



# NATIONAL CSO 20 CONVENTION 25

## The Future of Civil Society in Uganda

# The Law The Money The Politics

## Concept Note





# Introduction

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are key actors in Uganda's social, political, and economic life. They work alongside government, development partners, media and the private sector to advance inclusive development, protect fundamental freedoms, and create platforms for citizen engagement. Their role is formally recognised in the National Development Plan IV (NDP IV) as a vital part of Uganda's governance and development architecture, contributing to policy dialogue, delivering essential services, and the amplification of marginalised voices.

Convening the civil society sector and its stakeholders is vital to ensure that CSOs remain effective, coordinated, and strategically engaged on issues shaping Uganda's future. Such convenings strengthen collaboration within the sector and foster networking and dialogue with government representatives, international partners, academia, and the private sector.

Against this backdrop, the **National Civil Society Convention 2025** will take place on **Tuesday, 30th September & Wednesday 1st October 2025** under the theme: **"The Future of Civil Society in Uganda: The Law, The Money, The Politics."** The Convention will bring together diverse stakeholders from across the country to reflect on the current state of civil society in a rapidly evolving environment and to chart a shared vision for its future. It will provide a platform for constructive dialogue on how the sector can adapt to shifting political, legal, and financial realities, while sustaining its role as a trusted partner in Uganda's development journey.





# Background & Rationale

Uganda's civil society has made significant contributions over the years, championing human rights, promoting good governance, delivering humanitarian assistance, and fostering social innovation. In recent years, however, the sector has found itself operating in an increasingly demanding environment. The passage of the NGO (Amendment) Act 2024, which mainstreams the National Bureau for Non-Governmental Organisations into the Ministry of Internal Affairs, reflects a shift towards centralised oversight. This has potential benefits in terms of coordination and alignment with national priorities, but it also requires CSOs to navigate new compliance processes and institutional relationships. CSOs need to adapt to these changes while safeguarding independence and flexibility is a pressing concern.

Financially, the civil society sector is under significant strain. The suspension or closure of major funding channels such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), and Well Springs has left many organisations grappling with shrinking budgets, staff reductions, and in some cases, outright closure. With more than 90% of CSOs still dependent on external funding, the sector remains highly vulnerable to shifts in donor priorities and geopolitical dynamics. This financial fragility is reflected in the sharp decline in the number of registered NGOs in recent years.

This situation underscores the urgent need to diversify revenue streams and strengthen financial resilience. Local philanthropy, domestic resource mobilisation, and innovative cross-sector partnerships present viable alternatives that can reduce over-reliance on foreign aid and secure more sustainable foundations for the sector's work. Building such models will be critical if Ugandan civil society is to sustain its role as a driver of accountability, service delivery, and citizen voice in the years ahead.





Technological change offers both promise and peril for civil society. Digital platforms have the potential to broaden outreach, enhance efficiency, and open new forms of citizen engagement. Yet persistent barriers, including low smartphone penetration, limited digital literacy, and uneven connectivity, mean that the benefits of digitalisation are not evenly shared across organisations and communities. At the same time, Uganda's pre-election climate heightens sensitivities around civic space. Civil society's work in electoral governance, civic education, and accountability is particularly vulnerable to political pressures, with restrictions often intensifying during such periods. Navigating these dynamics while maintaining constructive engagement is essential for sustaining both trust and influence.

Against this backdrop, the National Civil Society Convention 2025 aims to foster a forward-looking dialogue on the sector's future. Discussions will centre on four interrelated themes: the regulatory environment, the political context, financial sustainability, and digital transformation, alongside the imperative of strengthening collaboration within the sector.







# Purpose & Objectives of the Convention

The National CSO Convention aims to provide a constructive and inclusive platform for dialogue, reflection, and joint action among civil society actors, government representatives, development partners, and other stakeholders. At its core, the convention seeks to strengthen mutual understanding, identify common priorities, and build collective strategies that enhance the effectiveness, resilience, and sustainability of the civil society sector in Uganda.

A central focus of the convention is to collaboratively analyse and address the evolving policy and legal frameworks that shape the operating environment for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). In light of the ongoing amendments to the NGO regulatory framework, the convention will facilitate a structured and inclusive discussion aimed at building consensus on key emerging issues.

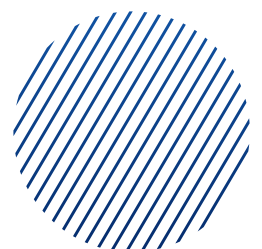
In recognition of the rapid technological shifts influencing civic space, the convention will explore practical strategies for leveraging digitalisation as a tool for organisational resilience. Discussions will focus on how CSOs can adopt and adapt digital innovations to improve efficiency, expand their reach, and safeguard their operations in an increasingly unpredictable environment.

