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Civil Society, Accountability, and Anti-Corruption: A Critical Examination of CSOs in Uganda

Mesharch Walto Katusiimeh[1], **Mary Baremirwe Bekoreire**[1]

[1] Department of Governance, Kabale University, Uganda

Email Correspondence: mkatusiimeh@gmail.com

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Abstract
Corruption remains a critical global concern that undermines governance, impedes service delivery, and hinders socioeconomic development. Uganda typifies this challenge, grappling with systemic corruption despite the existence of legislative frameworks and institutional reforms. This study evaluates the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Uganda's anti-corruption landscape. Employing a qualitative, descriptive research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and document reviews across Uganda's four regions. A purposive sample of 58 respondents, including CSO leaders, political and faith-based actors, informed the analysis. Thematic and narrative analyses using AtlasTi revealed that CSOs significantly contribute to advocacy, awareness creation, civic education, and monitoring public programs. However, their impact is constrained by financial instability, internal governance weaknesses, political interference, insecurity, and public apathy. The study advances civil society theory by situating Ugandan CSOs within debates on good governance. By connecting these findings to broader civic participation and governance debates in the Global South, the paper positions Uganda as a comparative case for understanding how civil society actors operate under conditions of constrained civic space. To enhance their effectiveness, the paper recommends diversifying funding, investing in digital tools, strengthening internal accountability, expanding civic education, and advocating for enabling civic space. These recommendations contribute not only to policy practice but also to scholarly debates on participatory governance and democratization in fragile contexts, showing how lessons from Uganda resonate with wider struggles of civil society in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Civil society organizations (CSOs), corruption, governance, Uganda, accountability, anti-corruption

Abstrak
Korupsi tetap menjadi masalah global krusial yang melemahkan tata kelola pemerintahan, menghambat penyediaan layanan, dan menghambat pembangunan sosial-ekonomi. Uganda merupakan contoh nyata dari tantangan ini, bergulat dengan korupsi sistemik meskipun telah ada kerangka kerja legislatif dan reformasi kelembagaan. Studi ini mengevaluasi peran lembaga swadaya masyarakat (LSM) dalam lanskap antikorupsi Uganda. Dengan menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif deskriptif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan tinjauan dokumen di empat wilayah Uganda. Sampel purposive yang terdiri dari 58 responden, termasuk para pemimpin LSM, aktor politik dan berbasis agama, menjadi dasar analisis. Analisis tematik dan naratif menggunakan AtlasTi mengungkapkan bahwa LSM berkontribusi signifikan terhadap advokasi, peningkatan kesadaran, pendidikan kewarganegaraan, dan pemantauan program publik. Namun, dampaknya terhambat oleh

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ketidakstabilan keuangan, kelemahan tata kelola internal, campur tangan politik, ketidakamanan, dan apatisme publik. Studi ini memajukan teori masyarakat sipil dengan menempatkan LSM Uganda dalam perdebatan tentang tata kelola pemerintahan yang baik. Dengan menghubungkan temuan-temuan ini dengan debat yang lebih luas mengenai partisipasi sipil dan tata kelola pemerintahan di negara-negara berkembang, makalah ini memposisikan Uganda sebagai kasus komparatif untuk memahami bagaimana para aktor masyarakat sipil beroperasi dalam kondisi ruang sipil yang terbatas. Untuk meningkatkan efektivitas mereka, makalah ini merekomendasikan diversifikasi pendanaan, investasi dalam perangkat digital, penguatan akuntabilitas internal, perluasan pendidikan kewarganegaraan, dan advokasi untuk memberdayakan ruang sipil. Rekomendasi-rekomendasi ini tidak hanya berkontribusi pada praktik kebijakan tetapi juga pada debat akademis tentang tata kelola partisipatif dan demokratisasi dalam konteks yang rapuh, menunjukkan bagaimana pelajaran dari Uganda selaras dengan perjuangan masyarakat sipil yang lebih luas di Afrika dan sekitarnya.

