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Open Parliaments in Africa

*Case studies of Ghana, Kenya, South Africa,
and the Pan-African Parliament*

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Abbreviations

AFMA	African Feminist Macroeconomic Academy
AGSA	Auditor-General of South Africa
ANC	African National Congress
APMON	African Parliamentary Monitoring Organizations Network
BJC	Budget Justice Coalition
CDD-Ghana	Centre for Democratic Development–Ghana
CRAWN Trust	Community Advocacy and Awareness Trust
CSO	Civil society organization
CTIN	Civic Tech Innovation Network
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FEMNET	African Women’s Development and Communication Network
GPMON	Ghana Parliamentary Monitoring Organizations’ Network
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
KEWOPA	Kenya Women Parliamentarians Association
MCA	Member of County Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NPP	New Patriotic Party
NDC	National Democratic Congress
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OBS	Open Budget Survey
OGP	Open Government Partnership
OPI	Open Parliament Index

OUTA	Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
PAP	Pan-African Parliament
PNAfrica	Parliamentary Network Africa
PMG	Parliamentary Monitoring Group
PMO	Parliamentary Monitoring Organization
RTI	Right to information
SLAPP	Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation
STAR-Ghana	Strengthening Transparency, Accountability, and Responsiveness in Ghana
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
WFD	Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Summary

An open parliament is one that makes legislative work transparent, participatory, and accountable, fostering a two-way relationship between citizens and their representatives. Across Africa, advances towards parliamentary openness have been lauded as governance breakthroughs, but what difference have they made in practice?

Openness can sometimes be reduced to dashboards, consultations, and scorecards, prioritizing visibility over influence. The risk is that open parliament initiatives create the illusion of participation rather than meaningful change. Accountability emerges only when openness makes parliaments more responsive to their people and, by extension, executives more responsive to their parliaments.

This paper examines Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) to assess whether open parliament reforms have resulted in institutional uptake and shifts in power dynamics, and where they have fallen short.

Ghana's open parliament ecosystem is anchored by a coalition of reformist MPs, parliamentary monitors, and donor-backed initiatives. The Right to Information Act (2019) marked legislative progress towards an open parliament, and transparency infrastructure has expanded. Rhetorical commitment from the Speaker of Parliament, a champion of openness, has been matched by the creation of the Citizens' Bureau, a standing feedback channel between Parliament and civil society that offers a shift from ad-hoc consultations towards a standing mechanism for engagement. Despite this progress, decisions in Ghana's Parliament are taken by voice vote, with no public record of how MPs vote. Government responses have been mixed, sometimes accommodating civic input, but at other times deflecting it.

In Kenya, a new constitution (2010) and early membership of the OGP (2011) both represented progress towards openness, but parliamentary oversight remains constrained by executive dominance. A diverse, embedded coalition of openness advocates promote open parliament, and several civic tech platforms have provided successful channels for citizen participation. But civic pressure is often co-opted. Open government caucuses and public budget forums suggest inclusion, but rarely challenge executive power. Open budget tools improve fiscal transparency but stop short of shifting allocations. Reforms produce visible changes, but the deeper dynamics of executive dominance and limited accountability remain largely unchanged.

South Africa's open parliament trajectory reveals a core paradox: one of the continent's strongest transparency infrastructures coexists with parliamentary weakness. Portals and civic campaigns have strengthened budget advocacy, enabled watchdog litigation, and provided records for public inquiries, showing that openness can translate into influence, especially in moments of political crisis. South Africa has the legal framework, civic infrastructure, and public demand for oversight to support openness, but entrenched party discipline and patronage networks often blunt Parliament's ability to respond consistently.

The Pan-African Parliament provides a supranational model that advances norms through model laws and open data, but is constrained by its advisory mandate and stalled ratification of stronger powers. Its Open Data Portal, which digitizes parliamentary transcripts, resolutions, reports, and model laws, is used by regional accountability networks to press for greater inclusion and transparency across African Union institutions.

Across cases, two conclusions stand out. Transparency has clearly expanded, and in some moments these tools have enabled civic actors to expose wrongdoing or shape reforms. At the same time, responsiveness is uneven, and executive dominance, partisan discipline, and structural exclusion continue to blunt accountability. Open parliament in Africa is less a finished reform than a contested process: progress is real but partial, and the challenge ahead is to link visibility to responsiveness so that citizens are not only seen and heard, but also heeded.

1. Introduction

Since the Declaration of Parliamentary Openness in 2012, the idea of ‘open parliaments’ has gained traction in parts of Africa. The Open Government Partnership (OGP) (2021) refers to open parliament as “an essential part of an open government,” while ParlAmericas (2016) frame it as a new form of interaction between citizens and legislative powers that promotes parliamentary openness and transparency, to ensure access to public information, accountability, citizen involvement, and high probity and ethical standards in parliamentary work. For its part, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2006) notes that openness includes physically open proceedings, proactive communication, and modern tools to connect parliament and the public. These descriptions of open parliament contain a common thread: the link between parliament and citizens, a relationship that can strengthen legislative independence, broaden oversight, and embed civic voice in decision-making.

Increasingly, African parliaments are livestreamed, tracked, and monitored to ‘open’ them to public view. Yet this heightened visibility has not enabled greater citizen participation in political processes, made politicians more responsive to their electorate, or rendered executives more receptive to parliamentary recommendations. Too often, openness is reduced to flashy measures, such as dashboards, dialogues, and scorecards, which create the illusion of transparency over meaningful institutional change and accountability, thereby obscuring deeper questions as to where power actually resides (Fox 2015; ParlAmericas 2016).

This paper frames open parliament not as an outcome of transparency tools but as a political process grounded in responsiveness and institutional learning. It asks whether civic voice leads to institutional change, not only through the formal adoption of transparency and participation measures within parliamentary processes, but also through their active use by legislators, committees, and other political actors to inform decisions and shape action. It further considers whether openness can shift power under executive dominance by first getting parliaments to listen and respond to citizens, and then compelling executives to listen and respond to parliaments.

Building on a blog by the author in the Accountability Keywords series (Knowles 2025), this paper investigates three sets of questions:

- Who uses open parliament civic tech innovations and tools, and who is excluded?
- Do civic tech innovations and tools lead to changes in institutional behavior, or do they merely create new rituals of visibility?
- In contexts of legislative weakness, can openness move beyond information disclosure to catalyze meaningful accountability?

These questions have emerged in a context of mounting democratic strain. Shrinking civic space, technocratic policymaking, and executive dominance have eroded the participatory role of legislatures. In response, this paper advances two propositions. First, open parliament is inherently political. Second, disclosure alone is insufficient: what matters is whether openness is actually taken up by parliaments and executives in ways that influence decisions.

The following sections outline the analytical ideas that inform these propositions: distinguishing between visibility and traction, voice and response; and understanding how strategic pathways can link civic voice to accountable institutions.

1.1 From ‘Voice’ to ‘Teeth’: Key Ideas Informing the Propositions

Open parliament reforms across Africa often foreground visibility, livestreams, portals, and dashboards (PNAfrica and APMON 2022). These tools signal openness, but visibility alone rarely shifts the balance of power. Instead, transparency initiatives often become symbols of reform without enabling accountability. To avoid this ritualization, open parliament must be understood not as a technical fix but as a political process. The key analytical move is to shift from access to response: not only whether citizens can speak, but whether institutions listen, and under what conditions they act.

This distinction clarifies the gap between ‘voice’ and ‘teeth.’ In African presidential systems, legislatures are routinely constrained by executive dominance, patronage networks, and informal hierarchies (Van Cranenburgh 2009, Opalo 2019). As Warren Krafchik, co-founder of the Open Government Partnership and the International Budget Partnership, and South African reformer, observed in an interview with the author in 2025: “parliament has a boss, and that boss is the president.”¹ In such contexts, disclosure without enforcement tends to neutralize dissent rather than catalyze reform. This reflects what Fox (2015) calls the “low accountability trap”: opportunities for participation exist, but lack enforcement mechanisms. Hearings, petitions, and consultations become stylized performances, absorbing civic input while insulating decision-makers from consequence.

As Fox (2015) emphasizes, “voice” refers to the aggregation and representation of citizen demands, while “teeth” refer to government’s capacity to respond through incentives and sanctions. Voice without teeth risks irrelevance, while teeth without voice risk capture; the challenge is how to link the two in practice.

The dynamics of institutional response to civic voice can be usefully understood along a continuum. Fox (2015) discusses how authorities often deflect reform efforts by “squeezing the balloon,” shifting blame or adapting corrupt practices to less visible arenas. Building from these insights, this paper frames government responses as ranging from absorbed (ignored), to deflected (diverted), to co-opted (symbolically embraced but substantively neutralized), to—in rare cases—scaled, when citizen action across local, subnational, and national arenas is vertically integrated to produce structural change, as Fox discusses. In this sense, open parliament reforms can generate new voice, but their democratic value depends on whether that voice is merely absorbed, deflected, or co-opted, or whether it is strategically scaled into lasting power shifts.

The core proposition of this paper is therefore that open parliament is a political project. Tactical approaches—petitions, dashboards, and pop-up consultations—cannot substitute for strategic pathways that link civic voice to institutional teeth. Durable accountability requires enforcement powers, cross-sector coalitions, and feedback loops that span state–society boundaries. Transparency can broaden voice, but only responsiveness and enforcement can translate that voice into power.

1.2 Frameworks Guiding ‘Open Parliaments’ in Africa

Several key ideas help understand diverse outcomes on the pathway from civic voice to institutional teeth across Africa. Open parliament reforms operate at the intersection of global norm diffusion, domestic power struggles, and civic contestation. Different strands of theory highlight these dynamics from complementary angles.

Liberal institutionalist perspectives assume that transparency norms, promoted by initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and the 2012 Declaration on Parliamentary

¹ Warren Krafchik, interview with author, Washington DC, August 2025. Several quotes from this interview are used in this paper, and are referenced Krafchik (2025).

Openness, gradually reshape legislative behavior through benchmarking and diffusion. While these initiatives differ in form—OGP as a multi-stakeholder and multilateral partnership, IPU as a parliamentary association, and the Declaration as a normative statement—all function as vehicles for norm diffusion. By this logic, African parliaments that adopt portals, livestreams, or disclosure laws are expected to gradually align with these international norms. Yet in practice, diffusion generates opportunity, not certainty. In executive-dominated legislatures, transparency reforms are often adopted symbolically, without altering incentive structures or redistributing authority.

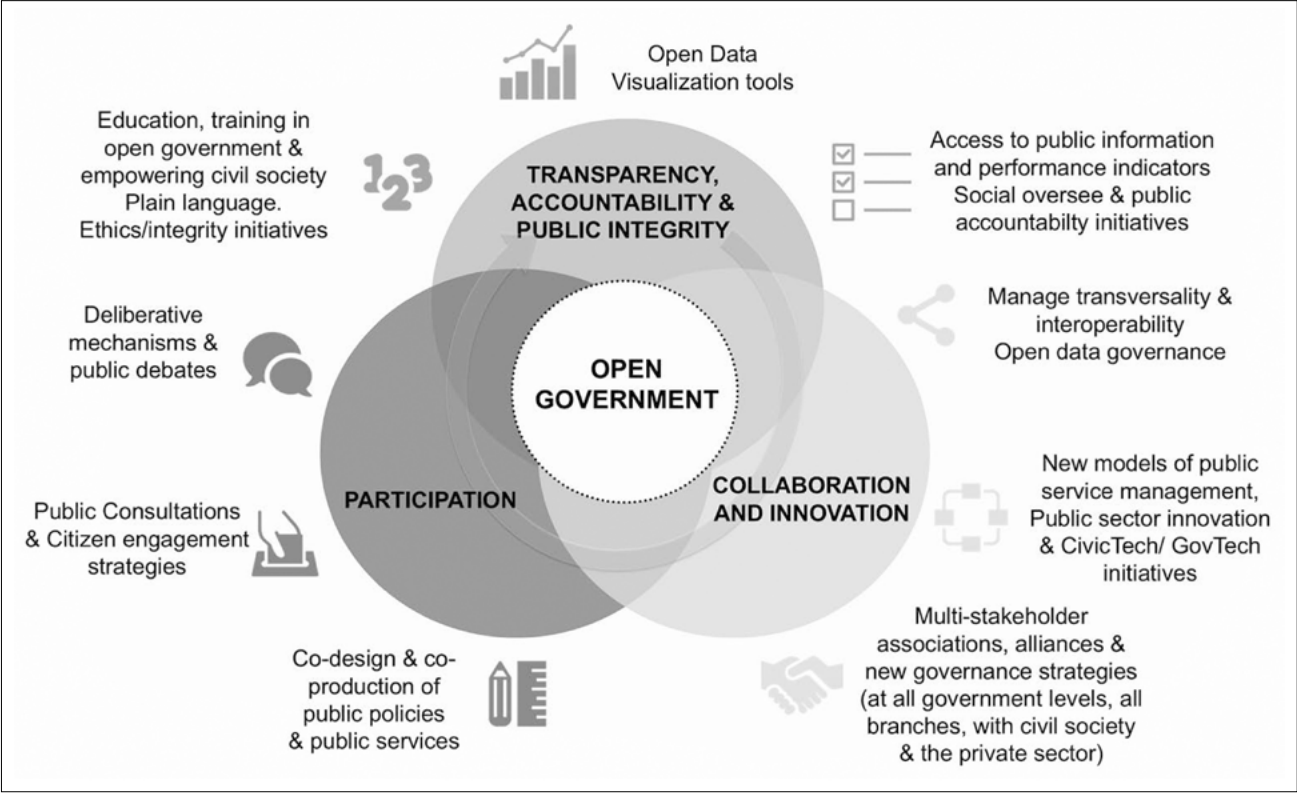
Constructivist approaches interrogate recognition and legitimacy. Civic engagement is not neutral: it is historically situated in contested struggles over who counts as a political participant and who confers that recognition. In the African parliamentary context, recognition is typically granted (or withheld) by institutional gatekeepers—political parties, legislative committees, or donor-driven initiatives—that decide which actors qualify as ‘partners’. Youth-led protests, feminist coalitions, and civic tech innovators are therefore claim-makers who contest the terms of recognition by demanding entry into arenas where participation is selectively bestowed. This lens directs attention to inclusion and exclusion: who is invited to the table, by whom, on what terms, and with what consequences.

Principal–agent theory highlights the misalignment of incentives. Legislators often remain more accountable to party hierarchies than to citizens, especially in presidential systems where executive dominance blunts oversight. This dynamic entrenches what Fox (2015) calls symbolic responsiveness, rituals of consultation that mimic deliberation without redistributing power.

The 2004 World Development Report on making services work for poor people distinguished between the short route to accountability of direct engagement between citizens and service providers, and the long route to accountability mediated through legislatures (World Bank 2003). In fragile or executive-dominated contexts, the long route is often blocked, because of weak parliaments unable to act as intermediaries, prompting citizens to bypass them altogether. A later World Bank report on harnessing transparency and citizen engagement (Khemani et al. 2016) reached a contradictory conclusion: even short-route tools such as civic tech rarely succeed unless the long route is functioning, meaning political incentives and institutional capacities must be aligned so that elected representatives listen and respond. Whether voice travels the short or long route, it reaches a dead end if legislatures cannot or will not act.

International frameworks provide scaffolding for open parliament reforms, but their traction depends on political context. Ramírez-Alujas and Cruz-Rubio (2025) suggest that open government frameworks are built on three interlinked pillars: transparency, accountability, and public integrity; participation; and collaboration and innovation. Each pillar is supported by strategies and tools as indicated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Interlinked Pillars of Open Government: Transparency, Participation, and Collaboration.



Source: Ramírez-Alujas and Cruz-Rubio (2025), reproduced with authors' permission

Liberal institutionalism underscores the importance of norms; constructivism foregrounds contested legitimacy; principal-agent theory highlights distorted incentives; and accountability frameworks diagnose the conditions under which voice gains traction. Open parliament in Africa must therefore be analyzed not as linear diffusion of global scripts, but as a contested political process shaped by executive-legislative relations, civic mobilization, and regional norm adaptation.

2. Case Studies of Open Parliament in Practice in Africa

This section examines four cases: Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), looking not only at the existence of open parliament reforms, but also their uptake, use, and institutional impact.

Rather than cataloguing isolated innovations or reform pledges, the analysis asks: do open parliament efforts contribute to accountability, and if so, under what conditions? It applies Fox's understandings of accountability (2015, 2024) to distinguish between symbolic openness and substantive institutional change. The analytical lens shifts from platform design to political consequence, drawing three core distinctions:

- passive transparency (one-way disclosure) vs. interactive transparency (two-way engagement)
- symbolic participation vs. institutional responsiveness
- adoption of tools vs. uptake that produces institutional change.

The three national cases, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa, are each examined through a six-part comparative framework:

1. **Context and reform trajectory** situates open parliament reforms within each country's constitutional and political evolution, tracing legacies of executive dominance, transitions to multiparty democracy, donor influence, and regional norm uptake.
2. **Key actors and civic tech innovations** identifies key reform actors, parliamentary monitors, civic tech intermediaries, oversight institutions, women's and youth caucuses, and donor partners. It distinguishes between performative gestures and participatory co-creation, assessing civic tech innovations such as legislative trackers, co-creation platforms, and scorecards.
3. **Uptake and use** assesses who actually uses civic tech innovations, for example citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs), Members of Parliament (MPs), journalists, and auditors. The focus is on frequency, durability, and influence, not just visibility or reach.
4. **Inclusion of women, youth, and marginalized groups** analyzes how open government reforms address the participation of politically marginalized constituencies. It examines both representation—who gains access to decision-making spaces—and recognition—whose voices are legitimized or sidelined by institutional gatekeepers.
5. **Power and accountability dynamics** diagnoses the structural forces that enable or constrain reform: executive control, Westminster-style limits, partisan committee capture, and shrinking civic space.
6. **Outcomes and constraints** assesses whether reforms generate institutional learning, behavioral change, or improved oversight.

It interrogates not only whether reforms increase visibility, but also whether they lead to meaningful institutional action and sustained accountability. Translating ‘response’ into practice requires clear, repeatable processes that connect citizen input to institutional decisions and back again. As illustrated in Figure 2, effective feedback loops involve structured stages, from authorizing and organizing the process, to budgeting, listening, analyzing, publishing, implementing, and finally reporting back and iterating. Without steps like these, citizen voice remains episodic and disconnected from decision-making cycles.

Figure 2. The ‘Listen, Respond, Report’ Feedback Loop



Source: NDI 2025 (CC BY-NC 4.0)

The fourth case, the PAP, is examined through a continental lens. While PAP lacks binding legislative authority, it functions as a symbolic and agenda-setting platform in African governance. Its reform trajectory reflects the interplay of transnational civic pressure, model law processes, and agenda-setting spaces like the PAP–CSO Forum. These continental mechanisms illustrate how openness is framed, promoted, and diffused, even in the absence of formal enforcement powers.

