise, local philanthropy, and foreign funding compared to Tanzania (\$61 billion) and Uganda (36 billion). This economic disparity affects the ability of NGOs to access resources and sustain their activities.

c) Militarism

While all three countries have a history of violent colonial conquest, militarism remains a defining feature of Uganda’s context. Unlike Kenya and Tanzania, which have maintained civilian governments and confined their militaries to defined roles, Uganda’s military wields significant influence in affairs of state, the economy, and elective politics. This sets a different outlook for NGOs operating there.

8. STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS TOWARDS BUILDING CSO RESILIENCE



This study has uncovered critical insights into the history, current realities, and future challenges of NGOs in East Africa. It highlights that NGO resilience is deeply intertwined with the evolution of the States in which they operate. These shared experiences are shaped not only by geography but also by colonial histories and prevailing socio-economic conditions.

Resilience, as defined in this study, goes beyond short-term, reactive responses to government repression. It encompasses long-term, adaptive strategies embedded within organisational cultures, enabling NGOs to sustain their operations and thrive despite adversity. However, resilience is not static; it must evolve in response to the ever-changing tactics of repression, which now extend beyond state actors to include corporate entities such as financial institutions and technology firms.

Repression mutates and evolves like a resilient pathogen, often becoming resistant to conventional countermeasures. Tactics such as freezing bank accounts, office sieges (cordon-and-search operations), smear campaigns, malicious prosecution, and the sequestering of personal and organisational property frequently give rise to new, equally insidious strategies. Civil society organisations (CSOs) must remain perpetually vigilant against these evolving threats to ensure their survival and continued effectiveness.

This study recognises that many development practitioners view civil society capacity and sustainability as systems-related concepts and have sought to establish sophisticated frameworks to support them. However, this approach is problematic. In restrictive environments, laws and regulations often hinder financial viability and credible systems, leading to frustration among civic actors. Additionally, an overemphasis on financial sustainability can push NGOs to prioritise donor preferences over citizen needs, creating a disconnect with their constituencies.

To address this, Respondent 11 emphasises embedding resilience into programming and work plans. She cites her organisation's unwavering focus on civic participation and governance, demonstrating the importance of staying mission-driven and accountable despite external pressures.

This study emphasises the role of citizens—voters, taxpayers, beneficiaries, and stakeholders—in building resilience. NGOs must actively engage with these groups, fostering deeper relationships beyond transactional interactions. Citizens can serve as robust allies, helping NGOs withstand repression and sustain their missions. Against this backdrop, the following strategic interventions are proposed to enhance NGO resilience:

8.1. NGOs must appreciate their political character

NGOs must acknowledge the inherently political nature of their work, even in projects that appear apolitical, such as providing safe water or financial literacy training. Politics, even without the partisan aspect, is essentially about the allocation of resources, which inevitably intersects with power structures and may provoke resistance from governments or other entities. Understanding this political dimension enables NGOs to interact effectively with governments, regulators, and law enforcement from an informed and confident position. It also allows them to develop political strategies that leverage citizen mobilisation (e.g., petitions) and coalition-building with like-minded organisations to amplify their impact.

In Uganda, for example, a letter from a local government official to the presidency highlighted how service delivery operations had been hampered because of the freezing of ActionAid International Uganda's bank accounts. This advocacy contributed to a reversal of the financial sector's decision, demonstrating the power of strategic engagement.

8.2. Adopt longer-term financing models for better resilience

Funding has historically been an Achilles Heel for NGOs. Governments know this vulnerability all too well and exploit it through tactics like freezing bank accounts, enacting restrictions on foreign funding, weaponising tax laws/regulations, and intimidating financial service providers into doing their bidding. To build financial resilience, NGOs should diversify their funding sources by exploring avenues such as social entrepreneurship, local philanthropy, and capital investments, reducing dependence on any single revenue stream.

NGOs should also establish financial reserves and consider securing fiscal hosts or intermediaries in stable jurisdictions, as suggested by Respondent 9, to safeguard their operations. Additionally, maintaining meticulous financial records is essential to enhance credibility with regulators, partners, and the public, thereby mitigating the risk of accusations of financial impropriety.

8.3. Communications and public relations

As the saying goes, democracy dies in darkness. NGOs must invest in strong communications and public relations strategies. Building relationships with mainstream media outlets provides a crucial platform to defend against allegations, counter-propaganda, and amplify organisational messages. However, this responsibility should not be left to the communications team solely. Instead, the NGO's messaging must reflect its identity, values, and vision, ensuring alignment across all public engagements.

Some interviewees cautioned against the common temptation to ignore misinformation, assuming the public will discern the truth. This approach is risky and ineffective. Robust communication is not just a defensive tool but a proactive means of showcasing an NGO's work, explaining its models, and strengthening public trust. By engaging with the media strategically and consistently, NGOs enhance their capacity to withstand public scrutiny and remain resilient.

