CONCEPT NOTE

RISE ZAMBIA: STRENGTHENING LEGAL ADVOCACY, PROTECTION, AND RESILIENCE OF CSOs IN ZAMBIA.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Zambia's civil society sector is going through a significant regulatory transition. The proposed NGO Bill of 2025 has raised serious questions about the future operating environment for CSOs, questions that remain largely unaddressed in any formal dialogue between government and the sector. Therefore, this six-month proposed initiative aims at giving civil society organisation the tools, evidence and platforms to engage with the relevant stakeholders.

The project has five activities: a national dialogue between CSOs and their regulators; a rapid preparedness study that generates evidence for policy submissions; a virtual exchange with international civic space networks; a round-table to develop a voluntary self-regulation framework; and a thought leadership initiative producing four analytical articles for public and policy audiences. Women-led and youth-led organizations are at the centre of the design, not as an afterthought.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

CSOs in Zambia do important work which include: holding government to account, amplifying citizen voices and supporting communities that would otherwise go unheard. But the environment in which they operate has become harder to navigate. The proposed NGO Bill of 2025 has introduced new uncertainties. The Registrar of NGOs would gain broad powers to suspend or deregister organizations, with limited due process protections and vague definitions of what constitutes a prohibited activity. Smaller organizations, which have neither the legal expertise nor the financial cushion to fight administrative decisions, are particularly at risk.

These provisions are in conflict with Zambia's own Constitution. Articles 20 and 21 protect freedom of expression and association, and Zambia's commitments under the ICCPR and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights reinforce those protections. Yet these obligations have not featured prominently in the current reform debate, in part because civil society has had no structured platform to put them on the table.

Women-led CSOs carry particular risks. They often run on tight budgets, have limited access to legal advice and are more exposed to personal harassment when they take on governance or human rights work. Youth-led organizations face their own pressures; public order laws have repeatedly been used to disrupt youth civic activity and younger organizations rarely have the institutional standing to push back effectively. Both groups need practical support and a real seat in the conversations that shape their operating environment.

Across the sector more broadly, responses to the NGO Bill have been fragmented. There is no shared evidence base, no agreed advocacy position and no coalition with the credibility and staying power to sustain engagement through a reform process that may take years. RISE Zambia is designed to build that foundation.

3. THEORY OF CHANGE AND OBJECTIVES

3.1 How Change Happens

The project works through three connected pathways.

The first is preparedness. When CSO leaders understand what the NGO Bill actually says, what their constitutional rights are and what compliance looks like in practice, they are far less vulnerable to arbitrary administrative action. This is especially true for women-led and youth-led organizations that currently have no access to this kind of practical legal guidance.

The second is dialogue. A credible study gives CSOs something concrete to bring to the table. It shifts the conversation from general concerns to specific, documented problems and creates the basis for structured negotiations with the Registrar of NGOs and relevant ministries about how the regulatory framework should be reformed.

The third is legitimacy. A sector that holds itself accountable is better placed to resist heavy-handed regulation. The self-regulation framework builds that credibility from within and gives CSOs stronger ground to stand on when they engage government. Connection to international civic space networks reinforces this further, embedding Zambia's reform efforts within a broader community that watches and supports.

3.2 Project Goal

To strengthen the legal preparedness of Zambian civil society organizations and build the platforms needed for constructive, evidence-based engagement with regulators.

3.3 Specific Objectives

1. Help CSOs — particularly women-led and youth-led organizations — understand the NGO Bill, their rights under it and what compliance requires.
2. Create a structured space for CSOs and regulatory bodies to engage directly, and produce documented reform commitments from that engagement.
3. Generate credible evidence on the state of civic space in Zambia and get it in front of the people with the power to act on it.
4. Support the sector to develop a voluntary self-regulation framework that strengthens its credibility and independence.
5. Connect Zambian civil society to regional and international networks working on the same issues.

4. PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: National Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue "Talk to Your Regulators"

ZCSD will bring together CSO leaders, the Registrar of NGOs and relevant regulatory institutions for a national dialogue on the proposed NGO Bill and what it means for civil society in practice. This is not a consultation exercise. It is a structured engagement in which CSOs come with documented evidence, a clear agenda and specific asks and leave with written commitments.