By grounding each case in a shared diagnostic framework, this section moves beyond abstract commitments to confront the politics of reform implementation as norms are contested, institutions are tested, and accountability is negotiated in real time.

2.1 Ghana: Civic Intermediaries in a Constrained Reform Space



Activity in the chamber of Ghana's Parliament.

Credit: Delali Adogla-Bessa

2.1.1 Context and Reform Trajectory

Ghana's open parliament pathway has been incremental, shaped by legal milestones, political openings, and elite bargaining. Under the 1992 Constitution of the Fourth Republic, Parliament has long been structurally subordinate to the executive, a legacy of centralized governance. As Kathyola and Job (2011) observe, the executive has tended to dominate both the decentralized and centralized aspects of governance, limiting legislative autonomy and narrowing space for citizen engagement.

The 2019 Right to Information (RTI) Act, won after two decades of advocacy, marked a watershed. For the first time, citizens had a legal basis to request government-held information. This was followed by a notable shift in the Fourth National Action Plan (2021–2023), which included Ghana's first Open Parliament Plan and a joint Parliament–CSO Steering Committee (Commitment GH0040). Co-created by reformist MPs and civic intermediaries such as Parliamentary Network Africa (PNAfrica), the Centre for Democratic Development-Ghana (CDD-Ghana), and Strengthening Transparency, Accountability, and Responsiveness in Ghana (STAR-Ghana), the plan signaled formal recognition that open government principles apply to the legislature. The election of Hon. Alban Bagbin as Speaker in 2021 proved catalytic, eventually leading to new platforms for engagement such as the Citizens' Bureau (Appiah-Osei 2023).

Political dynamics reinforced these openings. Ghana's 8th Parliament was evenly divided between the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC), producing a rare equilibrium of

power. This provided an enabling environment for heightened scrutiny, curtailed unilateral executive control, and created incentives for procedural transparency. Yet as Kathyola and Job's (2011) earlier observations cautioned, much of Ghana's decentralization and accountability reform remains elite-driven and top-down, negotiated within a duopoly that prizes stability over structural transformation.

External frameworks and donor investments further shaped the reform trajectory. The STAR-Ghana program strengthened committee systems, fiscal transparency, and CSO–legislature engagement (STAR-Ghana Foundation n.d.). The International Budget Partnership's Open Budget Survey (OBS) reinforced global benchmarking: in the 2023 edition, Ghana scored 46/100 on transparency, 28/100 on budget oversight, and 17/100 on public participation (IBP 2024a). These results highlight the persistent gap between access to information and citizen influence over fiscal decisions. Civic actors such as SEND Ghana and CDD-Ghana have used these metrics to press for participatory budgeting and more open fiscal governance.

Parliamentary openness also intersects with Ghana's decades-long decentralization reforms. While the 1992 Constitution and the Local Government Act (1993) established Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies as vehicles for local decision-making, real power remains concentrated in Accra. As Kathyola and Job (2011) noted, nearly ten years later decentralization had not translated into meaningful legislative accessibility for rural or marginalized communities, raising concerns about a capital-centric openness that was procedurally formalized but geographically narrow.

By 2022, the reforms that had been implemented had earned Ghana the top spot on Africa's Open Parliament Index (OPI), positioning it as a continental leader (PN Africa and APMON 2022). Its progress has been cumulative: foundational laws like the RTI Act, institutionalized CSO engagement through the Citizens' Bureau, and alignment with continental norms have moved Parliament from relative opacity toward regional leadership. Yet the same structural legacies—centralized governance, elite bargaining, and uneven access—continue to shape the boundaries of participation and responsiveness. Ghana has made visible gains in “voice” and procedural openness, but whether these are consistently matched by institutional “teeth” or “accountable responsiveness” remains an open question (Fox 2015; Fox et al. 2024).

2.1.2 Key Actors and Civic Tech Innovations

Ghana's open parliament movement is anchored by a coalition of reformist MPs, parliamentary monitors, civic technologists, and donor-backed initiatives, whose innovations span legislative, procedural, and digital terrains. While smaller in scale than Kenya's or South Africa's ecosystems, Ghana's approach is notable for embedding co-creation into parliamentary structures and pairing political leadership with civic tech experimentation. Rather than operating in isolation, these actors form a hybrid accountability ecosystem in which openness is both institutionalized and contested.

At the center is rare political buy-in from within Parliament. Speaker Alban Bagbin has positioned himself as a public champion of legislative openness, declaring in July 2025: “Let us recommit ourselves to building a Ghana where our Parliament is acclaimed as the most open, accountable, and responsive in Africa” (Appiah-Osei 2025). This rhetorical commitment has been backed by procedural reforms, most visibly the creation of the Citizens' Bureau, a permanent interface between Parliament and civil society. By maintaining a CSO registry, hosting thematic dialogues, and offering a standing feedback channel, the Bureau moves civic engagement from episodic consultation toward procedural permanence.

These reforms are anchored in the 2024–2028 Open Parliament Action Plan, co-created with the OGP and structured around four pillars: transparency, accountability, citizen participation, and technology/innovation. Reformist MPs, including Hon. Emmanuel Bedzrah and the First Deputy Speaker, have acted as political entrepreneurs, translating deliberative commitments into parliamentary priorities. Their efforts are reinforced by a parliamentary OGP caucus and a multi-stakeholder Open Parliament Task Team that convenes regularly to align civic and institutional strategies.

On the civic side, PNAfrica has emerged as a continental leader, producing the Africa OPI, which benchmarks legislatures on transparency, participation, and accountability. PNAfrica also convenes the African Parliamentary Monitoring Organizations Network (APMON), linking Ghanaian actors with peers across the continent. In the inaugural 2022 OPI, Ghana’s Parliament ranked first among 13 countries with an overall score of 63 percent (PNAfrica and APMON 2022), a symbolic and practical boost to its reform momentum.

Other domestic actors extend this infrastructure. CDD-Ghana leads the Ghana PMO Network (GPMON) and operates I Am Aware, which translates official data into citizen-friendly formats. It has supported the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) with technical insights, issued public statements on legislative disorder, and advocated for gender-responsive reform. Donor-funded initiatives, particularly STAR-Ghana (2015–2020), helped scale these efforts by financing over 40 civic projects, including budget alert systems, scorecards, and parliamentary outreach, and strengthening links between civil society and parliamentary committees.

Civic tech tools have widened both reach and oversight. Penplusbytes’ Connecting Citizens to Parliament project channels citizen feedback via WhatsApp and SMS directly to the Committee on Government Assurances, enabling MPs to track and follow up on unfulfilled government promises. Legacy platforms like *Odekro* digitized transcripts of parliamentary debates, exposed MP absenteeism, and normalized legislative data as a public good, pressure that contributed to Parliament’s pledge to reform attendance systems.

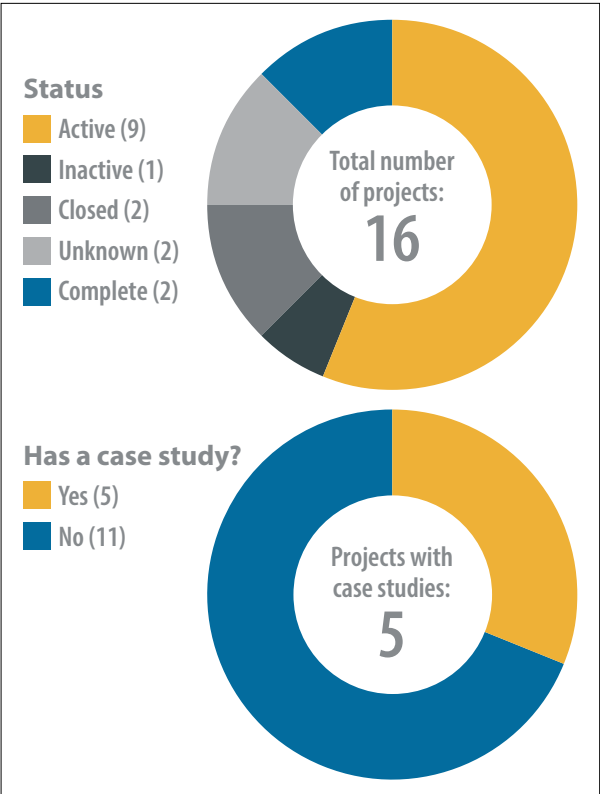
According to CTIN’s *State of Civic Tech in Africa 2025*, shown in Figure 3 below, Ghana had 16 documented civic tech projects, of which 9 were active (see [Annex 1](#) for a full list of documented civic tech projects in Ghana). While modest in volume, this ecosystem reflects growing potential digital accountability capacity.

Figure 3. Civic Tech Projects in Ghana



Source: CTIN 2025

Figure 4. Status of Civic Tech Projects in Ghana

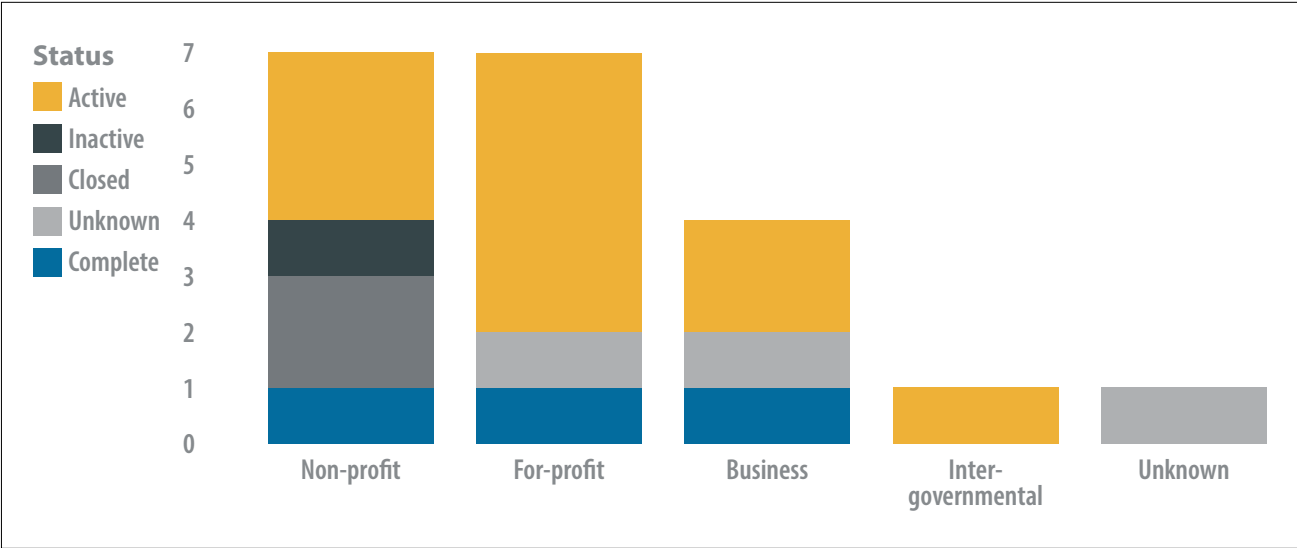


Source: CTIN 2025

As indicated in Figure 4, only five projects have documented case studies, revealing a learning and replication gap.

As indicated in Figure 5, the civic tech sector is led equally by nonprofits and for-profits, with fewer business-led and inter-governmental initiatives. This underscores a hybrid ecosystem shaped more by civic and entrepreneurial initiative than by state ownership.

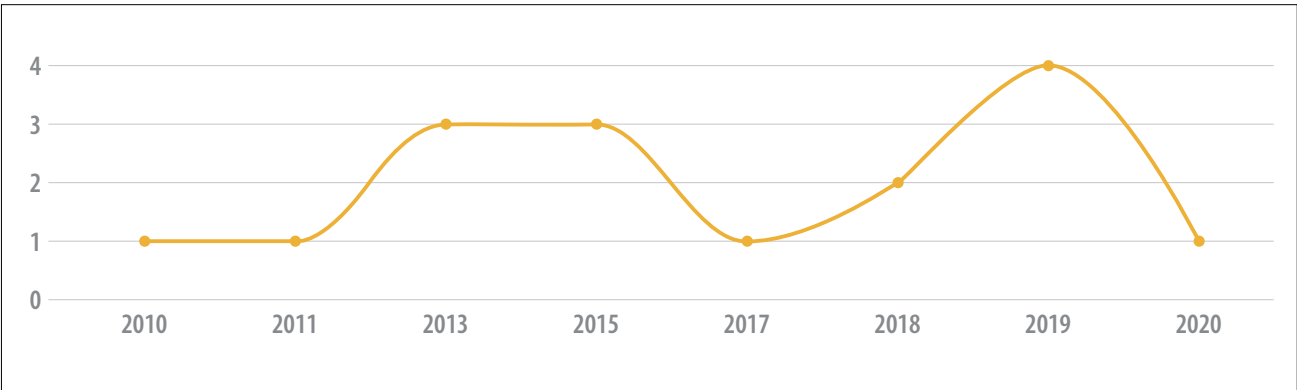
Figure 5. Organizations Leading Civic Tech Projects in Ghana



Source: CTIN 2025

Figure 6 shows that project initiation has been incremental, with small peaks in 2013, 2015, and 2019. While the 2019 increase coincided with the passage of the RTI Act, the numbers involved are modest and should be read as cautiously indicative rather than conclusive evidence of a link between enabling legislation and civic tech innovation.

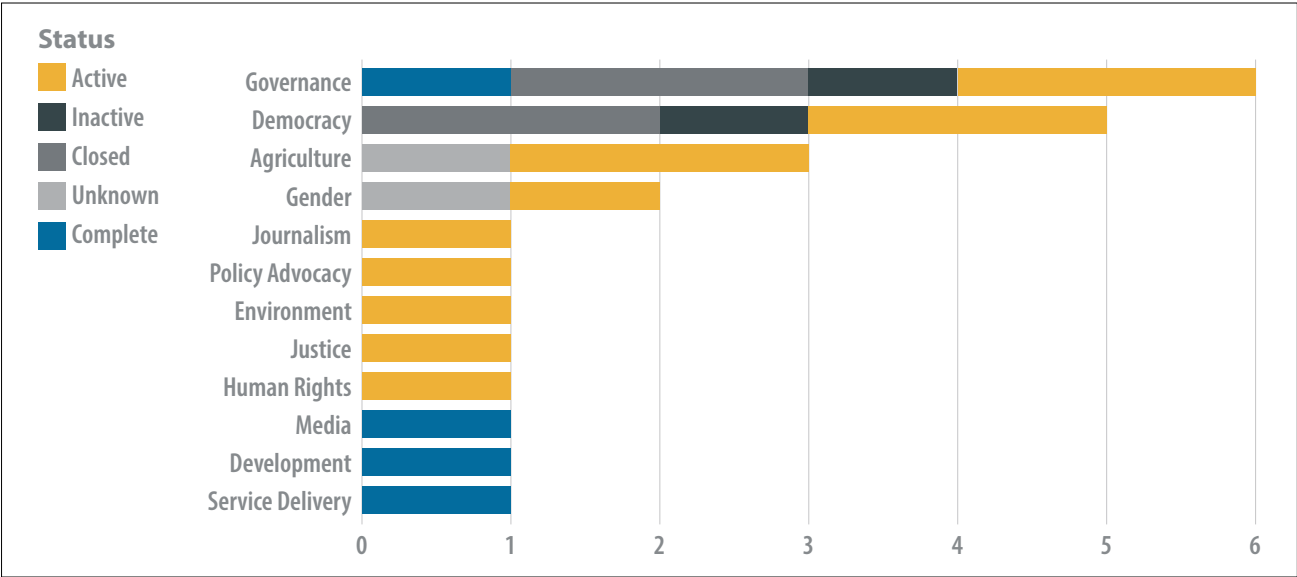
Figure 6. Civic Tech Projects in Ghana by Start Year



Source: CTIN 2025

Figure 7 shows that most civic tech projects focus on governance and democracy, with others in agriculture, gender, and human rights, policy advocacy, and journalism as indicated.

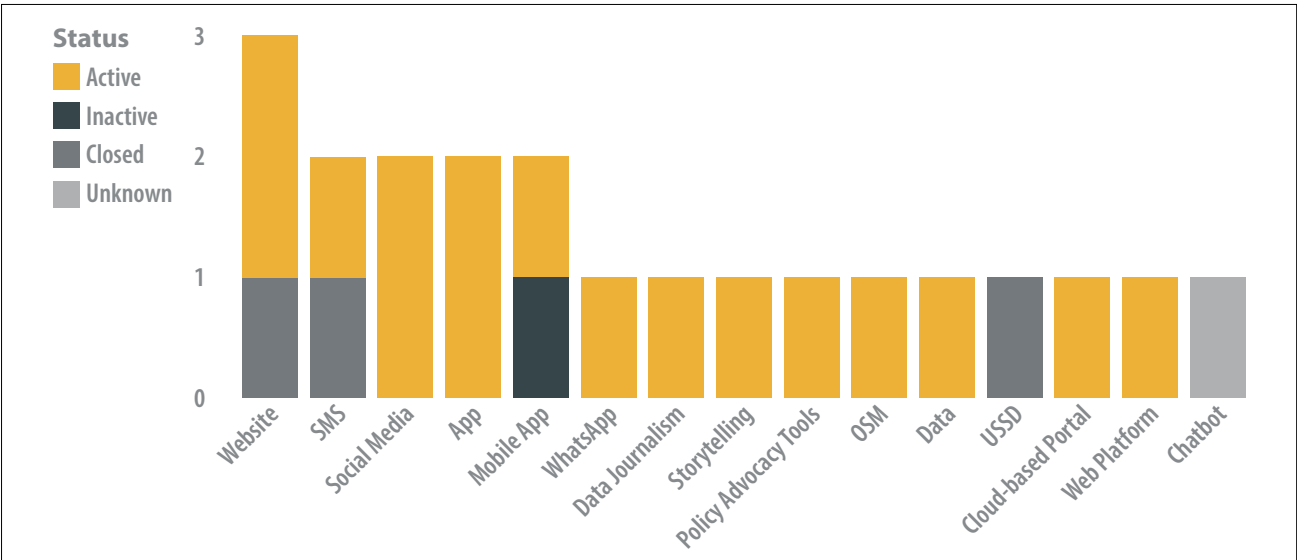
Figure 7. Thematic Focus of Civic Tech Projects in Ghana



Source: CTIN 2025

As shown in Figure 8, the civic tech ecosystem is technologically diverse with websites, apps, social media, SMS, WhatsApp, data journalism, storytelling, and USSD all featuring. AI-driven citizen engagement remains rare, with only one chatbot project recorded and of unknown status. Sustainability challenges persist, particularly for donor-dependent platforms without institutional anchoring.