Finally, the convention will address the pressing need for sectoral and organisational adaptation in the face of changing financial landscapes and emerging political challenges. By examining strategies for agility, responsiveness, and resilience, the discussions will equip CSOs with the tools and insights necessary to navigate governance uncertainties, diversify funding streams, and sustain their advocacy and service delivery efforts.



## Specific Objectives

- Facilitate a collective discussion of current CSO regulatory, policy, and legal frameworks, with the goal of reaching consensus on key issues related to the ongoing NGO policy review.
- Build and reinforce partnerships among CSOs from different regions and thematic areas, as well as with government, development partners, and other stakeholders through actionable commitments
- Identify and share strategies for harnessing digital tools and innovations to strengthen CSO resilience and operational capacity.
- Explore adaptive strategies for responding to financial constraints, governance uncertainties, and political challenges in the civic space.





# Structure of the Convention

The National CSO Convention 2025 will be convened as a high-level, in-person gathering (with a possibility of a virtual option) that brings together a diverse range of stakeholders committed to advancing an enabling environment for civil society in Uganda. This convention will be intentionally designed as a practical, solutions-oriented forum, moving beyond dialogue to generate actionable commitments and a shared understanding of how CSOs, government institutions, development partners, academia, and the private sector can work together to strengthen civic space, enhance sector resilience, and deliver greater impact for communities.

The Convention will employ interactive formats that encourage active participation and inclusive dialogue. These will include:

- **Keynote addresses** from distinguished leaders in government, civil society, development partners, academia, and the private sector, offering visionary insights and framing the broader discussion.
- **Panel discussions** on sectoral priorities, fostering multi-perspective debate and practical recommendations.
- **Plenary sessions** to consolidate learning and capture the collective voice of the Convention on cross-cutting themes.
- **Breakout sessions** allowing participants to dive deeper into thematic priorities, exchange experiences, and co-create sector-specific solutions.
- **Networking sessions** to strengthen partnerships, solidarity, and peer-to-peer learning.



To distinguish this Convention from previous gatherings, innovative engagement tools will be integrated into the program, including:

- Interactive digital tools (e.g., Mentimeter) to capture live feedback and perspectives.
- Gamified techniques (e.g., scenario simulations) to test strategies and stimulate creativity.
- Visual thinking methods (e.g., illustrating visions of the future of civil society for presentation at the close of the Convention).
- Inclusive participation techniques such as World Café and Fishbowl discussions to ensure diverse voices are heard.

In addition to the formal program, the Convention will provide space for side events, exhibitions, and compliance clinics to enable deeper exploration of emerging or specialised issues. These may include thematic deep dives on topics such as transitional justice, youth engagement, local philanthropy, or social enterprise. Organized by interested participants in advance, these sessions will enrich the diversity of perspectives and generate practical outcomes that extend beyond the main agenda.



# Target Participants

The CSO Convention will convene a broad and inclusive spectrum of stakeholders, including:

- Representatives from local, national, and international CSOs operating in Uganda across diverse thematic areas.
- Government officials and policymakers at national and subnational levels.
- Donors, philanthropic organisations, and development partners supporting civil society initiatives.
- Representatives from academia contributing evidence, analysis, and thought leadership.
- Private sector actors interested in social investment, corporate social responsibility, and cross-sector partnerships.
- Media and communication professionals as critical partners in amplifying civil society's voices and narratives.







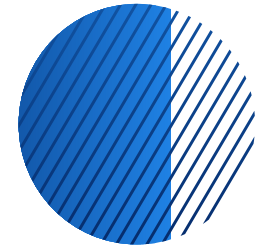
# Detailed exploration of the conference themes

## **Theme One: The Future of the NGO Regulatory Framework: Navigating a Complex Regulatory Landscape**

The legal and regulatory environment fundamentally shapes the operating context for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Uganda. The NGO (Amendment) Act, 2024, represents a significant development by repositioning the National Bureau for NGOs under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This restructuring has the potential to improve policy coherence, enhance coordination between government and civil society, and streamline oversight functions. At the same time, it raises critical questions about how CSOs can maintain operational autonomy and flexibility amid evolving regulatory expectations.