The dialogue will be facilitated by an independent moderator and structured around findings from the preparedness study. Participants will include representatives from statutory compliance bodies such as ZRA, NHIMA and NAPSA, whose enforcement practices poses real difficulties for smaller organizations.

Women and youth CSO leaders will be among the lead voices in the dialogue, with dedicated agenda time for the issues that affect their organizations specifically. The event will produce a joint communiqué agreed by both CSO and government participants, a formal proposal for a standing consultation mechanism between the sector and the Registrar and written clarification from at least one statutory body on compliance procedures applicable to CSOs.

Activity 2: Rapid Civic Space Preparedness Study

ZCSD will conduct a focused study on how ready Zambian CSOs are to operate under the regulatory framework the NGO Bill would introduce. The research will combine structured surveys with at least 60 organizations, interviews with legal experts and regulatory officials and dedicated consultations with women-led and youth-led CSOs. Their experiences will be reported separately so the distinct challenges they face are visible in the findings, not averaged away.

The study will look specifically at how the proposed legislation lines up against the Constitution and Zambia's obligations under the ICCPR and the African Charter not as an academic exercise but to give CSOs solid legal grounding for their advocacy.

The study will produce a full internal report, a national policy brief with specific reform recommendations formally submitted to the Registrar of NGOs. It will also produce a plain-language legal guide for CSOs summarising their rights and obligations and a practical compliance toolkit with calendars, template letters to regulatory bodies and a framework for documenting incidents of administrative harassment. All materials will be available in print and digital formats. The evidence gathered will feed directly into the dialogue, the self-regulation round-table and the thought leadership articles.

Activity 3: International Civic Space Virtual Exchange

ZCSD will facilitate a virtual exchange session connecting Zambian CSO leaders with counterparts in other countries who have navigated similar regulatory challenges. The exchange will focus on what has actually worked; which legal strategies held up, how coalitions were built, where dialogue with governments succeeded and where it did not. This is peer learning from people who have been through it.

Because the exchange is virtual, multiple ZCSD representatives and partner CSO leaders can take part at the same time, including women and youth advocates who would otherwise be left out of international engagement. Participants will produce a shared synthesis report drawing together the key lessons and practical recommendations most relevant to Zambia's context. That report will inform the self-regulation round-table and the thought leadership articles.

Activity 4: Self-Regulation Strategy Round-table

ZCSD will convene a round-table of senior CSO leaders to work through what a voluntary self-regulation framework for Zambian civil society should look like. Participants will arrive having already reviewed the preparedness study findings and the synthesis report from the virtual exchange, so the session can go straight into substantive decisions rather than covering ground people already know.

The round-table will produce a co-developed framework document covering accountability standards, member obligations, complaint procedures and conflict of interest rules. It will also produce an adoption plan targeting at least 15 early adopter organizations within three months and a peer mentoring protocol so that those early adopters can support others as the framework spreads, with each early adopter expected to work directly with at least three peer organizations.

Women-led and youth-led CSO networks will have guaranteed seats in the governance structure of the self-regulation platform that emerges from this process. The framework needs to work for the organizations most at risk if it is going to mean anything.

Activity 5: Thought Leadership Initiative

ZCSD will commission four analytical articles on the issues at the heart of this project. Each article will be written by a subject specialist, reviewed by ZCSD and a legal expert and published on at least two platforms, mainstream media, CSO networks and digital policy publications. All articles will be openly accessible.

The four pieces will cover: a plain-language constitutional and international law assessment of the NGO Bill; what self-regulation has meant for civil society in other countries and what Zambia can learn from those experiences; how regulatory environments create disproportionate pressures on women-led organizations; and how CSO-regulator dialogue can translate into actual reform rather than just conversation.

The goal is to move these debates beyond the organizations directly involved and into the broader public and policy conversation. Parliamentary discussions, donor decisions and public understanding of civil society's role are all shaped by what gets written and published. These articles are part of the advocacy, not just a record of it.