Figure 8. Technology Use in Civic Tech Projects in Ghana



Source: CTIN 2025

Outside formal civic tech, digital dissent has introduced new repertoires of accountability. Movements like #FixTheCountry (2021) and #OccupyBoG (2023) mobilized thousands online around demands for jobs, justice, and fiscal responsibility. Such mobilizations reveal both the expressive power of digital platforms and the depth of youth alienation from conventional institutions, including Parliament.

Together, Ghana's civic tech and parliamentary reform actors do more than promote access; they demand uptake. The institutionalization of the Citizens' Bureau, the OGP caucus, and the co-drafting of the Open Parliament Plan signal a shift from transparency as performance to transparency as architecture. Yet gaps remain in extending engagement beyond Accra into Ghana's regions, in demographic inclusion, and in state uptake. Closing these gaps will determine whether Ghana's model matures into a genuinely national democratic practice or remains disproportionately centered in the capital, limiting accessibility for citizens in rural and marginalized areas.

2.1.3 Uptake and Use

Ghana's open parliament reforms reveal the tension between expanding civic voice and uneven institutional responsiveness. While visibility of parliamentary proceedings, civic tech platforms, and participatory channels has grown, the mechanisms to translate citizen input into sustained legislative action remain fragile, inconsistently applied, and often dependent on individual champions rather than systemic integration.

The Citizens' Bureau, launched in 2023, exemplifies this asymmetry. Conceived as a formal interface between Parliament and the public, it has hosted submissions from civil society groups such as SEND Ghana and the Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition, and some of these inputs have been cited in parliamentary debate. Yet the Bureau lacks clear procedures to compel follow-up, leaving most submissions acknowledged but not acted upon. This gap between visibility of civic input and limited institutional uptake illustrates the broader tension in Ghana's open parliament reforms.

Similarly, the #RTIRedFriday campaign demonstrated the mobilizing power of digital advocacy, helping secure passage of the RTI Act in 2019. Once the Right to Information Commission became operational in 2021, demand accelerated: requests rose from just 13 in 2020, to 247 in 2021, and 783 in 2022 (OGP 2024). Journalists credited the law with enabling both seasoned and novice reporters to access credible information for impactful investigations. Yet, as with the Citizens' Bureau, the challenge has been less about sparking civic demand than about institutional uptake: 36 requests were rejected in 2022, often on the grounds of exemptions or jurisdictional limits, and bureaucratic bottlenecks persist (OGP 2024). Taken together, these cases illustrate a recurring pattern in Ghana's open parliament trajectory—civic visibility is advancing faster than parliamentary responsiveness.

Applying the lens of the NDI's listen–respond–report feedback loop model (Figure 2), Ghana performs relatively well in the listen phase. Parliamentary livestreams, RTI petitions, and Citizens' Bureau consultations provide structured channels for gathering public input. Yet the respond and report phases are far less developed. There is limited evidence of systematic follow-up, particularly in rural constituencies, and few examples of Parliament reporting back on how public submissions influenced decisions. The Citizens' Bureau remains largely unknown outside Accra, and RTI usage skews toward journalists and organized civil society, leaving large segments of the population underrepresented.

Despite the reforms, institutional gaps persist. Ghana's Parliament does not operate an electronic roll-call voting system; decisions are taken by voice vote, with outcomes judged by the Speaker based on the volume of responses. This method provides no public record of how individual MPs voted, undermining transparency and accountability. The *Connecting Citizens to Parliament* project, implemented by Penplusbytes, a media and technology governance organization, initially allowed citizens to track government promises (Penplusbytes 2016) but lost traction once donor funding ended. Penplusbytes has also promoted open governance through initiatives such as the Freedom of Information Tracker and the OpenGov Ghana platform, which enable citizen participation in policy-making and monitor the implementation of government commitments. Additionally, the CitiTrends radio–digital initiative

and IMANI Center for Policy & Education's iWatch Africa project have used data journalism and digital advocacy to amplify civic voices and demand accountability from public officials.

Odekro, a Ghanaian civic tech platform, hosted an online archive of parliamentary debates and accountability tools, attracting significant public use through its MP Tracker and digitized debate transcripts. Its monitoring work helped fuel broader debates on parliamentary accountability and the visibility of MPs' performance. Yet both *Odekro* and Penplusbytes' parliamentary tools eventually ceased operations in the absence of institutional ownership and sustained budgetary continuity. This reflects a wider pattern across Africa: participatory spaces often open, but without durable institutional uptake, their impact remains partial.

Benchmarking incentives have helped in specific instances. Ghana's first-place ranking in the 2022 Africa OPI prompted visible reforms, including the launch of the Citizens' Bureau, suggesting that performance metrics can spur targeted change. The Citizens' Eye app, introduced by the Ghana Audit Service with support from GLZ, enabled citizens to report stalled or irregular public projects through a mobile platform (Ghana Audit Service 2018). While such tools can expand transparency and public oversight, the evidence linking them directly to PAC enforcement outcomes remains less clear. For example, Speaker Bagbin routinely reports that the PAC has "saved" Ghana hundreds of millions of cedis annually (for example, Modern Ghana 2025), but attributing these results to any single civic tech intervention risks overstating causality.

Nonetheless, some of Ghana's most impactful accountability demands have occurred outside formal institutional channels, amplified by social media. Ghana's youth launched the #FixTheCountry movement in May 2021, quickly turning digital frustration into a powerful nation-wide mobilization urging better governance. The push gained momentum across platforms and rippled onto the streets, capturing attention beyond parliamentary discourse. As Ernesto Yeboah of the Economic Fighters League told *Deutsche Welle*, "We are hungry. Things are bad. Things are difficult. Life is tough. And it doesn't make the headlines" (Kripphal 2021). These actions epitomize what Fox (2020) calls "expressive accountability", where citizens use public expression to signal discontent and demand response when institutional routes for participation and oversight fall short.

Ghana's case thus fits what Fox (2015) describes as the "low-accountability trap": the visibility of parliamentary proceedings and citizen voice has grown, and invited spaces for participation have multiplied, but the translation of that voice into institutional influence remains sporadic. The infrastructure for participation exists, yet pathways for traction are obstructed by weak follow-through, uneven decentralization, and fragile civic tech sustainability. Whether voice leads to consequence is contingent on political will within Parliament, executive uptake of oversight, and the resources needed to sustain participatory innovations. The central challenge is no longer whether citizens are speaking, but whether Parliament—and the state at large—are listening, prepared to respond, and committed to closing the loop.

2.1.4 Inclusion of Women, Youth, and Marginalized Groups

The Affirmative Action (Gender Equity) Act (2024) represents a landmark step toward inclusive governance in Ghana, establishing a 30% quota for women's representation across public institutions. Yet meaningful implementation remains elusive. At a Parliamentary International Women's Day event in March 2025, Speaker Alban Bagbin criticized the unbalanced composition of President Mahama's cabinet: only two of the 19 ministers were women, well short of the quota mandated by the Act. "We have tarried long enough in passing the bill," he said. "Let us not apply the same wishy-washy attitude towards its implementation ... We passed the law, so we have to lead by example" (Narh 2025).

Yet the gap between law and lived reality remains stark. Ghana ranks 147th out of 168 countries in the IPU's 2025 Women in Politics Index, with women holding only 14.6% of parliamentary seats, up from 8% in 1995 but well below South Africa's 44.6% and Kenya's 23.3% (IPU 2025). The Women's Caucus, established in 1993, has advanced

legislation on domestic violence, girl-child education, and reproductive health, but continues to operate without a dedicated budget, formal agenda-setting powers, or guaranteed representation on key committees. Without these levers, women's representation risks remaining symbolic.

Institutionally, the Open Parliament Steering Committee, co-chaired by MPs and civil society partners such as CDD-Ghana, Penplusbytes, and the Northern Sector Action on Awareness Centre, has committed to embedding gender and social inclusion across the 2024–2028 Open Parliament Action Plan. Targets include passage of a Persons with Disabilities Bill, adoption of parliamentary accessibility standards, and structured outreach to youth-led networks. By mid-2025, however, many inclusion commitments were only partially implemented, illustrating an execution gap between ambitious targets and institutional follow-through.

Targeted capacity-building has gained momentum. In 2024, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Ghana, the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office, and the Parliamentary Service co-hosted training for female MPs on the Affirmative Action Act and gender-responsive budgeting, with participants describing the sessions as “eye-opening” in linking digital tools and fiscal analysis to legislative advocacy (UNDP Ghana 2025). CSOs are monitoring party compliance with quotas and working with grassroots women to navigate channels like the Citizens' Bureau and parliamentary hearings. Yet there is little gender-disaggregated data on the use of these channels, making it difficult to evaluate whether the initiatives are closing or reproducing exclusion gaps.

Structural barriers in Ghana's political economy magnify institutional constraints. A joint study by CDD-Ghana and WFD (2020), based on the 2012 and 2016 parliamentary elections, found that the cost of running for office rose by 59 percent over this period. On average, candidates needed to raise GHC 389,803 (approximately USD 85,000) to secure a party primary nomination and contest the parliamentary election in their constituency. These escalating costs meant that politics increasingly became the domain of elites with access to substantial personal resources. The most common source of campaign funding remained personal income, supplemented by loans from family and friends. The financial burden on MPs did not end with elections: once in office, they faced persistent demands for cash payments, lobbying for constituency projects, and in-kind rewards, reinforcing the perception of MPs as providers of charity rather than legislators. This financing environment fosters reliance on patronage networks and creates opportunities for corruption, while systematically excluding women, youth, and reformist outsiders who lack access to such financial and social capital.

Political participation is further constrained by intimidation and violence. Ninety-five percent of parliamentary candidates in Ghana have experienced some form of political violence, most commonly verbal attacks and smear campaigns (Bauer and Darkwah 2024). Women candidates often face gendered abuse, online harassment, and moral-policing rhetoric, all of which undermine their legitimacy in the public sphere. These social gatekeeping mechanisms reinforce the dominance of well-resourced male incumbents and deter underrepresented groups from contesting elections, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion.

Youth inclusion follows a similar trajectory of innovation and constraint. Parliament's annual National Youth Mock Parliament, launched in 2024 with PNAfrica, offers university students the opportunity to simulate legislative processes and receive mentorship from MPs. While such initiatives cultivate democratic literacy, they remain elite-facing. Outside invited spaces, youth-led digital activism has driven more confrontational accountability demands, such as the 2011 #FixTheCountry movement. While the movement prompted symbolic government responses, such as temporary fuel price adjustments, it also met with court injunctions and counter-narratives like #FixYourself, revealing the contested nature of youth political voice.

Digital platforms, though expanding, risk reinforcing inequities. In sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion of women with mobile internet access increased from 24 percent in 2017 to 39 percent in 2024, yet the gender gap in usage remains 29 percent, with 205 million women still offline (GSMA 2025). Connectivity challenges are especially severe in rural constituencies, compounding patterns of political exclusion.

In Ghana, inclusion is not merely a technical matter of quotas and platforms, but a political battleground. Gains such as the Affirmative Action Act and youth engagement initiatives mark progress, but without structural reforms to campaign financing, protection from political violence, localized outreach, and sustained political will, they will not shift power, broaden voice, or produce enforceable change.

2.1.5 Power and Accountability Dynamics

The structural reality of Ghana's legislature is that party hierarchies and executive dominance constrain parliamentary independence and limit the traction of openness reforms. A similar structural dilemma prevails in many other countries: open parliament reforms operate within systems where party discipline, patronage, and winner-takes-all politics shape institutional behavior. Formal rules may invite participation, but political incentives ultimately determine how far transparency will travel.

Ghana's parliamentary record reveals all four the modes of government response referred to in Section 1.2: absorption, deflection, co-optation, and scaling. The long fight for RTI legislation, stretching across successive administrations, is an example of both absorption and deflection. Governments endorsed transparency yet repeatedly stalled its realization—allowing bills to lapse, citing technical obstacles, or withholding budget data.

Recent years, however, have created important pockets of progress. The near-parity of ruling and opposition parties in the 2020–2024 Parliament disrupted the usual pattern of executive dominance, opening space for reform-minded insiders to collaborate with civic actors. The launch of the Citizens' Bureau marked a shift from ad-hoc consultations toward a standing mechanism for engagement. Yet without deliberate decentralization—regional satellites, vernacular consultations, and stronger constituency links—the Bureau risks functioning more as an elite forum in Accra than as a channel for wider participation.

Deflection persists in more politically sensitive reforms. Proposals to publish MP voting records or enforce parliamentary codes of conduct, including mandatory asset declarations, have faced pushback. MPs cite fears of reprisals from party whips or constituents, while legislative autonomy is invoked to dilute reforms. These maneuvers protect institutional prerogatives at the expense of transparency, leaving participation without enforcement.

Co-optation is also visible. Civil society involvement is often blunted. For instance, CSO representatives have been invited into parliamentary reform processes through bodies such as the Open Parliament steering group, but without voting rights or binding authority. These seats signal openness but risk legitimizing parliamentary routines rather than shifting decision-making power.

This period has also seen some moments of scaling, where civic and parliamentary pressure have converged at moments to shift outcomes. During the 2021 budget standoff, opposition MPs rejected the executive's proposal, creating a rare public impasse. Civil society groups like GPMON amplified concerns about procedural violations, and Speaker Bagbin ordered a budget re-submission, prioritizing parliamentary integrity over partisan expediency. This episode showed how civic pressure, aligned with institutional assertiveness, can raise the political cost of evasive behavior.

Formal oversight bodies are increasingly linked to civic intermediaries. The Public Accounts Committee now integrates citizen complaints, investigative journalism, and Auditor-General findings into televised hearings, creating feedback loops that connect grassroots scrutiny to institutional oversight.

Still, the final step in the accountability chain remains the weakest. While PAC and Auditor-General reports heighten answerability, enforcement rests with the executive and judiciary, which remain politically cautious. Gains in visibility and procedural responsiveness have yet to match gains in sanctioning power.

Ghana's accountability landscape therefore sits in an uneasy middle ground. Citizens have more channels to voice concerns, Parliament is more visible and at times more assertive, and civil society is more embedded in legislative processes. Yet government responses still oscillate between accommodation and co-optation, absorption, and deflection. The long-term test will be whether emerging openings—the Citizens' Bureau, budget confrontations, and PAC's evolving remit—can institutionalize consequence, not just conversation. Until then, open parliament reforms risk delivering more visibility for citizens than enforceable accountability from the state.

2.1.6 Outcomes and Constraints

Ghana's open parliament reforms have delivered visible gains in transparency and civic engagement, but the leap from access to accountability remains incomplete.

Transparency infrastructure has expanded significantly. Plenary transcripts and committee reports are now publicly available, and Parliament's website has been redesigned for greater usability. Fiscal openness has advanced: the Ministry of Finance publishes seven of eight key budget documents, including the Citizens' Budget, and Ghana's Open Budget Index score reached 56 in 2021 (IBP 2022), with further gains in 2023 following new disclosure practices (IBP 2024a). The creation of the Citizens' Bureau is especially notable, establishing a permanent channel for civil society engagement. Co-created commitments in the 5th OGP National Action Plan (2023–2027) include operationalizing the Bureau, applying the RTI Act to Parliament's administration, and creating an Open Parliament office. Together, these reforms move beyond ad hoc access toward embedded openness.

Responsiveness to citizen input has improved, though unevenly. The PAC now incorporates citizen complaints, Auditor-General findings, and investigative journalism into oversight hearings, with televised sessions heightening public pressure. Parliament has shown moments of responsiveness: queries on COVID-19 procurement prompted disclosures and corrections, while environmental advocacy shaped anti-poaching provisions in the 2022 Wildlife Bill. Yet structural gaps persist. RTI requests are slowed by an under-resourced commission, rules on MP attendance are rarely enforced, and responsiveness often depends on reformist leaders, raising doubts about durability if political alignments change.

Even when citizen voice and parliamentary response align, enforcement is the missing link. PAC recoveries of misused funds are significant, but prosecutions of implicated officials remain rare. Party discipline and winner-takes-all politics blunt the impact of transparency on MP behavior, while reforms such as roll-call voting or stricter asset disclosure continue to face resistance. Parliamentary openness cannot, by itself, overcome an executive that withholds implementation data or stalls on audit findings.

Structural constraints deepen these gaps. Engagement remains skewed toward urban, digitally connected constituencies, while rural women, youth, and persons with disabilities face linguistic, geographic, and socio-cultural barriers that limit entry. Constituency offices are chronically under-resourced, constraining year-round contact between MPs and their constituents. Within Parliament itself, open parliament reforms rely on small teams stretched across publishing, public engagement, and OGP compliance. Civil society capacity beyond Accra is similarly uneven, particularly since STAR-Ghana's donor-funded facilitation role has scaled back.

Yet Ghana's trajectory is regionally significant. It tops Africa's Open Parliament Index, shapes peer learning through the APMON, and has inspired reforms in Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone. Compared to Kenya, where civic tech flourishes outside Parliament but struggles to embed within it, Ghana's reforms are more institutionally anchored. Compared to South Africa, where fiscal transparency outpaces legislative openness, Ghana's parliamentary leadership has assumed a more proactive role in driving the openness agenda.

The challenge ahead is to close compliance gaps, guard against elite rollback, broaden inclusive access, and invest in the institutional and civic capacity needed for sustained progress. Seen does not mean heard, and heard does not mean heeded, unless Ghana can move from procedural openness to systemic consequence.

2.2 Kenya: Between Innovation and Executive Dominance



Interior of the Kenya National Assembly.

Credit: Sir Kevin Machira (CC 2.0)

2.2.1 Context and Reform Trajectory

Kenya's open parliament reforms illustrate the tension between constitutional ambition and political constraint. Early membership in the OGP in 2011 positioned the country as a regional leader in formal transparency commitments. The 2010 Constitution entrenched access to information, public participation, devolution, and expanded parliamentary powers, and created a bicameral legislature. Yet, as Ambasa (2019) notes, these parliamentary reforms did not guarantee robust oversight. Parliamentary autonomy remains contingent on political friction, assertive in moments of intra-coalition tension, compliant under executive–legislative alignment.

Despite enduring structural subordination, the emergence of a vibrant civic technology ecosystem has nonetheless gained momentum. Initiatives such as Mzalendo Trust's *Dokeza* platform, the County Legislative Tracker, and *Senate Mashinani* exemplify how civil society actors have developed participatory infrastructures aimed at enhancing democratic engagement. The core challenge, therefore, lies in translating procedural openness into institutional responsiveness.

Both chambers face structural and political constraints. The Senate, as Ogutu (2024) argues, has been systematically sidelined, its authority diluted, financial autonomy curtailed, and role as a devolution watchdog eroded, particularly in intergovernmental budget disputes. The National Assembly's oversight of fiscal matters and appointments has been similarly uneven.