In parallel, the National Bureau for NGOs initiated a review of the NGO Policy 2010 and the NGO Act 2016 in 2023, opening a window of opportunity for envisioning a comprehensive and modernised regulatory framework. This review process invites diverse stakeholders to contribute ideas and perspectives that could shape the future governance of the sector, balancing accountability with an enabling environment that supports innovation and community responsiveness.

For many CSOs, navigating this changing regulatory terrain presents real challenges. Increasingly complex administrative and reporting requirements risk diverting limited resources away from core mission delivery. Overly burdensome compliance measures may inadvertently restrict programmatic innovation and responsiveness, potentially undermining the sector's ability to adapt to emerging social needs.



The Convention will offer a dedicated space for government representatives, regulators, and CSO leaders to engage in open, constructive dialogue. The goal is to identify practical approaches to regulatory compliance that uphold accountability without stifling creativity or agility. Discussions will also focus on solution-oriented policy advocacy strategies and the institutionalisation of regular, meaningful consultations between regulators and the sector.

## **Theme Two: Civil Society in Uganda's Multifaceted Governance Context**

Election periods in Uganda are critical junctures that highlight the indispensable role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in fostering good governance, promoting citizen participation, and safeguarding electoral integrity. These moments offer unique opportunities for CSOs to educate voters, monitor elections, and encourage peaceful political engagement. However, they also tend to be accompanied by heightened political tensions that can constrain the operational space for civil society actors.

CSOs also face internal challenges arising from the broader political polarisation, which can strain their governance and strategic cohesion. Navigating this complex environment requires nuanced approaches that balance principled advocacy with pragmatic engagement strategies, ensuring that civil society remains credible and effective while minimising risks to personnel and organisational security.

This theme will convene participants to explore practical frameworks for sustaining constructive partnerships with electoral bodies and government actors. It will emphasise the importance of trust-building, transparency, and dialogue as foundations for expanding civic space during politically sensitive periods. Furthermore, the discussions will highlight innovative approaches to voter education that are impactful, inclusive, and compliant with regulatory frameworks, especially in underserved or high-risk areas.



## **Theme Three: Financial Sustainability: Adapting to a Shrinking Resource Landscape**

The financial foundation of Uganda's civil society has historically depended on international development assistance. While external funding will remain important, the recent closure of major funding facilities has underscored the need for diversification and resilience. Smaller and emerging organisations have been particularly affected, as competition for limited resources often favours larger, well-established entities. This dynamic can lead to “mission drift,” where organisations adjust their objectives to fit donor priorities rather than community needs. It can also reduce incentives for collaboration, as organisations compete for the same funding streams.

The Convention will explore strategies for strengthening financial sustainability, including developing local philanthropy, forging partnerships with the private sector, and creating income-generating activities aligned with organisational missions. Discussions will also consider policy measures that could encourage domestic giving, such as tax incentives for charitable contributions.

## **Theme Four: Technology and Digital Transformation in Civil Society**

Digital technology offers transformative potential for CSOs. It can expand outreach, facilitate real-time communication, streamline operations, and enable data-driven decision-making. However, harnessing these benefits requires both the infrastructure and the skills to use technology effectively. Uganda's smartphone penetration rate remains relatively low, and digital literacy is uneven, particularly outside urban areas. For many organisations, budget constraints limit investment in new tools or training, while concerns about cybersecurity and data privacy add further complexity.

The Convention will consider how CSOs can integrate digital tools in ways that enhance rather than complicate their work. This includes developing strategies for inclusive engagement that reach communities with limited access to technology, identifying cost-effective tools that match organisational needs, and building internal capacity for ongoing adaptation.

# About the Convenors

The National Civil Society Organisations (CSO) Convention 2025 is convened by the Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF) in partnership with the National Bureau for NGOs, and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).



## Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF)

Established in 1997, UNNGOF is a national platform that brings together NGOs and civil society actors in Uganda to promote collective voice, coordination, and influence on issues of governance and development. It plays a leading role in shaping civic space and strengthening the effectiveness of the civil society sector.



## National Bureau for NGOs

The Bureau is the statutory body under the Ministry of Internal Affairs mandated to register, regulate, monitor, and coordinate NGOs operating in Uganda. Its participation in the Convention underscores government's role in creating an enabling regulatory and policy environment for civil society.



Deutsche Gesellschaft  
für Internationale  
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

GIZ is an international development agency that works on behalf of the German Government and other partners to promote sustainable development worldwide. In Uganda, amongst other things, it implements the Civil Society in Uganda Support Programme (CUSP), under which this convention is supported. CUSP is commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and co-funded by the European Union (EU).



# NATIONAL CSO CONVENTION 2025

*30th September & 1st October 2025: Kampala*