Kata Kunci: *Lembaga swadaya masyarakat (LSM), korupsi, tata kelola, Uganda, akuntabilitas, antikorupsi*

INTRODUCTION

Corruption continues to be a serious worldwide problem that threatens governance, the use of resources, service delivery, and socioeconomic advancement (Hope 2024). The French Napoleonic Code pénal of 1810, which established severe penalties to criminalize corruption in public life, was one of the first frameworks for the historical evolution of efforts to combat graft (Johansen 2024; Stessens 2001). In Africa, anti-corruption efforts gained momentum during the anti-colonial struggles. They targeted exploitative colonial regimes, and that set the stage for current anti-corruption campaigns (Doig & Riley 1998). Despite these historical strides, corruption remained pervasive, complex, and entrenched in post-colonial Africa. According to Transparency International's 2019 Global Corruption Barometer, more than half of Africans believe that corruption has increased, and the government is doing little to combat it.

With particular reference to Uganda, corruption has developed into a widespread and systemic issue that has persisted in spite of multiple anti-corruption initiatives and regulations (Okok et al., 2020). Kakumba (2021) and Kakumba (2025), using data from the Afrobarometer surveys, state clearly that Ugandans say the corruption level has increased and rate the government's fight against corruption poorly. This persistent problem continues to undermine progress, strain public resources, and erode public confidence in political systems. CSOs have emerged to advance democratic values, civic participation, and inclusive governance, including becoming key actors in anti-corruption. As Diamond (1994) has argued, civil society is fundamental to democratic consolidation by creating arenas of accountability beyond the state, while Putnam (1993) emphasizes how civic associations build social capital that

underpins responsive and effective governance. CSOs in Uganda embody these normative roles as watchdogs that monitor government activities, expose corrupt practices, and demand accountability (Katusiimeh, 2004). This role is especially crucial in an environment where state actors' conflicts of interest are well-established (Khan, 1998). CSOs help mitigate these conflicts by mobilizing citizens, amplifying whistleblowers' voices, and partnering with the media to counterbalance compromised state institutions (USAID 2021).

Recently, CSO empowerment has been a goal of Uganda's political and economic reforms. While economic changes have focused on market-based solutions and recognized non-government groups, especially CSOs, as good options to replace corrupt government systems, political changes have created ways for people to hold leaders accountable. Donor support has been crucial in supporting CSOs and establishing them as important actors in the fight against corruption. However, major systemic issues and sociopolitical dynamics constrain their efficacy.

CSOs are private, self-governing organizations founded on voluntary associations; they are not political parties or profit-driven organizations (DeMattee 2020). By increasing public awareness, disclosing corruption incidents, encouraging transparency, and pushing for legislative changes, these groups play a critical role in anti-corruption initiatives (Grimes, 2013; Nalyvaiko, 2022). Additionally, CSOs carry out crucial performance monitoring of public institutions (Simon & Sikoyo 2021). However, enabling factors like free media, open government, and favorable socioeconomic environments are frequently necessary for CSOs to be effective (Katusiimeh 2024).

Operational challenges for CSOs in Uganda align and are consistent with broader political and historical contexts. CSO operations are limited by systematic corruption and government control, even in the face of legislative frameworks like the Anti-Corruption Act (2010) and the Whistle Blowers Policy (2009) (Gumisiriza & Mukobi, 2019).

The literature presents two conflicting perspectives regarding the function of CSOs in anti-corruption initiatives. Optimistic perspective proponents emphasize their ability to increase awareness and encourage openness (Villanueva, 2023). Pessimists, on the other hand, highlight weaknesses that could weaken their goal, such as their vulnerability to internal corruption and co-optation (Katusiimeh, 2024; Ebrahim, 2003; Gibelman & Gelman, 2004). Yet what remains underexplored in the Ugandan context is the dual vulnerability of CSOs—facing both internal risks of corruption and external repression from the state—alongside the paradox of their dependence on donor funding while simultaneously claiming autonomy.