Yet civic and parliamentary actors continue to innovate. Mzalendo Trust's *Dokeza* facilitates public input into bills; its Parliamentary Scorecard tracks MP performance. The County Legislative tracker, designed and supported by WFD, monitors subnational lawmaking. *Senate Mashinani* brings Senate hearings to counties. Still, the test is not whether civic tech innovations exist, but whether they are used and elicit institutional response.

The disconnect between citizen voice and institutional response became stark during the 2024 Gen Z protests. Sparked by outrage over a Finance Bill that proposed taxing basic goods, and fuelled broader demands for dignity and justice, the protests called for legislative accountability. Parliament “demonstrated shocking apathy” (Ambasa 2025), hearings were minimal, MPs echoed executive silence, and no responsive legislation followed. Openness again served as a symbol of reform, without consequences for inaction.

At the subnational level, similar patterns persist. The *Eye on County Assemblies* report highlights absenteeism, poor reporting, and weak participation frameworks; in 2022, only 20 of 47 county assemblies published debate transcripts and just six released committee reports (Mzalendo Trust 2024a). Legal mandates have not translated into institutional discipline. The Senate's devolution role (protecting county governments, and allocating and overseeing the use of devolved funds) also remains constrained by limited budgets and political marginalization. An earlier Mzalendo Trust report further flagged that parliamentary committees, such as those established to oversee Kenya's COVID-19 response, face challenges in fulfilling their mandates, undermining effective scrutiny during critical periods (Mzalendo Trust 2021a).

Electoral dynamics further entrench elite dominance. Kanyinga and Mboya (2021) estimated that the average cost of securing a National Assembly seat was KES 18 Million (USD 182,000), the equivalent of 245 percent of an MP's annual salary. For the Senate, the figure rose to USD 350,000, while a County Assembly seat averaged USD 31,000. Beyond the initial campaign, legislators reported spending on average USD 93,600 annually from personal resources to meet constituency demands. Personal income remained the dominant source of campaign financing, with only a minority of aspirants receiving party support.

These high entry and maintenance costs effectively shut out women, youth, and reformist outsiders who lack comparable financial networks. Indeed, although women candidates often outspent men (except in Senate races), their representation in the National Assembly remains disproportionately low. 71 percent of respondents indicated they would spend even more if contesting again, underscoring how politics operates as a high-stakes investment cycle (Kanyinga and Mboya 2021). In this context, elected office is treated less as a site of legislative accountability than as a prestigious and transactional arena, where handouts, patronage, and ethnic mobilization determine outcomes more than programmatic debate.

And yet, civic contestation endures. Reform in Kenya is rarely linear; rather, it is iterative, shaped by struggle, appropriation, and political friction. The question remains not what exists on paper, but whether it compels a response.

2.2.2 Key Actors and Civic Tech Innovations

Kenya's open parliament movement is sustained by a diverse coalition of parliamentary monitors, civic technologists, oversight institutions, donors, and youth-led movements, whose innovations span digital, procedural, and political terrains. Rather than operating in silos, these actors form a complex accountability ecosystem in which openness is continuously negotiated, adapted, and contested.

At the center is Mzalendo Trust, Kenya's leading parliamentary monitoring organization (PMO). Since 2005, it has evolved from a transparency portal into a catalytic civic tech hub. Signature tools include the MP Scorecard and *Dokeza*, discussed above. Through *Bonga na Mzalendo* (SMS polling) and the People's *Shujaaz* Awards, Mzalendo blends digital innovation with civic recognition. Its strategic engagement with Parliament has enabled co-creation of legislative commitments within Kenya's OGP process.

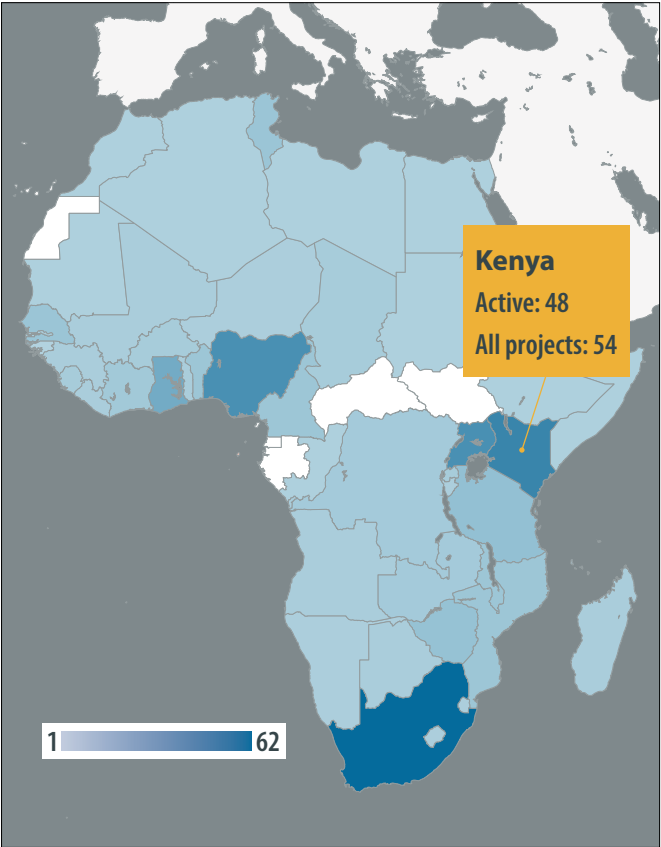
Reformist actors inside Parliament have also played a catalytic role. The establishment of an OGP Desk and cross-party OGP Caucus helped build legislative buy-in for participatory governance. In 2019, the Senate partnered with Mzalendo and the WFD to originate a draft Public Participation Bill that mandates broader use of digital tools. Though the bill remains stalled at the National Assembly, this initiative prompted the executive to prioritize the drafting and technical review of their own Public Participation Bill (2025), which has reached the relevant cabinet sub-committee for approval.

WFD has supported the extension of open government infrastructure through localized innovations. The *Senate Mashinani* model brings Parliament physically closer to the people. The County Legislative Tracker, developed by WFD with the Senate Liaison Office, monitors county laws, offering a replicable oversight model at the subnational level. Such parliament-in-situ approaches show how parliaments can proactively reach marginalized communities, especially when paired with civic facilitation on the ground. The real test remains whether parliamentary committees integrate citizen submissions into deliberations, and whether the executive acts on resulting oversight.

These models, built through regional peer exchange, embed legislative openness in co-creation practices. Parliamentary committees, CSOs, and communities collaborate in real time on bills, budgets, and development plans, an approach that moves openness beyond disclosure rituals toward responsive accountability rooted in co-governance. It challenges the assumption that physical or procedural proximity alone ensures participatory legitimacy. Kenya’s broader civic tech ecosystem reinforces this shift.

In terms of civic tech projects, as indicated in Figure 9 below, Kenya ranks second on the continent, with 54 civic tech projects, 48 of which are active.

Figure 9. Civic Tech Projects in Kenya



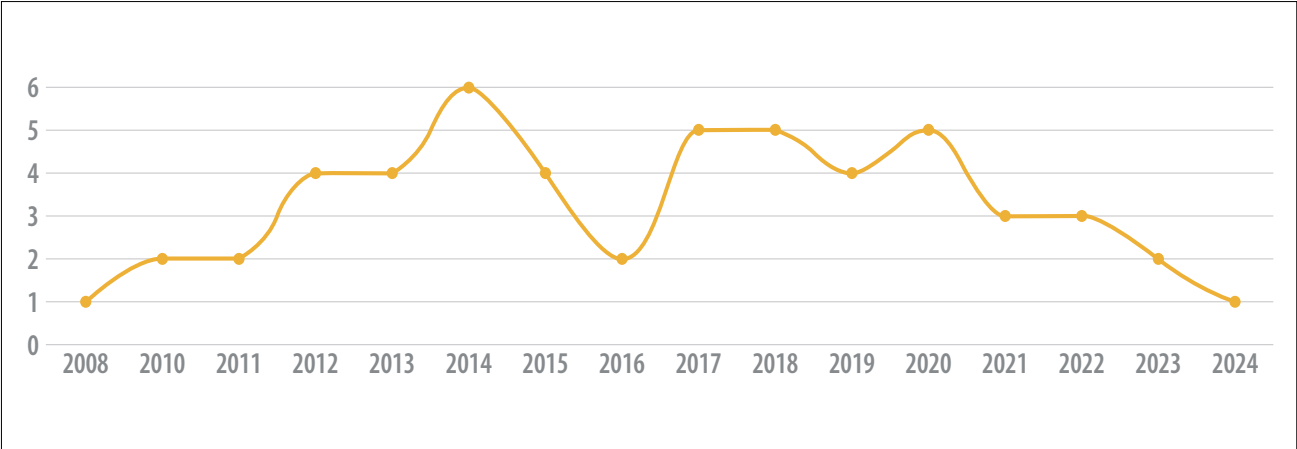
Source: CTIN 2025

Civil society leads this landscape: 43 of the 54 projects are driven by nonprofits, with the remainder spread across for-profits, government, and other actors. Despite limited commercial incentives, the ecosystem remains mission-driven, challenging assumptions that only market-led initiatives can scale or endure.

The named 54 projects have shaped Kenya’s civic tech terrain. Pioneers like Huduma Kenya, Kenya Open Data, Maji Voice, *Ushahidi*, and Voice of Kibera have been joined by newer platforms such as CheckIT, *Maai Makwa*, MyCandidate, Planning 4 Informality, and The HiveBioLab. These initiatives operate across modalities and engage multiple levels of government and civil society (see [Annex 2](#) for a full list of civic tech projects in Kenya).

Figure 10 shows that civic tech activity grew in the aftermath of the 2010 constitutional reforms, closely tracking electoral and reform cycles. From 2021 onward, new launches slowed, with just one project recorded in 2024. This decline may reflect donor fatigue, institutional absorption, or the diffusion of civic tech into broader digital cultures and informal movements.

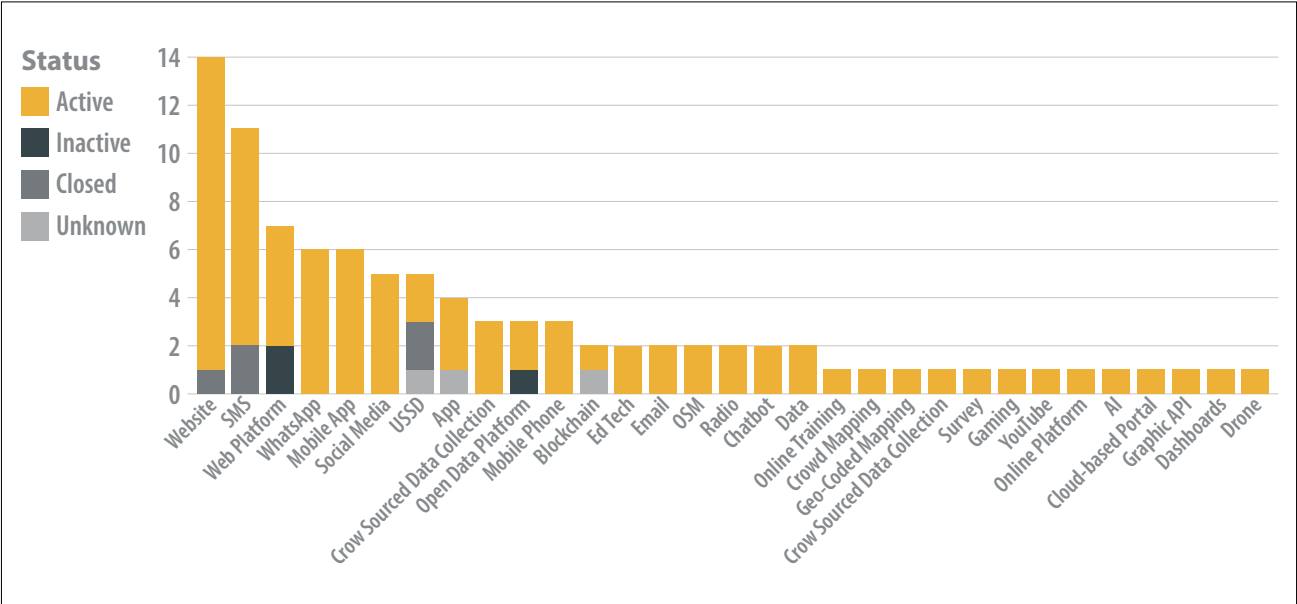
Figure 10. Civic Tech Projects in Kenya by Start Year



Source: CTIN 2025

Technologically, Kenya’s ecosystem is both inclusive and experimental. As shown in Figure 11, the most common formats include websites, SMS, web platforms, WhatsApp, mobile apps, and social media. Tools like USSD, radio, and OpenStreetMap extend reach beyond urban centers, making participation more accessible. Meanwhile, newer frontiers—such as AI and drones—signal a growing wave of civic tech experimentation.

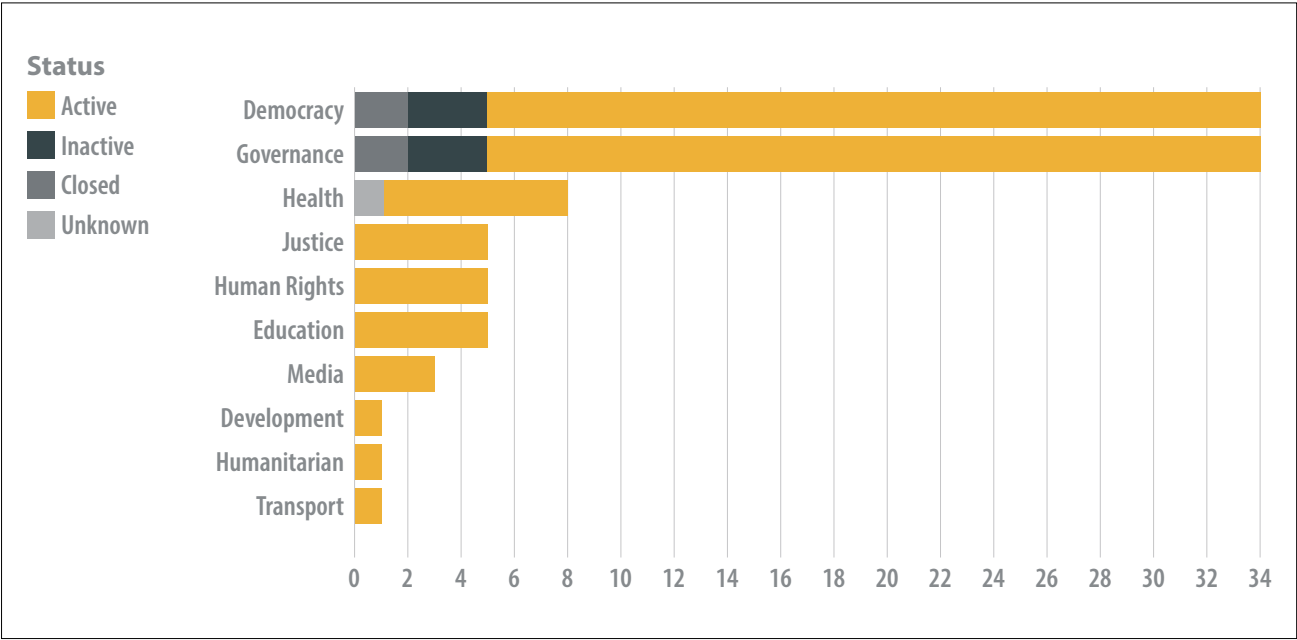
Figure 11. Technology Use in Civic Tech Projects in Kenya



Source: CTIN 2025

The civic tech ecosystem remains focused on politics. As Figure 12 shows, 34 projects focus on democracy and governance. These tools aim to enhance legislative scrutiny, budget transparency, participation, and service delivery oversight. Civic tech projects are less common in sectors like health, education, and transport.

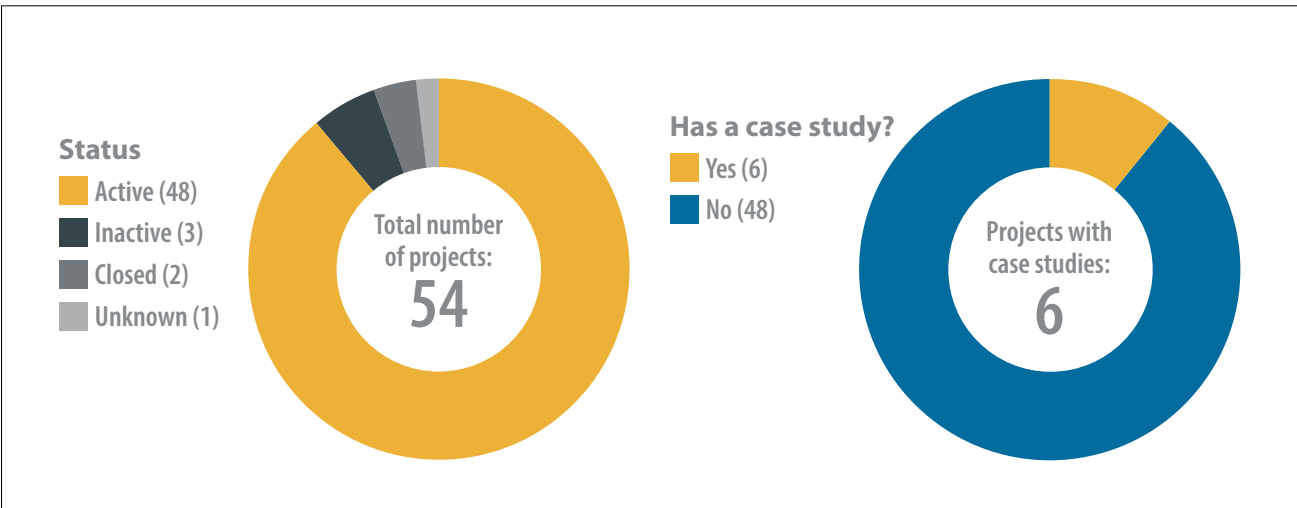
Figure 12. Thematic Focus of Civic Tech Projects in Kenya



Source: CTIN 2025

Figure 13 shows that only six civic tech projects have publicly documented case studies. This suggests a documentation and learning gap that may limit replication.

Figure 13. Status of Civic Tech Projects in Kenya



Source: CTIN 2025

Youth-led digital mobilizations have introduced new repertoires of accountability. The 2024 Gen Z protests exemplified this shift, leveraging hashtags, memes, and TikTok to protest opaque legislative behavior. These mobilizations represent the ecosystem’s creative edge: fluid, leaderless, and unbound by institutional norms. Together, Kenya’s civic tech and parliamentary reform actors do more than promote access; they demand change. Their innovations aim not just to disclose information, but to provoke response, revealing the tension between symbolic openness and institutional change. These tools are not merely technical fixes, but instruments of political struggle, positioning Kenya as one of Africa’s leading test cases for digitally mediated co-governance.