8.4. Invest in understanding the legal environment

Operating in politically charged environments like East Africa requires NGOs to have a thorough understanding of the legal frameworks within which they operate. In regions where lawfare—enacting laws to suppress dissent—is widespread, foresight becomes a critical asset. NGOs must anticipate potential legal challenges and prepare accordingly. Respondent 9 underscored the importance of having internal legal capacity or access to reliable external legal counsel to combat judicial or administrative attacks. The ability to fight legal battles in court has proven essential in numerous cases, where litigation resolved issues that might otherwise have crippled organisations. A strong legal footing not only shields NGOs from immediate threats but also positions them to challenge repressive laws and policies, contributing to broader systemic change.

8.5. Institutional Learning

NGOs should prioritise documenting their experiences to create a repository of organisational memory. This contributes to a bank of institutional learning that can inform strategies, improve practices, and strengthen the resilience of both their own organisation and others in the sector. This knowledge can be used to develop training materials to orient new staff and prepare them for the realities of working in restrictive environments.

Additionally, grant-making institutions like Organisation 12 have supported NGOs by investing in research to understand shrinking civic space, offering training in areas such as physical and digital security, and fostering collaboration through coalitions. These scoping studies have informed responses to attacks on NGO resilience in Tanzania, while the coalitions distribute risks and build collective strength, enabling NGOs to continue their work in hostile environments.

Several respondents also noted the importance of mandatory courses for entry-level staff, aimed at building awareness and resilience. Collaboration with universities and think tanks could further enrich this knowledge base, embedding NGO experiences into academic disciplines such as political science, sociology, and development studies. These would not only deepen understanding but also foster connections to the lived realities of social justice, politics, and public policy, making learning a dynamic and impactful process.

8.6. Adaptive systems

The ability to adapt is a hallmark of resilient NGOs. While strong internal structures and systems are often touted as indicators of sustainability, rigidity can hinder an organisation's capacity to respond to crises. Findings from this study show that organisations with embedded adaptability were better able to withstand external threats, such as account freezes or leadership arrests, than those with inflexible frameworks. For example, Organisation 4 demonstrated resilience by adjusting its operations after a 2017 office siege, continuing its mission despite surveillance and financial restrictions. **Respondent 11**⁵⁴ emphasised that resilience is always contextual, shaped by the specific nature of repression faced by NGOs. Kenyan NGOs, for instance, have benefited from a historical ethos of adaptability and non-conformity, organising in the form of movements, NGOs, and other forms of association to fight for justice from the pre-colonial to present times.

8.7. Digital footprint and presence

In the digital age, a strong online presence is indispensable for NGOs. Donors, partners, and the public increasingly rely on digital platforms to evaluate organisations, making a functional and credible digital footprint essential. Respondent 9 extends this argument by highlighting the importance of online platforms for advocacy, noting their viral potential and cost-effectiveness in optimising human rights defenders' work.

Beyond advocacy, a digital presence allows NGOs to counter misinformation, engage with younger demographics, and participate in critical discussions on issues like surveillance capitalism. Governments have become more adept at using digital tools for repression, but NGOs can leverage the same platforms to push back, amplify their messages, and build solidarity. A well-managed digital strategy not only enhances visibility but also strengthens credibility and public engagement.

8.8 Staff courage and political conscientisation

This study underscores the importance of ideological grounding and political conscientisation for NGO staff, partners, and the communities they serve. NGO work is not merely employment but a deeply political endeavour rooted in humanity's enduring quest for justice and liberty. Staff at all levels must be clear about the purpose and significance of their work. The study found several instances where organisations successfully navigated attacks due to the political clarity and conviction of their staff or partners. Resilience was often tied to this ideological soundness, which can be fostered through anticipatory planning, scenario building, and predictive analysis. These tools prepare staff to adapt and push back effectively against repression. Moreover, understanding the political and ideological justifications governments often use for their repressive actions is crucial for NGOs to build robust resistance.

8.9. Constituency ownership as a measure of resilience

CSOs must reframe resilience from mere survival to sustaining relevance. NGOs should prioritise aligning their work with the needs of their constituents, making relevance their guiding star. This shift will ensure that funding aligns with the CSOs' mission, instead of the other way around. By investing in meeting their constituents' needs, NGOs strengthen their legitimacy and resilience, as relevance is the foundation of sustainability.

8.9. Establish a financial infrastructure for NGO Staff

Financial insecurity is a persistent challenge for NGOs, often undermining staff commitment despite their passion for the work. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted this vulnerability, as CSO staff suffered more than the organisations they worked for. Although the pandemic was a temporary disruption, there is a lingering sense of persistent crisis stemming from fragmented and insufficient funding.

To address this, NGOs should explore innovative financial strategies, such as forming cooperatives for CSO workers. These cooperatives could pool resources to enhance collective financial security and enable participation in income-generating activities. Additionally, fostering financial ingenuity, cultivating strong relationships, and ensuring organisational care for staff is critical for building a resilient and sustainable civil society sector.



9. LESSONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study identifies critical lessons and conclusions for strengthening the resilience of NGOs in East Africa. These insights underscore the interconnectedness of NGOs with their sociopolitical environment and highlight strategies to ensure sustainability and relevance in increasingly challenging operating contexts.