5. EXPECTED RESULTS AND MONITORING

Expected Result	Indicator	Means of Verification
CSOs better equipped to navigate the NGO Bill	At least 60 CSOs surveyed; compliance toolkit distributed to all participants	Study report; toolkit distribution records
Direct dialogue between CSOs and regulators takes place and produces results	Joint communiqué agreed; at least one statutory body provides written clarification on CSO compliance procedures	Signed communiqué; official correspondence
Research findings reach government and parliament	Policy brief formally received by Ministry of Home Affairs and Parliamentary Committee	Submission acknowledgement letters
Self-regulation framework agreed and adopted	Framework document produced; at least 15 CSOs sign on within three months of the round-table	Framework document; sign-up register; roundtable minutes
Public debate on civic space strengthened	Four articles published on at least two credible platforms each	Published articles with platform links; readership data
Zambian CSOs connected to international networks	Virtual exchange held; synthesis report shared with ZCSD membership	Meeting records; attendance list; synthesis report

6. RISK ANALYSIS AND MITIGATION

Risk	Level	How We Will Manage It	If It Still Happens
Government or regulatory actors push back against the project's advocacy	**Medium**	Keep all engagement grounded in constitutional and legal arguments rather than political ones. Use the OGP framework to create positive incentives for government engagement.	Collective positioning across the coalition reduces the risk that any single organization becomes a target.
The Registrar or other regulatory bodies decline to attend the dialogue	**Low–Med**	Send formal invitations early, with clear framing of the dialogue as an opportunity rather than a confrontation. Engage Ministry focal points	Document the non-participation publicly. Redirect advocacy through the parliamentary

		during the planning phase.	submission process.
Government acknowledges the policy brief but takes no action	**Medium**	Pursue practical administrative wins alongside legislative ones — compliance guidance and consultation mechanisms can move faster than law reform. Use international participation to maintain external attention.	The dialogue commitments become a public accountability record. The parliamentary committee engagement continues independently.
Women and youth activists face security pressure or harassment	**Low–Med**	The compliance toolkit will include guidance on documenting incidents and accessing legal support. Collective positioning and public visibility reduce individual exposure.	ZCSD will monitor and respond to any reported incidents. An emergency legal referral protocol is built into the toolkit.
CSOs cannot agree on a self-regulation framework	**Medium**	Build the framework through genuine co-development rather than presenting a finished document. Start with organizations already committed to the idea and let adoption grow from there.	The cascade approach means the framework can start small and build momentum over time. Early adopters create proof of concept for others.

7. ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY AND PARTNERS

7.1 Zambia Council for Social Development (ZCSD)

ZCSD is the national umbrella body for civil society in Zambia, representing over 100 organizations. It has led governance, public finance accountability and civic participation programmes funded by the EU, Oxfam and a range of other international partners. The organization has the financial systems, governance structures and experienced staff needed to manage this project well and bring diverse stakeholders to the table.

The ZCSD website (www.zcsdev.org.zm) is currently being renewed. In the meantime the organization is active on social media through facebook @thezcsd and will restore the full website during the project period.

7.2 Partners

Partner	Role	What They Bring
Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)	Implementing partner	Policy brief development and stakeholder engagement
Civic Advisory Hub	Regional partner	Virtual exchange facilitation and international network connections
Women and Youth CSO	Primary beneficiary group	Research participants, dialogue

Networks		speakers and self-regulation governance seats

8. SUSTAINABILITY AND LONG-TERM IMPACT

The self-regulation framework is built from the start to work without external funding. The governance structure rotates leadership, quarterly reviews are embedded as a member obligation and the cascade mentoring protocol means knowledge spreads outward through the network without needing central coordination. The target is 15 signatories within three months of the round-table, with each early adopter working directly with at least three peer organizations after that.

The policy brief and dialogue commitments do not expire when the project ends. ZCSD and its partners will track legislative progress on the NGO Bill and submit written evidence to any parliamentary review process. The commitments made in the dialogue will be recorded publicly, creating an ongoing accountability reference that CSOs can return to.

The four published articles will continue to circulate and shape the conversation long after the project closes. They are written for a broad audience and will be freely available, so their reach is not limited to people who attended a particular event.

RISE Zambia project is also the foundation for something larger. The evidence, relationships and structures built over these six months are the building blocks for a longer national programme on civil society resilience. In the final month of the project ZCSD will develop a sustainability plan that identifies the next funding opportunities and sets out what the coalition needs to keep moving forward in the twelve months after project closure.