2.2.3 Uptake and Use

Kenya’s open parliament reforms illustrate the tension between a high-functioning civic tech ecosystem and a low-responsiveness institutional environment. The gap between access and influence remains stark. While civic voice has expanded, the institutional mechanisms needed to translate input into action remain inconsistent, weakly institutionalized, or altogether absent.

Mzalendo Trust’s suite of platforms exemplifies the expansion of civic voice. The Bunge Scorecard has catalyzed public debate and media scrutiny around MP performance, while the Shujaaz Awards reinforce pro-accountability norms by celebrating responsive legislators. These tools have attracted thousands of submissions, especially during contentious budget debates and ministerial vetting. Mzalendo’s *Dokeza* platform has allowed citizens to provide feedback on draft laws debated in Parliament, particularly during the 11th and 12th Parliaments (2013–2022), though the number of bills engaged through the tool remains limited and documentation is uneven. Its reach, alongside *Bonga na Mzalendo*, an SMS-based feedback tool operating in 42 of 47 counties, signals growing civic confidence in engaging Parliament. Outreach through universities and grassroots partners has expanded participation beyond urban elites, increasing demographic breadth and signaling the normalization of legislative engagement.

The asymmetry between voice and responsiveness becomes evident when this expanded civic voice is viewed through the lens of the NDI’s Listen–Respond–Report feedback loop model (Figure 2). Kenya excels in the listen phase. *Dokeza* and *Bonga* collect citizen input systematically, channeling it into Parliamentary processes. Yet action in the respond and report phases remains limited. While some committees have acknowledged submissions and a few MPs cite citizen feedback, agenda-setting remains opaque. Committee chairs retain broad discretion, and follow-through is irregular. Even formally adopted tools are poorly integrated into parliamentary workflows, reducing their institutional durability.

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified this disconnect. Legislative activity spiked, but responsiveness to citizens stayed largely symbolic. A review of the effectiveness of five parliamentary committees during the pandemic (Mzalendo Trust 2021a) found mixed results: the Kenya Senate Ad Hoc Committee on COVID-19 ranked highest in overall effectiveness (2.0/3.0), but the National Assembly Health Committee, despite a responsiveness score of 2.3, scored only 1.7 on transparency. The Senate Health Committee issued delayed and inconsistent updates.

Kenya’s legislative processes are described as “very clear and accessible to the public” and participation is relatively high compared to other East African parliaments (Mzalendo Trust 2022). Nonetheless, committee proceedings and debate transcripts are not consistently accessible or mandated. A policy brief on legislative openness (Mzalendo Trust 2023a) spotlighted Kenya’s role as a regional leader, noting its hosting of the Regional PMO Conference in Nairobi and involvement in developing the East African Open Parliament Index. Together, these efforts underscore both Kenya’s progress in institutionalizing openness and the unfinished task of translating access into accountability.

Structural barriers compound these shortcomings. Research on digital and data policies for a secure and inclusive economy (Mzalendo Trust 2021b) identified persistent digital exclusion—rural, gendered, and generational—that

undermines broad uptake of civic tech tools for open government. Despite growing internet penetration, Kenya lacks a rights-based digital strategy to ensure equitable access. Most civic tech tools operate without formal legal anchoring or budgetary support, making their adoption fragile and episodic.

Even successful platforms hit a ceiling. Civic tech has carved out invited spaces for participation, but these rarely mature into full feedback loops. While the listen stage of the feedback loop model is well-developed, the respond and report stages depend on political will, which remains weak. Participation grows and watchdog norms spread, but institutional behavior remains static. Parliamentary committees often treat civic tools as peripheral, and useful for image, not function. Transparency initiatives have multiplied, but incentive structures still reward loyalty over responsiveness.

Kenya's case shows that visibility alone cannot shift power. The infrastructure for voice exists, but the pathways for influence remain obstructed. The core question is no longer whether citizens are speaking, but whether power is listening, and prepared to act.

2.2.4 Inclusion of Women, Youth, and Marginalized Groups

Kenya's open parliament reforms gesture toward gender inclusion, but entrenched asymmetries of power continue to constrain women's institutional influence. While the 2010 Constitution enshrines gender parity as a legal imperative, and Article 81(b) mandates that "not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender," parliament has failed to translate this principle into binding legislation. Articles 27(3) and 100 reinforce the right to equality and call for legislative measures to promote the representation of marginalized groups. Yet more than a decade later, these constitutional commitments remain unfulfilled.

In 2023, the Supreme Court issued a directive to dissolve Parliament for non-compliance with the two-thirds gender rule. The directive was ignored, exposing not only institutional defiance but also deep-seated inertia around gender equity. By September 2024, ten legal petitions had been filed before the High Court over Parliament's failure to pass legislation implementing the two-thirds gender rule (Gitonga 2024). The petitions cited a 2020 advisory by then Chief Justice David Maraga which urged President Uhuru Kenyatta to dissolve Parliament because of several years of failure to comply. Resistance came from the National Assembly, Senate, and Attorney General, amongst others, who argued that the Chief Justice lacked jurisdiction under Articles 261(5)-(7) of the Constitution, warning that enforcing the advisory would cripple governance by leaving the country without a functioning legislature to appropriate funds or hold the executive accountable.

These legal battles expose the limits of constitutionalism without political will. Within Parliament, the Kenya Women Parliamentarians Association (KEWOPA) has advanced critical legislation on gender-based violence, women's leadership, and fiscal justice, but while committee membership in Kenya is allocated by political parties rather than caucuses such as KEWOPA, women MPs affiliated with the caucus often face marginalization through exclusion from influential committees, limited influence over legislative calendars, and entrenched party gatekeeping. The institutional design does not merely sideline women, it constrains their agenda-setting power.

Financial barriers deepen these inequalities. As noted in Section 2.2.1, Kanyinga and Mboya (2021) show that the average cost of winning National Assembly, Senate, and County races is high, as are those of staying in office. These costs intersect with gendered economic inequalities, making it disproportionately difficult for women, who often lack access to both capital and political patronage, to mount competitive campaigns; the same is true of youth and candidates from marginalized regions. In 2025, only 23.3% of Kenya's MPs were women (IPU 2025).

The financial threshold interacts with gendered political risks. While Kenya lacks comprehensive national data on political violence against candidates, evidence from electoral observation and civil society monitoring points to patterns similar to Ghana's, where verbal harassment, smear campaigns, and intimidation are deployed to discredit women challengers. In Kenya, such tactics are particularly pronounced during party primaries, when gatekeeping is most intense and internal accountability weakest. Women aspirants, especially in rural and peri-urban constituencies, face the compounded challenge of economic exclusion, exposure to gender-based violence, and the absence of party-financed security or campaign infrastructure.

This pattern of symbolic inclusion extends to the executive. The Office of the Women's Rights Advisor exists, but has minimal influence. Between June 2024 and March 2025, the Ministry of Gender operated without a dedicated Cabinet Secretary, a prolonged leadership gap that underscored the administration's low prioritization of gender equity. During a National Assembly sitting on April 15, 2025, Suba North MP Millie Odhiambo challenged the government, urging "we need to take this Ministry seriously and that we don't just use it as a means of filling up slots" (Ngano 2025).

International comparisons reinforce her critique. The 2025 IPU report ranked Kenya below the continental average in women's parliamentary representation, trailing countries like Rwanda and Namibia, where political will supports quota enforcement (IPU 2025). Numeric inclusion alone is insufficient. The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)'s analyses of Generation Equality Forum commitments stress that the deeper question is not how many women enter formal spaces, but who gets to govern, whose agendas prevail, and whether inclusion translates into real power (FEMNET 2021, 2022). As these reports underscore, policy gains risk becoming symbolic if they do not embed women and marginalized groups in decision-making authority.

Even civic tech platforms reproduce these tensions. Mzalendo's Dokeza platform has collected inputs on gender-related legislation, including the Sexual Offenses (Amendment) Bill. But, like the other civic tech platforms covered in CTIN's 2025 overview of the civic tech sector in Africa, it does not collect gender-disaggregated usage data, making it difficult to surface intersectional barriers or evaluate inclusion. Without intentional design, civic tech risks replicating the exclusions it seeks to address.

The digital divide further exacerbates exclusion. Mzalendo (2021b) shows that over half of rural women lack internet access, and most require assistance to navigate online platforms. Kenya's celebrated digital infrastructure masks deep inequalities in access and usage. Unless digital engagement strategies are grounded in gender equity, open parliament tools risk becoming elite-centric, undermining their participatory promise.

Yet feminist coalitions continue to push back. KEWOPA, Community Advocacy and Awareness (CRAWN) Trust, the Federation of Women Lawyers in Kenya (FIDA-Kenya), FEMNET-African Feminist Macroeconomic Academy (AFMA), and UN Women have advanced a gendered accountability agenda, using civic tech and advocacy to center feminist priorities. As Ambasa (2025) argues, "Parliament's inaction has become an accomplice to the status quo." Legal petitions to dissolve Parliament are more than procedural; they are a diagnostic flashpoint, revealing the limits of legal reform without political traction.

Women's inclusion is always political, never merely procedural. In Kenya, it is not a technical issue but a political battleground. Between quota fatigue, tokenistic appointments, financial exclusion, gendered political violence, digital divides, and civic resistance, the open parliament agenda stands at a crossroads. Its success must be judged not by symbolic gestures or numeric targets, but by whether the voices of women and other marginalized groups reshape power, institutions, and norms.

2.2.5 Power and Accountability Dynamics

The central dilemma of open parliament reform in Kenya, and in many Westminster-style systems, is that while formal rules may invite participation, executive dominance continues to define the terrain. At the county level, the dynamic mirrors the national: the governor is the boss. Across both arenas, civic energy has grown, but institutional change remains elusive.

Transparency reforms have multiplied: livestreamed sessions, digitized laws, co-created platforms. But participation without consequences often turns into performance. Much of what looks open in Kenya ends up being recognized, but neutralized.

Using the continuum of government response discussed above helps map the terrain. One illustration is *Dokeza*—a civic tech tool endorsed by MPs and occasionally cited in committee reports. Yet it has not been integrated into core legislative workflows, remains underfunded, and is treated as optional. That's absorption: rather than shifting practice, it is absorbed at the margins.

Deflection is even more common. MPs deflect responsibility to ministries, ministries shift blame to counties, and counties cite national bottlenecks. A case in point is the National Youth Employment Authority Act. Civil society campaigns and youth advocates pushed Parliament to adopt the legislation, but the law was never backed by a budget. What looked like a participatory victory produced no change in practice: the statute existed on paper, but without resources, it delivered nothing.

In other cases, civic pressure is co-opted. Open government caucuses and public budget forums suggest inclusion, but rarely challenge executive power. Tools like the Citizens Budget improve fiscal transparency but stop short of shifting allocations. Parliamentary scorecards are popular, but few MPs lose elections for poor performance. The surface changes; the underlying logic remains intact.

Scaling does occur, but only in pockets. Mzalendo's tools enjoy growing visibility. The Treasury's budget transparency has improved; Kenya's Open Budget Index rose from 46 in 2012 to 55 in 2023 (IBP 2024b). Yet these gains remain fragile. Ambasa's (2019) argument still holds: parliamentary committees lack the autonomy, resources, and political will to enforce oversight.

The gap is most visible at Kenya's political margins. Negotiated democracy, seen in several counties where clans or community leaders preselect candidates by consensus, undermines voter choice and weakens accountability. Within political parties, indirect nominations similarly function as instruments of internal control rather than mechanisms of accountability (Mzalendo Trust 2024b).

The 2022 Political Parties Amendment Act aimed to incentivize inclusion by linking public funding to the election of marginalized candidates. But oversight gaps between the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties and the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission left space for evasion. Parties complied on paper, but manipulated the process in practice.

These patterns reflect what Fox (2015) calls tactical reforms: those that respond to pressure without disrupting power. Even parliamentary insiders acknowledge this gap. In a policy brief on legislative openness (Mzalendo Trust 2021), the Office of the Clerk describes public participation as a constitutional right plagued by weak implementation, inadequate resources, and limited follow-through. The mandates exist. Politics resists.

At the county level, the pattern repeats. Members of County Assemblies (MCAs) are structurally hemmed in by the Governor's control of assembly budgets and leadership appointments (Mzalendo Trust 2024a). While oversight powers are granted by law, enforcement is rare. Summonses go unanswered. Committee reports vanish. The distance between constitutional promise and political reality is measured in silence.

The costs of running for election, noted above, intensify these dynamics. Success depends less on ideas than on handouts. Voters expect food, cash, and favors, not public-interest legislation. MPs, in turn, view their seats as investments. The result is a transactional politics that corrodes both civic expectations and institutional behavior.

When civic actors resist, retaliation follows. Investigative journalists and whistleblowers are targeted for exposing corruption. Lawsuits, harassment, and intimidation are common; one journalist noted: “I have been sued so often that every time I write a [story], I consciously know it is a candidate for a lawsuit” (Mzalendo Trust 2024b). Yet civic pressure is not receding. The Gen Z protests of 2024–2025 began as opposition to the Finance Bill and became a broader indictment of performative governance. Youth demanded more than consultation, they demanded consequence.

Opportunities for grassroots mobilization to align with reformers inside institutions, which in some contexts has offered a path towards power shifts (Fox, Robinson, and Hossain 2023), are limited in Kenya. Reformers within Parliament are few. Pressure from the outside is mounting. The question is whether they will meet in the middle, or pass each other by. Until then, the risk remains that open Parliament will remain more show than substance: visibility without enforcement, participation without power, voice without teeth.

2.2.6 Outcomes and Constraints

Kenya’s open parliament agenda has delivered visible gains in transparency and civic voice, yet institutional accountability remains constrained by entrenched power asymmetries, symbolic compliance, and weak enforcement. Platforms such as *Dokeza* and *Bonga na Mzalendo* have expanded real-time citizen engagement; committee proceedings are livestreamed, and legislative records are publicly accessible. Civic tech actors, particularly Mzalendo Trust, have normalized parliamentary monitoring, while Kenya’s 2023 Open Budget Survey score, 55/100 for transparency and 31/100 for participation (IBP 2024b), signals meaningful progress. These developments reflect growing civic expectations that Parliament should not only be seen, but heard, and responsive.

Institutionally, the government has sought to mainstream open government reforms through the establishment of a National Steering Committee, a National Secretariat, and a Multi-Stakeholder Technical Committee with representation from both state and non-state actors. Within Parliament, a Parliamentary Caucus on Open Government has been created with representation from both houses, signaling an attempt to institutionalize peer learning and exchange. Kenya has also deepened its engagement with the OGP by involving four subnational governments alongside the Commission on Administrative Justice, the Legislature, and the Judiciary, thereby broadening the reform coalition. These efforts are complemented by the creation of a dedicated open government website, designed to centralize and publicize commitments, progress, and citizen-facing resources.

Despite these advances, the structural limits of reform remain stark. Civic tech and transparency initiatives have enhanced visibility but not necessarily institutional change: parliamentary oversight continues to be blunted by executive dominance, partisan patronage, and the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms. Gender and inclusion gaps persist, with elite-driven compliance often substituting for substantive responsiveness. The open parliament agenda in Kenya has thus produced important results in terms of transparency and civic engagement, but the response from state institutions remains partial and inconsistent, and broader accountability outcomes continue to lag behind civic expectations.

Parliamentary tools, public consultations, and citizen input channels have created an infrastructure for openness. County-level forums for participatory budgeting and public vetting have become institutionalized. These developments mark real gains in visibility and voice. But the extent to which institutions absorb, use, or act upon citizen input, remains fragmented and inconsistent.

Civic voice seldom triggers accountable responsiveness. Strategic lawsuits, legal harassment, and even threats of violence are more likely responses (Mzalendo Trust 2024b); retaliation has become a routine cost of oversight. Structural exclusions based on class, gender, and geography further compound accountability gaps.

Still, moments of traction do exist. The passage of the Access to Information Act (2016), driven by civil society coalitions, demonstrated that influence is possible when legal opportunity, elite alignment, and civic pressure converge. Collaboration between CRAWN Trust, FEMNET, and KEWOPA on gender-responsive consultations shows how organized civic actors can shape legislative outcomes. These are not symbolic victories; they are substantive. Yet they remain episodic rather than systemic.

Much of Kenya's open parliament infrastructure remains externally driven and donor-funded, with limited roots in mass civic movements or autonomous public institutions. The 2024 youth protests against the Finance Bill laid bare this disjuncture between participation and power. As protestor Dan Nzyoki reflected, "I honestly doubt whether they hear us at all. We marched against the Finance Bill last year. We bled for it. Yet months later, they turned around and said it's already been implemented, almost in full. What does that say to us?" (Samuel and Wamoyi 2025). For rights defenders like Salma Hamid, the state's response underscored the same gap: "It's painful. People are crying out, and the state responds with bullets, arrests, and denial. Is this how a government listens?" (Samuel and Wamoyi 2025). These voices capture the unfinished business of open parliament in Kenya, the gulf between civic expression and institutional consequence.

The challenge now is not openness for its own sake, but traction: institutionalizing co-governance, redistributing decision-making authority, and building accountability ecosystems resilient to executive domination. Transparency may deliver visibility, but visibility alone does not compel action. For Parliament to meet the demands of a restless civic generation, it must move beyond procedural openness toward durable responsiveness.

2.3 South Africa: Civic Engagement and Parliamentary Paralysis in a Transparent State



President Cyril Ramaphosa responding to the Debate on the State of the Nation Address at the Joint Sitting of Parliament in the National Assembly, 2019.

Credit: GovernmentZA (CC BY-ND 2.0)

2.3.1 Context and Reform Trajectory

South Africa's open parliament trajectory reveals a core paradox: one of the continent's strongest transparency infrastructures coexists with systemic parliamentary weakness. The 1996 Constitution granted sweeping oversight powers and guaranteed public participation, supported by platforms such as the PMG and People's Assembly. The 2023 Open Budget Survey ranked South Africa among the world's most transparent countries (87/100) (IBP 2024c).

The era of state capture—during which former President Jacob Zuma (2009–2017) and other influential members of the economic elite influenced government decision-making for their own benefit, weakening laws and oversight mechanisms to ensure that public policies favored specific businesses—exposed the limits of transparency without political autonomy. The Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, known as the Zondo Commission (2022) found Parliament complicit in shielding the executive, failures rooted not in legal gaps but in partisan deference. As Warren Krafchik observed in an interview with the author (2025), “transparency doesn't equal oversight.” In the Nkandla case, the Constitutional Court ruled that Parliament had violated its constitutional duties by protecting Zuma despite clear misuse of public funds. As Krafchik went on to note, “when the President is your party boss, and committee chairs answer to the caucus whip, formal checks often become symbolic rituals.”