9.1. The NGO is part of the country's democratisation journey

The pre-and-post-independence histories of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda demonstrate the integral role of civil society in these nations' democratisation processes. While pre-independence organising was characterised by professional, vocational, and student associations, the prominence of NGOs grew post-independence. Initially focused on charity, NGOs transitioned into vehicles

for governance-oriented advocacy, addressing issues such as independence movements, women's rights, and the fight against apartheid. By providing platforms for citizen engagement, influencing public policy, and connecting East Africa to global movements, NGOs have become essential to the region's democratisation journey.

9.2. The value of authentic relationships with constituencies

Resilient organisations are invariably those that have invested in cultivating tangible, meaningful relationships with their constituencies. These connections ensure that government attacks are not met by the organisation alone but resonate with the population, who respond in solidarity. For example, Organisation 12 in Uganda has publicly aligned itself with citizens, fostering a constituency ready to defend itself against government repression.

Respondent 11 highlighted the NGO fraternity in Kenya's role in drafting the 2010 Constitution, which improved the operating environment for NGOs. These examples underline the importance of solidarity networks and partnerships in building organisational resilience.

9.3. A grand vision beyond day-to-day activities

This study has affirmed the importance of ideological grounding and political consciousness as an important tool for ensuring the resilience of NGOs. Not least because it enables NGOs to paint a picture of the society they want to build. Respondent 14 underlines the role that having a clear set of guiding values played in the establishment of Organisation 15 in Kenya; it was founded on a clear set of values, distinguishing it from organisations that merely follow trends. A grand vision provides a counterweight to ideologies such as neoliberalism, anti-immigration, and far-right extremism. By projecting a future that inspires partners and constituencies, NGOs strengthen their resilience and reinforce their societal relevance.

9.4. Solidarity within and across borders

In-country and cross-border solidarity are vital for NGO resilience. When the NGO Bureau in Uganda cracked down on several organisations, collective actions such as vigils, resource sharing, and financial and material support proved crucial in sustaining the sector. Similarly, cross-border solidarity has been built through the East African Civil Society Forum, by ensuring that challenges encountered in any one, two or more member countries are collectively addressed by the broader NGO movement.

Respondent 16⁵⁵ emphasised the utility of coalitions, collaborative programming, and consortia in Tanzania, which distribute risk and insulate individual members from targeted attacks. They also the importance of diaspora networks for supporting persecuted NGOs. These solidarity mechanisms ensure resilience through collaboration and shared capacity. Respondent 9, however, cautioned that some coalitions should operate covertly to avoid state repression. Operating coalitions below the radar is a spectacular lesson on resilience.

9.5. Movements as an organising model

NGOs that have infused their working models and approaches with movement building have proven to be more resilient than those that have not. Movements create broader ownership, spread risk, and make it difficult to target a singular organisation. **Respondent 17** observed that movements in Kenya provide tactical agility, enabling NGOs to pursue a decolonisation agenda that has given them an authentic identity, and speaks to the lived realities of the people. As **Respondent 11**, an international NGO, stressed, their support for social movements has enhanced their capacity to deliver on their mission objectives, while protecting against isolation. Movement-building fosters longevity and resilience.

9.6. Alternative funding streams

Financial sustainability is essential to the continuity of the work that NGOs do. Unfortunately, traditional funding sources have declined due to donor fatigue, the resurgence of nationalist politics, economic instability, and restrictive government policies. This has adversely impacted the ability of NGOs to be resilient. Remarkably, NGOs that diversify their income through social enterprises, capital investments, consultancies, and local philanthropy are better positioned to endure funding crises.

Respondent 13 made a spirited case for a radical shift towards the social enterprise model to reduce over-dependence on foreign donor sources, a view shared by Organisation 15⁵⁶. He, however, acknowledged that this model is difficult to undertake in the prevailing economic environment. Organisation 8, on its part, approached financial security by creating buffer accounts and financial reserves outside Uganda, combined with meticulous compliance to statutory obligations like remittance of social security payments. By minimising financial vulnerabilities, NGOs reduce opportunities for government interference and enhance their resilience.

55 Civil Society Organisation in Tanzania

56 Organisation 15 in Kenya

In conclusion, this study has examined the multifaceted challenges faced by NGOs in East Africa, highlighting the pervasive effects of shrinking civic space, repressive government actions, and financial constraints. Despite these obstacles, NGOs have demonstrated remarkable resilience through adaptive strategies, movement-building, and fostering solidarity within and across borders. The findings underscore the critical role of NGOs in the democratisation processes of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, where their historical and ongoing contributions have shaped public policy and empowered citizens.

However, resilience requires a deliberate approach—investing in authentic relationships with constituencies, adopting alternative funding models, enhancing legal preparedness, and leveraging digital platforms. The study recommends a proactive embrace of the political nature of NGO work, the cultivation of ideological clarity, and the reinforcement of in-country and regional collaborations to withstand repression and remain aligned with their missions. By adopting these strategies, NGOs can continue to thrive as indispensable actors in advancing democracy, social justice, and sustainable development in the region.

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