This study assesses the contribution of CSOs in the fight against corruption in Uganda. This research also aims to fill the existing literature gap by examining the specific challenges faced by CSOs in Uganda. By addressing these constraints, this study contributes to the ongoing discussion about strengthening the role of CSOs in advancing good governance in Uganda.

METHODOLOGY

In order to methodically gather information that elucidates the mechanisms and procedures impacting the operations of civil society organizations (CSOs) and their overall influence on the fight against corruption, this study used a descriptive research design. This methodology—very qualitative in nature—allowed the researchers to collect rich contextual information and insights about CSO experiences.

The study was carried out in Uganda's eastern, western, northern, and central regions. The main emphasis was on anti-corruption organizations, such as governmental organizations, civil society organizations, and well-known individuals who are actively fighting corruption. This geographical diversity ensured a comprehensive understanding of the various dynamics that characterize different regions. The study prioritized a balance between elite, urban-based CSOs (including international NGOs and national coalitions) and local grassroots and faith-based organizations, ensuring that smaller and often marginalized voices were represented alongside more prominent actors.

Representatives from CSOs that have been at the forefront of fighting against corruption on a local, national and regional scale made up the study population. Respondents also included representatives of political parties, government agencies, and faith-based groups that have made significant contributions to anti-corruption campaigns.

Purposive sampling criteria were used to choose the respondents. The seniority, anti-corruption experience, and duration of service in their respective organizations were considered while choosing the CSOs and individuals. This deliberate choice made sure the study included pertinent perspectives from well-informed and significant players in the anti-corruption landscape. Special consideration was also given to including grassroots CSOs that often operate under severe constraints but bring community-level insights that differ from elite organizations.

The researchers interviewed 58 respondents in all, which was deemed an appropriate sample size since they had reached a saturation point, which Francis et al. (2010) describe as the point at which no new information about the topic under investigation becomes available. This saturation showed that the data collected was sufficiently robust to address the research question.

Both primary and secondary sources of information were used. Primary data was obtained by means of in-depth interviews intended to elicit qualitative information. In order to give participants, the freedom to express in-depth experiences and viewpoints pertaining to the study objective, the interviews used non-structured questions. Respondents were not only subjects but also treated as knowledge co-producers, as CSO representatives had opportunities to suggest areas of emphasis especially later during their participation in feedback sessions where preliminary findings were shared and validated.

Documentary reviews were used to compile secondary data, with an emphasis on previously published reports about CSOs' efforts to fight corruption. Among the sources were published reports that were available on the official websites of a few Ugandan anti-corruption organizations, Google Scholar, and other search engines. The inclusion criteria centered on studies published between 2010 and 2025, and a total of 40 articles were analyzed using a systematic search technique with specific terms such as "CSOs," "anti-corruption efforts," "challenges," and "Uganda."

Transcribing qualitative information from interviews and documentary reviews was the first step in the data analysis process. We created an Excel coding framework after accurately editing and cleaning the primary data. To summarize the data and find thematic commonalities, the analysis used the AtlasTi software, version 9.

Two techniques for analysis were applied: thematic analysis to find recurring themes and trends that are pertinent to the study's goal and narrative analysis focusing on synthesizing the individual stories that CSO leaders expressed about their attempts to combat corruption. Researchers also reflected on their interpretive role, acknowledging that their positionality shaped coding decisions and actively checking interpretations against respondent feedback to reduce bias.

The study team implemented a number of quality control procedures to guarantee the accuracy and dependability of the data gathered. The first method used was triangulation. Comparing the results of documentary evaluations with the data from primary interviews helped detect inconsistencies and improve consistency. The second step involved member checking, where we coded data in pairs to minimize bias and ensure a comprehensive analysis. Third was standardized protocols. This was to ensure consistency in data-gathering procedures, as all data collectors followed the same methodological protocols. Fourth was Codebook Development. This process made it easier to find themes and patterns in the data set. The fifth was the training of research assistants. This step ensured the quality of the data obtained. All research assistants were thoroughly trained prior to data collection. In addition, participatory validation workshops with selected CSO respondents were organized to review interpretations, which enhanced trustworthiness and gave CSOs a role in shaping the final narrative.