Even amid institutional collapse, transparency allowed civic actors to continue pressing for accountability, sustaining the possibility of advocacy even when enforcement mechanisms failed. Civil society groups such as Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (OUTA) and Corruption Watch, investigative journalists, and legal advocates mined parliamentary transcripts, committee records, and procurement data to expose wrongdoing, build legal cases, and mobilize public outrage. PMG maintained a parallel archive by publishing verbatim records even when committees withheld information. As Krafchik (2025) put it, transparency “stopped total institutional freefall, even if it couldn't reverse it.”

Post-Zondo, Parliament pledged reforms. A 2022 implementation plan proposed a Standing Committee on the Presidency, expanded committee advisory capacity, and deeper civil society participation. Some changes took hold, the Presidency Committee launched in 2023, and consultation rules were updated, but structural resistance persisted. Proposals to allow opposition MPs to chair committees were rejected, and key Zondo recommendations were diluted or delayed, signaling symbolic uptake without substantive change.

Outside Parliament, civic tech innovations advanced. The Imali Yethu coalition's *Vulekamali* portal visualized budgets in accessible formats. The Budget Justice Coalition (BJC) mobilized for equitable public spending, while community groups used dashboards to monitor service delivery. Yet despite these advances, parliamentary uptake of civic inputs remained limited, often acknowledged, rarely acted upon.

Youth engagement further underscored the participation–power gap. Post-apartheid ‘born frees’ increasingly favored protest over institutional channels. The #FeesMustFall protests, which began in 2015, grew into a nationwide mobilization demanding free higher education. Government froze tuition hikes in 2016 and increased allocations to the higher education budget, but structural reform lagged. The protests caused millions of dollars-worth of damage, led to 619 arrests, and left Parliament largely on the sidelines. According to Afrobarometer, 63% of South Africans in 2022 believed most MPs are corrupt, while youth voter turnout continued to decline (Mpako and Ndoma 2024). Parliament expanded livestreaming during COVID-19 and launched youth forums, but outreach remains uneven and poorly adapted to rural, younger, and marginalized communities. The digital divide persists: sub-Saharan Africa remains the region of the world with the lowest mobile internet connectivity and the widest coverage gap, with Southern and Western Africa at around 30% and Central Africa at 19% (GSMA 2024). Gender, disability, and linguistic inclusion remain marginal in both civic tech design and parliamentary strategy.

Some MPs maintain local presence through constituency offices and public hearings, and radio remains a vital communication tool. Yet follow-through is weak: citizens often report that submissions receive no formal response, and committees may acknowledge inputs without shifting course. Still, rare moments of responsiveness show the system's latent potential. In 2022, following renewed scandal at public electricity utility Eskom, Parliament convened

a live inquiry, grilled executives, and broadcast proceedings in real time, demonstrating that when civic pressure and political will align, dormant oversight levers can be activated.

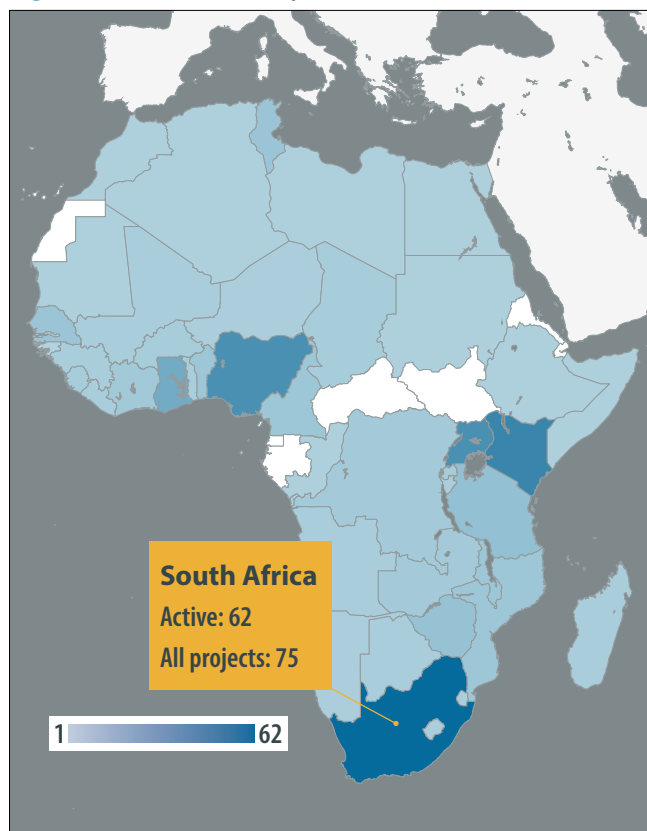
In 2025, South Africa stands at a crossroads. The legal framework, civic infrastructure, and public demand for oversight are in place, yet party discipline and patronage networks continue to constrain parliamentary autonomy. While some civic actors, such as the BJC, pursue long-term insider engagement, many encounter limited institutional receptivity. The challenge remains to determine whether the post-Zondo era will deliver democratic renewal, or whether transparency will again mask continuity of executive dominance, entrenched patronage, and parliamentary inertia.

2.3.2 Key Actors and Civic Tech Innovations

South Africa's open parliament regime is upheld by a durable ecosystem of civic tech innovators, watchdogs, oversight bodies, and reform-minded legislators. Unlike episodic reform cycles, this ecosystem has endured, even though institutional regression. Civic tech here serves as transparency infrastructure, a channel for public voice, and a tactical archive. Its staying power reflects not only robust design but also long-term engagement, but also comparatively lower donor dependence than in Ghana or Kenya, with domestic institutions and civic coalitions sustaining momentum beyond external project cycles.

At its core is the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG), one of Africa's most established parliamentary monitoring organizations. Since the democratic transition, PMG has transcribed and published committee proceedings, operating as a civic memory institution. During the state capture era, these transcripts became insurgent documentation, used by journalists, litigators, and civil society to challenge impunity. This affirms Warren Krafchik's (2025) insight that "fiscal transparency was implemented brilliantly... but no institution could raise the alarm."

Figure 14. Civic Tech Projects in South Africa



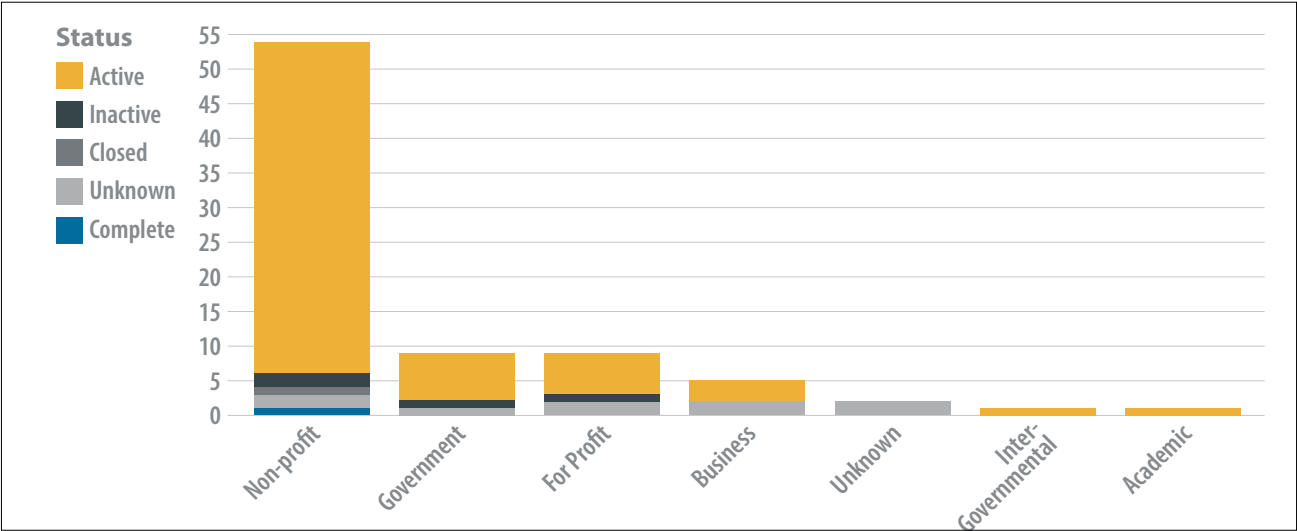
Source: CTIN 2025

People's Assembly, a mobile-first platform, complements PMG by profiling MPs, tracking votes, and enabling direct messaging. By the end of 2025, internet penetration in South Africa is projected to reach 77.9%, with 4G covering 98.9% of the population and 13 million households expected to have home access (Statista 2025). Against this backdrop, tools like People's Assembly can help reduce representational distance, particularly in the context of declining public trust and weak feedback loops. *Vulekamali*, co-created by the National Treasury and civil society partners such as the Budget Justice Coalition (BJC), illustrates institutionalized civic tech. It visualizes budget data and invites public input, though its uptake within Parliament has remained uneven.

This broader ecosystem is extensive. As shown in Figure 14, South Africa leads Africa with 75 civic tech initiatives, 62 of which are active. Such digital density reflects a convergence of factors: a mature civic tech sector, strong civil society infrastructure, strategic donor alignment, and catalytic crises like state capture and the Zondo Commission. The ecosystem is also diverse, as detailed in [Annex 3](#).

Of the 75 projects, 54 are led by nonprofits, with smaller clusters from government, for-profits, businesses, and inter-governmental or academic institutions as indicated in Figure 15 below. All five business-led projects are still active, suggesting viable private engagement that does not eclipse public interest goals.

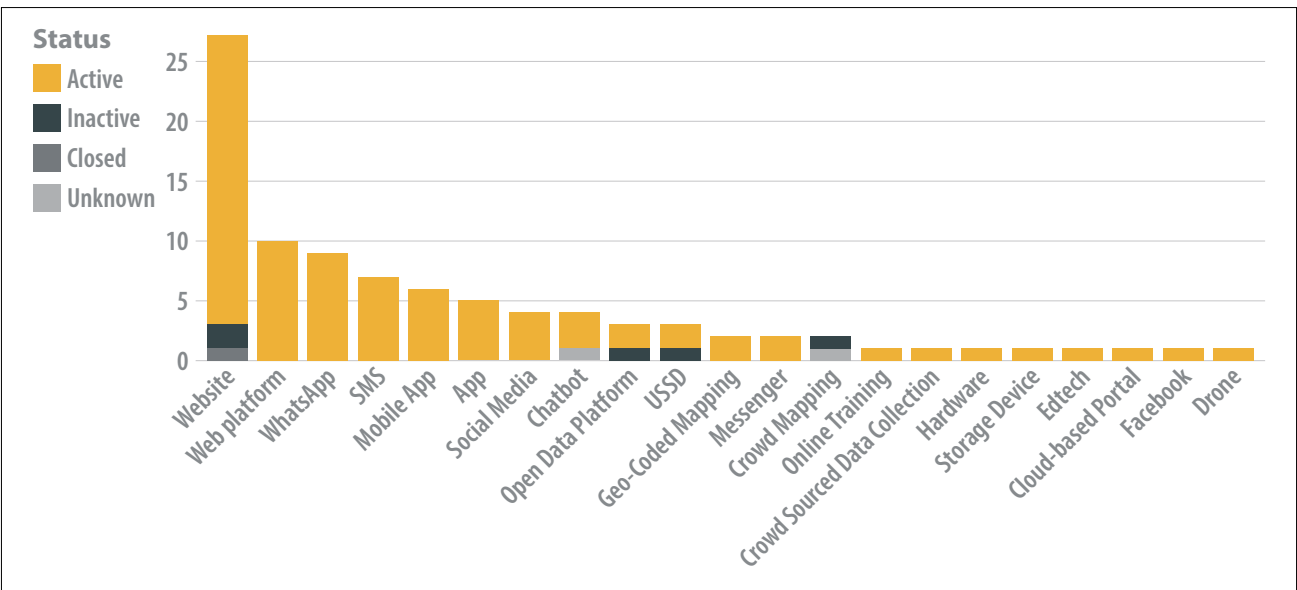
Figure 15. Organizations Leading Civic Tech Projects in South Africa



Source: CTIN 2025

Technological variety reinforces accessibility. The dominant formats, as shown in Figure 16 below include websites, web platforms, WhatsApp, SMS, and mobile apps, showing a mobile-first, bandwidth-conscious design. USSD and SMS remain vital for low-connectivity areas, while newer tools, chatbots, geo-mapping, and crowd-sourcing, signal experimentation. The field spans from hardware and drones to cloud portals and EdTech, indicating broad technical range.

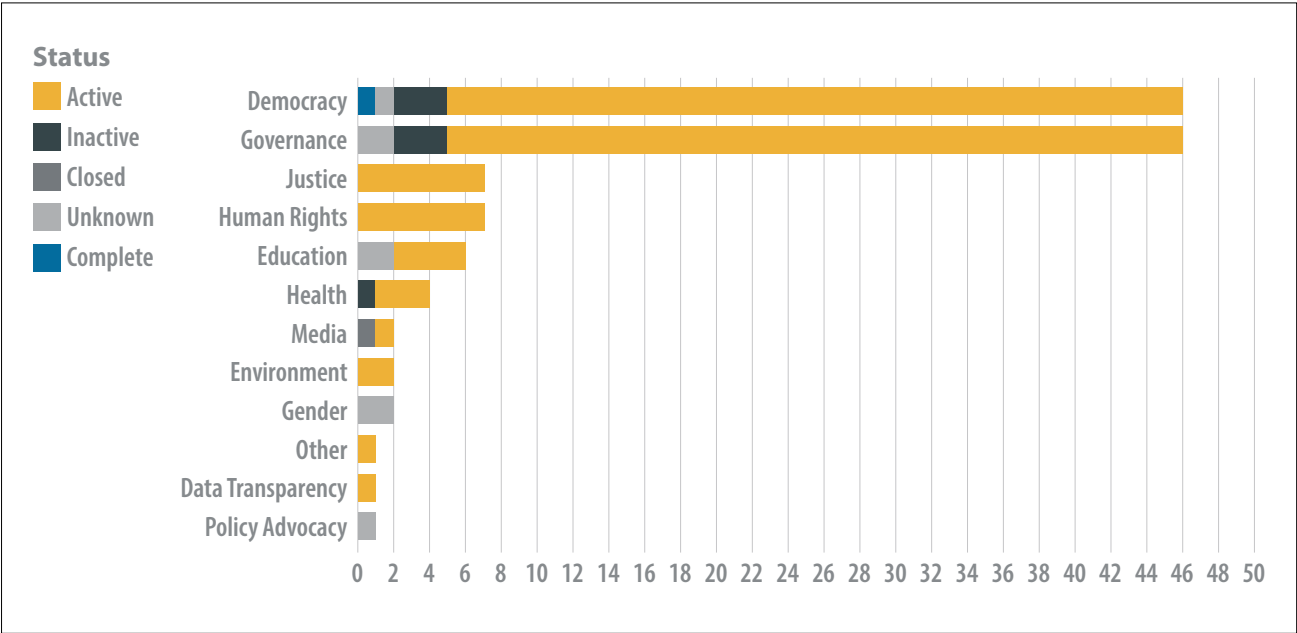
Figure 16. Technology Used in Civic Tech Projects in South Africa



Source: CTIN

As shown in Figure 17, the thematic focus of South Africa’s civic tech ecosystem is overwhelmingly political: democracy, governance, justice, and human rights together account for the majority of projects. Like Kenya, this pattern suggests a strong emphasis on democratic accountability but continued underinvestment in intersectional priorities.

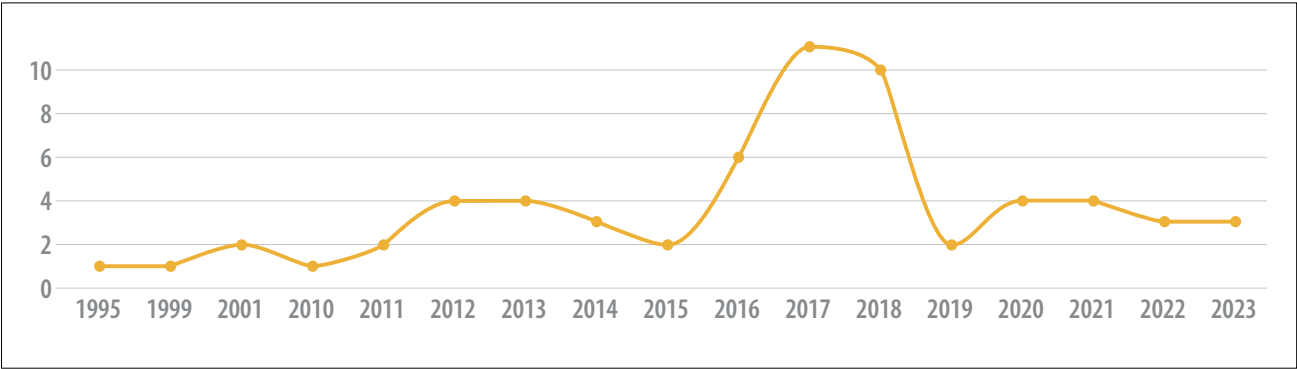
Figure 17. Thematic Focus of Civic Tech Projects in South Africa



Source: CTIN 2025

Figure 18 shows that civic tech peaked in 2017–2018 amid public outrage over state capture. Activity dipped in 2019, likely due to funding shifts and post-regime uncertainty, but remained steady post-2020 at 3–4 new projects per year. This points to resilience despite political volatility.

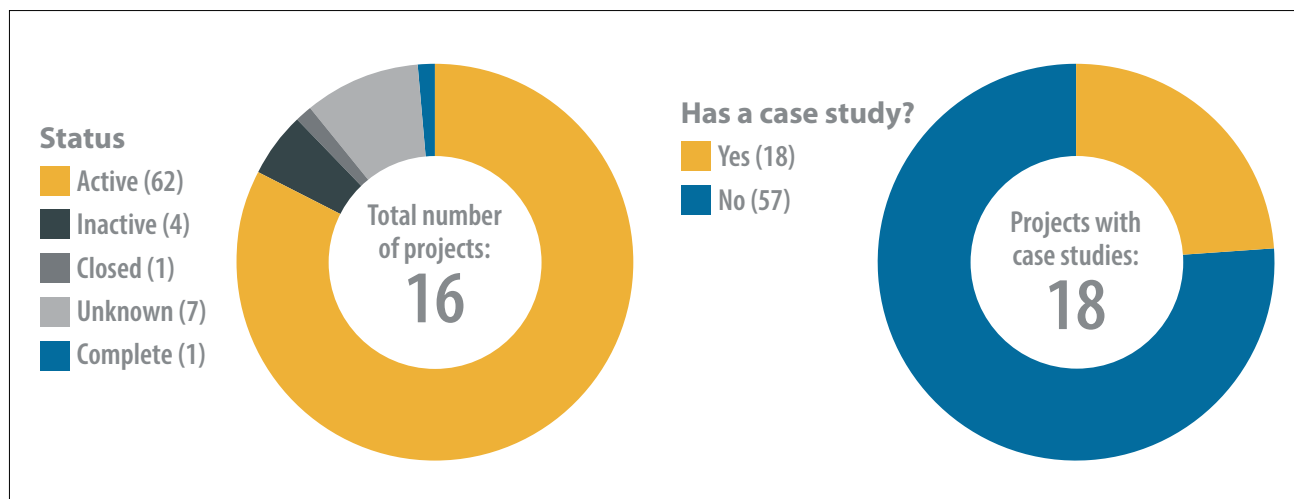
Figure 18. Civic Tech Projects in South Africa by Start Year



Source: CTIN 2025

Figure 19 below indicates that only 18 of 75 projects have public case studies, mirroring Kenya’s weak documentation culture and corresponding learning gap. Low levels of documentation constrain institutional memory, replication, and uptake. Without evaluation, civic tech risks becoming performance, transparency without consequence.

Figure 19. Status of Civic Tech Projects in South Africa



Source: CTIN 2025

Civil society coalitions have filled critical oversight gaps. The BJC advanced gender-responsive budgeting and participatory appropriations. OUTA led investigations and litigation, calling for stronger legal powers for committees. Both ensured that Zondo Commission findings echoed within Parliament. Oversight institutions like the Auditor-General and Public Protector also shape this ecosystem. Their reports feed civic tech platforms and trigger public scrutiny. But their effectiveness, like Parliament's, hinges on political will.

Digital movements further reshaped civic action. Hashtag campaigns like #FeesMustFall and #EskomInquiry forced live inquiries and public-facing hearings. These movements rejected symbolic participation in favor of disruptive visibility. Yet exclusion persists. Digital platforms may also deepen inequality unless they better serve rural users, improve disability access, and adopt multilingual design. Women's participation in civic tech projects remains thin and only two projects documented by CTIN (2025) focus explicitly on gender.

In sum, South Africa's civic tech sector is more than a cluster of tools; it is a politically embedded ecosystem. Its strengths lie in dense actor networks, digital pluralism, and sustained civic voice. Its limits remain: shallow feedback loops, limited parliamentary uptake, and selective responsiveness. Within this landscape of regime complexity, where overlapping institutions, watchdogs, and civic actors shape accountability without a single center of authority, civic tech functions both as infrastructure and as a pressure valve. The next section assesses whether these tools have translated transparency into accountability.

2.3.3 Uptake and Use

South Africa has built one of the continent's most expansive transparency infrastructures, constitutionally guaranteed public participation, publicly accessible parliamentary transcripts, livestreamed committee hearings, and civic tech platforms like PMG and *Vulekamali*. The central question is not how much data is available, but whether that information leads to institutional uptake, and by whom.

Among a core group of accountability actors—journalists, watchdog CSOs, researchers, and reformist MPs—this infrastructure is deeply embedded in practice. PMG transcripts are routinely used by journalists to verify reporting, by CSOs to monitor legislative performance, by researchers to analyze policy debates, and by reformist MPs to fact-check officials and strengthen oversight. Committee records have powered litigation, exposés, and policy advocacy.

Auditor-General reports inform procurement lawsuits. Civil society coalitions like the BJC and *Imali Yethu* interrogate budget data from *Vulekamali* to craft submissions, pressure legislators, and advance fiscal justice campaigns. For these actors, transparency is not symbolic, it is instrumental. Open data is used to shape narratives, mobilize advocacy, and, in rare cases, reconfigure institutional behavior—for example, the Zondo Commission’s reliance on parliamentary committee minutes to expose patterns of state capture, which in turn compelled legislative reforms in procurement oversight; or when PMG transcripts informed the Eskom corruption enquiry.

Parliamentary access tools in South Africa tend to reach a relatively narrow but influential audience. Platforms such as PMG and People’s Assembly attract sustained engagement from journalists, watchdog CSOs, researchers, and reform-minded MPs, rather than mass publics. Their influence extends inside the chamber: backbenchers and opposition legislators have been observed interrogating ministers and contesting budgets with civic tech outputs in hand, including printed extracts from *Vulekamali*.

Yet beyond a relatively small core of engaged users—journalists, watchdog CSOs, researchers, and reform-minded MPs who rely on platforms like PMG, People’s Assembly, and *Vulekamali*—a persistent gap remains between transparency infrastructure and broader public interaction. South Africa ranked fourth globally for transparency in the 2023 Open Budget Survey (83/100), but scored only 31/100 for participation (IBP 2024c). The pipes are laid, but the pressure is low. The initial rollout of *Vulekamali* included roadshows and hackathons, but its user base has remained largely confined to civil society and academia. The supply of openness has outpaced the demand for parliamentary accountability. At the same time, broader demands for accountability are highly visible in protests, litigation, and civic campaigns, but these pressures rarely flow through digital parliamentary platforms.

Examining the South African experience through the lens of the NDI’s listen–respond–report feedback loop model (Figure 2) shows that the listen phase is well-developed: citizens, CSOs, and intermediaries can access data, submit input, and participate in consultations. Tools like PMG and *Vulekamali* facilitate structured voice. But the respond and report phases remain weakly institutionalized. Parliamentary committees may sometimes act on civic inputs, but such responses are inconsistent, discretionary, and rarely accompanied by outcome reports. As NDI cautions, feedback loops that do not close risk deepening civic fatigue and mistrust.

Structural barriers further constrain uptake. Despite the high smartphone penetration noted earlier, the digital divide persists. Poor rural infrastructure, high data costs, and low digital literacy still exclude large segments of the population. Data affordability remains the top barrier. Civic tech, despite its depth, has not gone viral.

Platform design also limits traction. Many tools, including People’s Assembly, PMG, and *Vulekamali*, are optimized for access but not interaction. Citizens can message MPs, but responses are rare. Public submissions are welcomed, but feedback is seldom reported back. Provinces have piloted e-petitions, but uptake has been minimal. Unlike Kenya’s *Dokeza*, which allows collaborative bill annotation, South African tools largely stop at disclosure. Without deliberative mechanisms, transparency risks becoming a cul-de-sac.

Even so, when civic capacity aligns with political will, platforms can gain traction. The 2017 Eskom corruption inquiry, spearheaded by a cross-party coalition of MPs, was catalyzed by data, pressure, and documentation. PMG’s transcripts became key evidence in follow-up investigations. Community groups have used Municipal Money—a web-based tool developed by South Africa’s National Treasury and Code for South Africa (now OpenUp) that visualizes municipal financial data, to demand ward-level accountability and track local spending. The Zondo Commission itself, livestreamed and followed by millions, was made possible by South Africa’s transparency infrastructure and years of civic pressure.

But these are episodic gains, not systemic shifts. Without routinized responsiveness, civic voice is absorbed or deflected. As Warren Krafchik observed, “Parliament’s oversight powers exist, but they only matter when MPs feel supported, informed, and emboldened by civic allies.” In the absence of those alliances, formal mandates collapse into ritual.

Even within the civic tech field, uptake remains uneven. Of the 75 civic tech projects tracked in the *State of Civic Tech in Africa* dashboard, 62 remained active as of March 2025—a regional high (CTIN 2025). This reflects a mature ecosystem, supported by robust civil society actors such as Codebridge and OpenUp, and by catalytic moments like the Zondo Commission. Nonetheless, many tools remain donor-funded, time-bound, and disconnected from long-term public infrastructure.

What emerges is a two-tiered architecture of use. One layer, comprising watchdog groups, civic tech specialists, journalists, and reformist MPs, leverages data strategically. The other layer—rural communities, young people, and historically excluded groups—remains largely peripheral to these platforms, in the sense that their direct use of parliamentary civic tech tools is limited by access, design, and trust gaps. As noted above, Afrobarometer found that a majority of South Africans believed that most MPs are corrupt (Mpako and Ndoma 2024). Public mistrust is deep, and civic tech alone cannot bridge that divide.

South Africa has built the infrastructure of openness. The challenge ahead lies in building inclusive feedback loops, responsive institutions, and civic alliances that link data to disruption. Until civic tech becomes embedded not just in elite usage, but in everyday citizenship, the promise of open parliament will remain partial and uneven.

2.3.4 Inclusion of Women, Youth, and Marginalized Groups

Any serious open parliament agenda must address not only what is disclosed, but who is heard. South Africa illustrates the paradox of inclusion: women's high representation in Parliament coexists with entrenched patterns of exclusion and marginalization. On the surface, the country leads the continent in women's parliamentary representation, with women holding 44.6% of seats (IPU 2025). This milestone reflects decades of feminist organizing, and party quotas (notably the African Nation Congress (ANC) voluntary gender rule). From the leadership of pioneering feminist ANC MP Pregs Govender on gender-responsive budgeting to sustained advocacy around gender-based violence, women MPs have often driven accountability gains.

Yet presence is not power. Many of these gains reflect symbolic compliance—codified in gender-sensitive guidelines from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, OGP action plans, and regional commitments, but rarely matched by structural transformation. Parliamentary mechanisms like the Women's Caucus are siloed, sidelined, or instrumentalized to convey legitimacy. Gender-sensitive budgeting remains sporadic, donor-driven, and 'piloted', rather than institutionalized.

Structural barriers continue to exclude women and other marginalized people from entering politics. High campaign expenditures ranged from ZAR 17,000 (USD 978) to ZAR 1 million (USD \$57,560), with a median spend of ZAR 50,000 (USD 2,878) during the campaign period (Hasson and Futurelect 2025). The closed-list proportional representation system places significant power in the hands of party leadership, making list placement, rather than constituency campaigning, the decisive factor in electability. For candidates from established parties, the final stretch of the election was often backed by centralized party resources. By contrast, candidates from smaller parties and independents bear the full financial burden of candidacy, which disproportionately affects first-time entrants, women outside dominant party structures, and youth candidates.

The uneven distribution of resources favors incumbents and those embedded in well-funded parties. Women in established parties may benefit from quota rules, but their access to winnable list positions often depends on factional alignment rather than independent political capital. For women in smaller formations, the personal financial burden is compounded by the care responsibilities and emotional labor that Hasson and Futurelect (2025) identify as disproportionately borne by female aspirants. Balancing political ambition with domestic responsibilities effectively raises the 'entry cost' of participation, mirroring the barriers seen in Ghana and Kenya.

Digital exclusion compounds these inequities. As political engagement increasingly shifts online, gendered and social divides are reinforced. As already noted, 61% of the adult female population remain offline (GSMA 2025). Rural

women, older women, and low-income communities are still excluded by high data costs, low digital literacy, and English-dominated, web-based platforms. Most open parliament tools—PMG, People’s Assembly, *Vulekamali*—are designed for digitally fluent users. For a woman in rural Limpopo, without affordable data or digital skills, these portals are not gateways to participation but barriers that reproduce exclusion.

This exclusion is not just technical, it is political. Inclusion demands deliberate design: mobile-first interfaces, multilingual platforms, plain-language content, and offline options. A few actors have begun addressing this. The Public Service Accountability Monitor has distributed printed *Vulekamali* materials for community trainings. Parliament’s Taking Parliament to the People program has held rural hearings. Yet these efforts remain episodic, symbolic moments within a digitally exclusive ecosystem.

Inside Parliament, inclusion remains precarious. Political hierarchies are still male-dominated, and gender issues are often treated as peripheral. Women MPs who challenge entrenched power face not only political isolation but also misogynistic threats and sexist attacks that male counterparts often escape. Makhosi Khoza’s experience is emblematic: after taking a principled stand against state capture, she endured targeted harassment, intimidation, and eventual isolation that led to her resignation. According to the IPU, several prominent women left politics in 2023, many citing burnout and increasing online harassment as the main reasons (IPU 2024). The ‘glass cliff’ is a metaphor that describes the reality of female reformers asked to fix dysfunction without meaningful institutional support.

Youth exclusion adds another layer to South Africa’s democratic deficit. Although 35% of the population is aged 15–34 (Carter 2025), only 10% of candidates in the 2024 elections were under 30, while the majority (54%) fell within the 40–60 age bracket (Hasson and Futurelect 2025).

Mpako and Ndoma (2024) underscore this gap: only 43% of South Africans said they prefer democracy to any other system of government, 25% were satisfied with how democracy is working, and just 13% believed MPs often or always listen to citizens. For young people specifically, Carter (2025) finds both aspirations and disillusionment: 63% of youth expressed a desire to participate in politics, 50% of the electorate in the 2019 national elections were young voters, and 50% of eligible 18–29 year-olds voted in 2019. Yet civic engagement increasingly takes place outside Parliament. 70% of 18–24 year-olds report feeling empowered through online activism, and 72% of young adults use social media for political content (Carter 2025).

Despite these digital openings, Parliament remains slow, opaque, and alienating. In response, youth have built parallel accountability strategies such as #FeesMustFall, township-based organizing, and meme activism, deliberately bypassing formal institutions. As Krafchik (2025) notes, Generation Z’s activism reflects a “competent and courageous uprising,” marked by digital fluency, rights consciousness, and growing impatience. Yet institutional pathways for youth engagement remain underdeveloped. While tools exist, few are designed with youth in mind, in their languages, on their platforms, or with feedback mechanisms that validate their input. Without intentional design, trust cannot be rebuilt, and democratic legitimacy will erode further. These critiques echo to regional norms. Tools are not enough. What’s needed is participatory infrastructure designed for diversity, across gender, age, language, and geography, and backed by institutions willing to respond.

South Africa has built the architecture of openness. The next frontier is ensuring its benefits reach those long locked out, not just through better access, but through real, sustained pathways to civic power. Until then, open parliament remains uneven terrain: visible to many, usable by few, and responsive only to those already in the room.

2.3.5 Power and Accountability Dynamics

South Africa’s open parliament trajectory is shaped less by technical innovations than by entrenched power structures. Despite global recognition for its transparency infrastructure—committee livestreams, budget portals, open transcripts—the country continues to struggle with the deeper challenge of traction: converting civic voice into institutional responsiveness. The mechanisms for openness exist; the challenge is whether they lead to meaningful accountability.

Parliament's capacity to check executive power is structurally constrained. The ANC's longstanding dominance, reinforced by a closed-list proportional representation system, centralizes authority within party leadership. MPs owe their positions to party hierarchies rather than constituents, a dynamic that discourages dissent and dilutes accountability. The Zondo Commission was critical of Parliament's failure to intervene in corruption and state capture, finding that the legislature had sufficient oversight powers and tools but did not use them effectively, in part because the governing party was determined to shield implicated leaders from scrutiny (PARI 2024).

While the Commission issued concrete recommendations, including strengthening resources, establishing a committee to oversee the Presidency, and considering opposition committee chairs, Parliament adopted almost none of them. By March 2024, 13 of the 19 recommendations were formally "addressed," yet in most cases Parliament chose not to implement them (PARI 2024). Decisions were often opaque and narrowly interpreted, leaving the core findings of the Commission unexamined. The result has been procedural compliance without substantive accountability: oversight powers exist on paper, but in practice are constrained by partisan calculations and institutional inertia.

These shortcomings were not unprecedented; earlier reform efforts had already revealed similar limits, showing how institutional design changes failed to shift the balance of power. One of the most notable was the 2009 *Money Bills Amendment Procedure and Related Matters Act*, which granted Parliament budget amendment powers and established the Parliamentary Budget Office. Yet, in practice, the Treasury has retained de facto control of the fiscal process, and the Budget Office remains under-resourced and politically marginal.

In this vacuum, civil society has stepped in, often acting as both watchdog and policy entrepreneur. The BJC, for example, uses *Vulekamali* to promote equity-focused budget advocacy. In 2023, civil society pressure helped stall a proposed VAT increase. Yet such wins are rare. Advocates are forced to navigate multiple power centres—the Treasury, Parliament, and the executive, hoping that at least one will respond. While this diffusion of authority sometimes creates new entry points, the absence of a clear locus of accountability often weakens follow-through and reinforces institutional inertia.

Moments of reform often emerge during crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted experiments with virtual hearings, digital petitions, and online budget tracking. Yet, as Ambasa, Otele, and Onyango (2022) caution, most of these were ad hoc innovations implemented outside regular institutional routines. Even the Zondo Commission, despite its landmark scope and exposure, failed to generate structural change. Most of its recommendations remain unimplemented, implicated MPs were cleared by ethics panels, and parliamentary business resumed as usual. This pattern has prompted charges of what Krafchik and Evans (2024) describe as 'open-washing': transparency optics without enforcement. South Africa's OGP action plans highlight tools, not outcomes. Post-Zondo, parliamentary debates have invoked reform rhetoric, but rarely translated it into practice.

Still, cracks are emerging in this regime complex. The ANC's electoral dominance is weakening. Opposition parties are increasingly asserting procedural influence. The judiciary and media have grown more confrontational. In this shifting terrain, simultaneous pressure from above (auditors, courts, donors) and below (citizens, civic tech, watchdogs) has produced moments of institutional recalibration.

Yet systemic constraints persist. Parliamentary committees vary widely in independence. Whistleblowers face retaliation. Procurement loopholes remain unresolved. Parliament's ability to respond to crisis or uphold its watchdog function is frequently inconsistent, reinforcing public disillusionment. Its legitimacy is not undermined by a lack of transparency, but by the absence of meaningful responsiveness.

Moving from symbolic openness to substantive accountability requires more than livestreams or data portals. It demands empowered backbenchers, protected dissenters, decentralized oversight routines, and civic-state coalitions that convert feedback into institutional change. South Africa's next task is not to showcase transparency, but to operationalize accountability, moving beyond invitation toward durable impact.

2.3.6 Outcomes and Constraints

South Africa's open parliament agenda has delivered robust gains in transparency, but limited and uneven progress in institutional accountability. While the transparency infrastructure is among the most developed in Africa, the traction of this openness remains constrained by entrenched political dynamics, bureaucratic inertia, and asymmetrical power relations.

Transparency outputs and participatory infrastructure are visible and measurable. Parliament scores highly on the Open Budget Survey (IBP 2024c). Civic actors routinely submit budget proposals and conduct fiscal analysis. Tools like PMG and People's Assembly allow public monitoring of MP behavior. Recent additions, such as electronic resolution-tracking and increased committee visibility, signal procedural reform. As Krafchik noted, "they implemented fiscal transparency brilliantly."

However, the institutional uptake and use of information remains inconsistent. Despite the Zondo Commission's extensive evidence, structural reform has been minimal. By 2025, only four MPs faced sanctions, and most received token penalties. Investigations into state-owned enterprises, COVID-19 procurement, and service delivery have been announced but not led to systemic change. Committee recommendations circulate, but follow-through is slow or absent. The appearance of openness often conceals the absence of institutional recalibration.

Accountability, when civic voice translates into consequences and shifts in power, is the weakest link. Elite impunity has proven durable. The ANC majority has resisted reforms to democratize oversight, such as allowing opposition parties to chair the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. Parliament failed to respond meaningfully during key moments of public crisis. In these moments, it was civil society, not Parliament, became the locus of accountability. The BJC, Section 27, and the Auditor-General formed a last line of defense against state capture built around Parliament, but not within it.

Structural and technical barriers limit institutional response. Parliament lacks enforcement power over the Executive and the Treasury. Committee recommendations are often ignored or watered down. Legislative capacity gaps, particularly in data analysis and oversight implementation, persist. Digital participation tools expanded access during the pandemic, but failed to shift the underlying power hierarchies. Even the 2018 Auditor-General Amendment Act, a rare success story, was the product of civil society and auditor pressure, not internal parliamentary initiative.

Symbolic compliance further compounds these constraints. Many Open Government Partnership reforms emphasize optics over substance: data portals lack disaggregation, consultations are held post-decision, and livestreams do not translate into procedural change. As Krafchik (2025) put it: "we fetishize transparency, but the institutions remain the same."

Where institutional uptake falters, civic-facilitated monitoring and feedback loops emerge. Outcomes remain modest and localized, but they illustrate what traction looks like when civic intermediaries translate community voice into incremental policy response.

Youth-led protests, from #FeesMustFall to broader anti-corruption mobilizations, have also challenged Parliament's symbolic legitimacy. These are not isolated actions, but symptoms of a wider democratic deficit: declining voter turnout, populist frustration, and growing perceptions that Parliament is visible but ineffective. Still, South Africa's civic tech and information ecosystems have prevented deeper collapse. Jacob Zuma's 2018 resignation was not triggered by Parliamentary intervention, but by civil society pressure, media exposés, and judicial rulings. South Africa remains suspended in this liminal zone, open by appearance, inert by design.

For the open parliament agenda to advance, the challenge is no longer transparency, but traction. This requires redistributing oversight power, protecting dissent, institutionalizing civic feedback, and embedding inclusion not as a supplement, but as a foundation. The question is not whether parliament is open. The question is whether it can respond, recalibrate, and re-earn public trust.

2.4 The Pan-African Parliament: Regionalism, Legislative Representation, and the Limits of Integration in Africa



17th Ordinary African Union Summit in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, where the Pan-African Parliament became the legislative organ of the African Union.

Credit: Teodoro Obiang/Embassy of Equatorial Guinea (CC BY-ND 2.0)

The Pan-African Parliament (PAP) reflects a distinctive form of African regionalism, shaped not only by geography, but also by shared legacies of anti-colonial resistance, cultural solidarity, and pan-African political imagination. In Anderson's (2006) terms, regions, like nations, are "imagined communities," constructed through collective narratives and political aspiration. The PAP embodies this understanding: a continental institution where Africa is not merely a spatial unit, but a political community striving for integration, self-determination, and inclusive governance.

The urge to create the PAP was driven by both internal continental imperatives and external international pressures. Internally, the Abuja Treaty (1991) and the Sirte Declaration (1999) called for stronger integration mechanisms that would allow citizens to shape policy beyond the sovereignty-first model of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Founded in 1963 at the height of decolonization, the OAU was Africa's first continental intergovernmental body, but it prioritized non-interference and the defense of state sovereignty over democratic participation and accountability. Externally, the post-Cold War international order favored participatory regional institutions, and African leaders sought to signal that the African Union (AU), launched in 2002, would depart from the OAU's legacy by embedding a continental parliamentary body that could project democratic legitimacy.

The Constitutive Act of the African Union (2000) sought to remedy the OAU's weaknesses, mandating continental action against genocide, war crimes, and unconstitutional changes of government, while also promoting democracy, human rights, and accountability as binding continental norms (EPRS 2022). Externally, the post-Cold War international order favored participatory regional institutions, and African leaders wanted to signal that the AU, launched in 2002, would depart from the OAU's tradition of non-interference by embedding a continental parliamentary body that could embody democratic legitimacy.

The timing of the PAP's establishment in 2004 was therefore strategic. The 1990s had seen devastating civil wars in West Africa and the Great Lakes, alongside recurring military coups, which exposed the OAU's inadequacy. The PAP was conceived as part of a new 'never again' architecture, designed to restore continental credibility and legitimacy by institutionalizing citizen representation at the AU level.

The choice of the name 'parliament' was deliberate and symbolic. Although the PAP was only granted consultative and advisory powers for its first five years, the label projected legislative ambition and representative authority. It signaled an aspiration to evolve into a directly elected body, one that could be the voice of the peoples of Africa rather than merely their executives. This ambition was affirmed in later speeches, such as South African President Jacob Zuma's 2009 call for the PAP to gain full legislative powers, a trajectory formalized under the Malabo Protocol (2014).

The PAP was inaugurated on 18 March 2004, initially seated in Addis Ababa before relocating to Midrand, South Africa. It is composed of five members per ratifying member state, at least one of whom must be a woman. By 2022, 47 of the AU's 55 member states had ratified the founding PAP Protocol (2000), sending a total of 235 representatives. While the composition is intended to reflect political diversity, members are appointed by national legislatures rather than directly elected by citizens, limiting the PAP's democratic legitimacy.

The PAP's work is structured around three main organs—the Plenary, the Bureau, and the Secretariat—and supported by ten permanent committees covering areas from agriculture and trade to gender, justice, and audit. Bureau leadership currently includes President Fortune Charumbira of Zimbabwe (elected June 2022) and four Vice Presidents from Cape Verde, Chad, Ethiopia, and Mauritania, upholding the AU's principle of regional balance. Its motto, One Africa, One Voice, encapsulates both its symbolic role and its unfulfilled promise as a continental forum for accountability and integration (Pan-African Parliament 2019).

This ideational grounding highlights that regionalism in Africa cannot be reduced to economic or functionalist logic. Regional institutions emerge from a blend of political aspiration, normative imagination, and external pressures. In the African context, external intervention is multidimensional. It refers, first, to the enduring influence of former colonial powers, often expressed through military bases, preferential trade regimes, or diplomatic pressure. It also encompasses global economic policies and donor conditionalities—such as structural adjustment programs, aid leverage, and trade agreements—that shape the political choices of African governments. In addition, external intervention can involve international security operations authorized by the UN or regional coalitions, such as peacekeeping deployments in Darfur or Somalia. Importantly, intervention can also occur within Africa itself, when larger or more powerful states exert economic or political pressure on their neighbors in the name of stability or integration.

In this sense, the PAP represents more than a technical organ of the AU—it is a symbolic assertion of African agency. Yet its trajectory has been shaped less by bottom-up mobilization than by elite bargains among member states. While the PAP carries the normative flavor of anti-colonial solidarity, it functions primarily as an elite-driven project to consolidate continental legitimacy and project unity, rather than as a genuine vehicle for citizen accountability.

Yet PAP's development also reflects the dual logics that Katzenstein (1996a) describes: pressures for regionalization from below, driven by civic aspirations, cross-border linkages, and normative ideals of integration, and sovereignty-bound limits from above, imposed by state elites seeking to protect national authority. While Article 17 of the AU Constitutive Act and the Abuja Treaty envisioned the PAP as a powerful continental body, its initial mandate was limited to advisory and consultative functions. Although the 2017 AU–European Union Summit reforms expanded its scope to include drafting Model Laws (non-binding legislative templates drafted by the PAP on specific policy issues, meant to guide member states in developing their own national laws through a harmonized framework that reflects AU values, principles, or priorities) for AU Assembly approval, its resolutions remain non-binding, members are still appointed by national parliaments, and legislative authority is absent. The Malabo Protocol, which proposed direct elections and expanded powers, is stalled; as of 2025, fewer than 15 states have ratified it, well short of the 28 required. This impasse reinforces Mearsheimer's realist view (1994) that states rarely cede sovereignty without strategic gain.

Still, the states that have ratified the Malabo Protocol, such as Cameroon, Ghana, South Africa, and Togo have done so partly to signal commitment to deeper continental integration, to strengthen the PAP's legitimacy as a people's body, and to align with AU norms on democracy, human rights, and accountability. For some governments, ratification has also served as a diplomatic strategy to enhance their standing within the AU by supporting institutional reforms that promise greater African agency.

Recent developments suggest that momentum, though slow, is not entirely stalled. Côte d'Ivoire's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, has recognized the urgent need to expedite ratification of the Malabo Protocol. In July 2024, following advocacy by the PAP's Committee on Gender, Family, Youth, and People with Disabilities, led by Hon. Mariam Dao Gabala, the Ministry pledged to take necessary steps to ensure that Côte d'Ivoire fulfills its commitments to ratify the Malabo Protocol. During the meeting, chaired by Ambassador Yapi Koffi Evariste, the Ivorian delegation also reviewed other pending AU legal instruments—Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons, the Protocol on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Protocol on Social Protection and Social Security—all awaiting ratification. While the review of these protocols does not in itself demonstrate progress on the Malabo Protocol, it situates Côte d'Ivoire's pledge within a wider continental agenda of accelerating ratifications. The Pan-African Parliament had already, in its 3rd Ordinary Session of the Fourth Parliament (July 2024), called for member states to fast-track these commitments, framing Côte d'Ivoire's move as part of a broader push to empower the PAP and safeguard the rights of vulnerable populations.

These dynamics reveal both the constraints and possibilities of the PAP's institutional trajectory. Sovereignty concerns remain dominant, but the fact that some states are ratifying the Malabo Protocol, and others, like Côte d'Ivoire, are pledging to expedite, suggests that arguments in favor of a more empowered PAP continue to circulate. If sustained, such incremental commitments could lay the groundwork for shifting the PAP's role from advisory symbolism toward meaningful legislative authority, preventing it from stagnating as a body of aspiration and ensuring its survival as a relevant organ of African integration.

Still, the PAP has become a key site of normative contestation, where the meaning and application of democratic governance, rights, and accountability are debated. Feminist groups such as FEMNET-AFMA, civic coalitions, and parliamentary networks like APMON engage the PAP not for its coercive authority but for its symbolic legitimacy. These actors challenge prevailing norms of executive dominance and state sovereignty by pressing for more inclusive, rights-based, and participatory interpretations of continental integration. PAP's Model Laws on Access to Information (2013), Food and Nutrition Security (2019), Disability Rights (2019), and Policing in Africa (approved by PAP in 2018 and adopted by the AU Assembly in 2022) exemplify these struggles. While non-binding, these instruments have shaped national legislation in Ghana, Malawi, and Nigeria by embedding principles of transparency, inclusion, and rights protection. The Model Law on Policing, in particular, seeks to shift the prevailing norm from policing as an instrument of state control toward a democratic, human-rights-compliant institution, developed through participatory engagement with African policing experts. Beyond lawmaking, the PAP also oversees a Trust Fund, established in 2005, that channels resources toward governance, gender equality, and anti-poverty initiatives—another arena where contestation over priorities and values plays out.

This symbolic power is enhanced by PAP's Open Data Portal, which digitizes parliamentary transcripts, resolutions, reports, and model laws. It lowers access barriers and strengthens accountability actors such as journalists, watchdogs, and civic organizations that repurpose data to challenge power. Regional accountability networks like FEMNET and APMON have drawn on PAP outputs to expose the exclusion of women and marginalized groups from parliamentary decision-making and continental governance processes, alongside broader patterns of impunity. They leverage PAP's symbolic legitimacy to press for greater inclusion and transparency across AU institutions. The symbolic nature of this openness becomes clearer when considering actual representation. Country delegations to the PAP are composed of members nominated by their national parliaments, typically reflecting a range of political parties rather than direct citizen choice. This means that while PAP presents itself as a continental forum for representation, its membership is still filtered through national elites and party structures, limiting its democratic legitimacy.

Beyond the PAP, the civic tech platform openAFRICA plays a crucial role in enabling transparency of government and parliamentary data from below. Maintained by Code for Africa, it is the continent's largest independent public data repository. Unlike official portals, openAFRICA is not state-run. It curates and republishes datasets, ranging from budgets, procurement records, and election data to parliamentary proceedings, that are often fragmented or inaccessible. In this way, it provides civic infrastructure for accountability, supporting journalists, watchdogs, and advocacy groups. Where PAP's own openness remains weak or symbolic, platforms like openAFRICA become critical nodes in a distributed architecture of transparency.

The PAP operates within a fragmented governance ecosystem. Its mandate overlaps with the AU Assembly, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community, and the East African Legislative Assembly. Civil society often engages in strategic 'forum shopping,' using the PAP's symbolic visibility to amplify demands, while targeting courts, donors, or national governments for implementation. Some states, in turn, view the way civic actors repurpose PAP outputs to demand openness as politically disruptive, especially when these efforts challenge elite impunity or expose legislative shortcomings. Political instability and corruption in some states have also limited participation and timely payment of member dues, leading to operational funding shortages.

PAP's role also intersects with broader questions of multilateral governance. As Boutros-Ghali (1992) emphasized in *An Agenda for Peace*, peacebuilding is not only about security; it also requires institutions that build trust, participation, and civic norms. PAP contributes to this architecture by cultivating regional deliberation, democratic legitimacy, and what Acharya (2004) calls "hybridized norms," locally adapted and collectively shaped. Even principles like the Responsibility to Protect—the 2005 UN-endorsed norm that sovereignty entails a duty to shield populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity—though beyond PAP's formal scope, resonate with its normative mission. By championing gender equity, civic voice, and participatory governance, PAP acts not only as an AU body, but as a platform for regional responsibility grounded in values as well as law.

Comparisons to the European Parliament are common, but analytically misleading. Unlike the European Parliament, which has evolved into a supranational legislature with direct elections and binding co-decision authority, the PAP remains consultative, with appointed members and limited power. The EU's integration was enabled by decades of economic interdependence, elite cohesion, and geopolitical stability. Africa's trajectory, by contrast, is shaped by postcolonial fragmentation, contested sovereignty, and uneven state capacity. The shared label 'parliament' deepens this confusion: in the European context, it connotes legislative supremacy and binding authority, while in the African context, the term can also denote a deliberative forum without coercive powers, yet still relevant as a site of voice, legitimacy, and continental aspiration. The PAP must therefore be judged on its own terms, not by how closely it mimics Brussels, but by how effectively it channels African aspirations and adapts to continental complexity.

Viewed this way, the stalled Malabo Protocol does not mark the end of PAP's utility. The PAP's strength lies not in coercive power, but in what it enables: spaces for feminist leadership, civic experimentation, legal imagination, and youth engagement. In Katzenstein's (1996b) terms, the PAP embodies regionalism as both response and building block, reactive to globalization's inequities, and generative of new governance forms.

The PAP sits uneasily between aspiration and enforcement, between giving voice and succumbing to institutional inertia. In Africa's evolving regional order, aspiration itself becomes political currency: capable of signaling continental unity, yet also vulnerable to stagnation. The current moment marks both a risk and an opportunity. PAP could remain trapped in advisory marginality, or it could emerge as a turning point in Africa's search for participatory regionalism. For the open parliament agenda to deepen across the continent, PAP's symbolic legitimacy must be more than safeguarded—it must be reclaimed, repurposed, and reimagined from below as part of Africa's broader struggle to embed accountability into integration.

3. Recommendations for Strengthening Openness in African Parliaments

Open parliament in Africa is evolving within uncertain and plural futures. The reforms proposed here are not only opportunities for expansion but also survival strategies in the face of disruption. Their value lies in moving openness beyond symbolic aspiration toward substantive accountability. Achieving this shift requires tailored action by each stakeholder—national parliaments, the PAP, the OGP Support Unit, CSOs, private sector actors, and international development partners, leveraging their distinct capacities to build resilience, responsiveness, and citizen power.

National Parliaments

- Treat open parliament as strategic sovereignty, not donor compliance: ratify and domesticate PAP instruments, including the Malabo Protocol, to strengthen collective bargaining power in a multipolar world.
- Close the national–local participation gap. Institutionalize constituency hearings, county/parish assemblies, and local oversight committees so citizens can directly participate in law-making, budget oversight, and policy monitoring. Subnational traction is key to sustaining open parliament reforms.
- Systematically track gender, youth, and disability representation in parliamentary committees to move inclusion beyond tokenism.

Pan-African Parliament

- Position PAP as a normative laboratory. Even without binding authority, it can set continental standards on access to information, inclusion, and fiscal oversight, building a culture of accountability that national parliaments can adapt and localize.
- Strengthen the Open Data Portal as civic infrastructure. Move beyond publication to ensuring timeliness, usability, and accessibility, with standardized formats, metadata, multilingual search, and APIs that enable civic tech uptake.
- Create feedback loops with national delegations so PAP representatives are accountable to citizens, not only executives.

OGP Support Unit

- Elevate Africa's parliamentary ecosystems as peer-learning hubs. This includes parliamentary monitoring networks (APMON, EAPMON, CSPEN, GMON) and regional parliamentary bodies (ECOWAS Parliament, East African Legislative Assembly, SADC Parliamentary Forum, and the Pan-African Parliament)—with priority on horizontal exchange over conditionality.

- Integrate legislative commitments into national OGP action plans. While some countries have piloted parliamentary components, inclusion remains inconsistent. Making parliaments explicit co-owners of NAPs would anchor open government across both executive and legislative branches.
- Use OGP's convening power to highlight stalled Malabo Protocol ratifications, situating them within global standards of transparency and participation.

CSOs

- Leverage PAP strategically. Use PAP's symbolic legitimacy to frame continental standards, while pressing for enforcement through domestic legislatures, courts, and donor conditionalities.
- Translate continental norms into national action. Adapt PAP Model Laws and AU frameworks into country-specific advocacy campaigns—especially on gender equity, disability rights, and inclusion.
- Monitor parliaments domestically. Track committee work, constituency development funds, and legislative oversight processes to expose elite capture and demand accountability to citizens.
- Strengthen feedback loops at home. Facilitate community consultations, digital platforms, and citizen scorecards so women, youth, and rural constituencies can channel their priorities directly into national parliaments.
- Build coalitions. Collaborate with PMO networks (APMON, CSPEN, EAPMON, GMON) to scale local accountability campaigns and create regional learning exchanges.

Private Sector

- Invest in civic tech infrastructure. Support platforms such as openAFRICA that democratize access to parliamentary and fiscal data.
- Forge accountable partnerships. Align collaborations with PAP and national parliaments so that technology and trade initiatives reinforce transparency and public oversight.
- Treat inclusion as strategic stability. Support open parliament initiatives that expand gender, youth, and rural representation, reducing risks of unrest and fostering more legitimate investment environments.

International Development Partners

- Recognize parliamentary openness as resilience. Open and accountable legislatures help societies absorb shocks, whether from demographic transitions or political instability, and should therefore be integrated into cross-cutting support for governance, peacebuilding, and resilience programming.
- Support systematic measurement of inclusion. Fund independent tools and monitoring that track gender, youth, and disability representation across African legislatures, making the data public and actionable without tying it to conditionality.

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