To protect respondents' rights and integrity, the researchers conducted the study in accordance with ethical guidelines. The Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST) and the Research Ethical Committee (REC) approved the research protocol. Participants were given a detailed explanation of the study's goals by the researchers, who also made sure they understood the importance of their involvement. Forms for informed consent were given out, stressing that participation in the study was voluntary and detailing the rights, possible dangers, and advantages of doing so. Permission was obtained prior to any audio recordings of the interviews. We preserved anonymity for agencies and individuals

by refraining from revealing people's identities when reporting findings. Particular care was taken to manage risks for respondents by anonymizing all identifying details, especially for grassroots actors who faced heightened vulnerability to state reprisals.

Despite the strict approach employed in this study, there were certain restrictions that might have affected the data collection and findings. It was difficult to interact with certain important responders, especially those from donor organizations and government agencies. Some people were unresponsive or unavailable for interviews despite repeated attempts to contact them, which could have resulted in gaps in various viewpoints. To fill this gap, the research team broadened the original target list of respondents and looked for substitute contacts within related networks or organizations. Because of this sample flexibility, the researchers were able to locate additional informed people who provided valuable insights on the anti-corruption landscape. Nonetheless, the study acknowledges that participation skewed slightly toward elite CSOs due to accessibility, even though efforts were made to incorporate grassroots voices to avoid a one-sided narrative.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The main goals were to determine the true effectiveness of CSOs in the fight against corruption, as well as to comprehend how they operate and how their efforts affect the broader anti-corruption landscape.

The Role and Impact of CSOs in Uganda's Fight against Corruption

According to the study, CSOs are important players in several initiatives meant to combat corruption. Among the key activities noted are:

Advocacy and Awareness: CSOs actively educate the public about government initiatives and raise awareness regarding corruption. Respondents cited advocacy as a critical activity 34 times. Many pointed out that CSOs teach citizens how to denounce corruption and demand accountability in addition to informing them about accessible services. One respondent, for instance, said, "Some of us discuss corruption issues on radios and televisions... We present these topics so that the nation can comprehend them." This highlights and emphasizes how crucial media participation is to CSO activism. In another question about the impact of CSOs, respondents reported enhanced public awareness enabling citizens to more effectively demand accountability from public officials. One respondent underlined, "CSOs have been instrumental in raising public awareness... which has put significant pressure on government officials to be more accountable." Another respondent had this to say: "Building citizen agency has been one of the key achievements... increasing responsiveness of government."

These advocacy initiatives can be situated within social accountability frameworks, particularly Fox's (2016) notion of "vertical integration," where citizen awareness campaigns link local grievances to higher levels of accountability. Rather than being mere outputs (information sessions), they contribute to outcome-level changes by expanding civic agency and enlarging the public sphere in which state actors are scrutinized.

Monitoring of Government Programs: CSOs are heavily involved in monitoring government programs to make sure funds are distributed and used properly. Respondents rated this as a crucial activity. For example, one respondent noted, "We monitor government funds and public resources, tracking the money's movement from its release by the ministry to its use." This role serves to identify and address inefficiencies in the way the government provides services. The position is also related to the impact CSOs have made, which is timely service provision, according to respondents. By advocating for community grievances, CSOs have influenced the government to take action more quickly (11 mentions), emphasizing their role in ensuring timely service delivery. One civil society activist had this to say: "During the COVID-19 pandemic time... our chair raised a concern to the head of state... the president acted, and things stabilized."

This reflects participatory governance in practice, where non-state actors assume quasi-audit roles to enhance oversight. Yet, an important question is whether these monitoring interventions achieve sustained outcomes (institutional reforms, deterrence of corruption) or whether they produce superficial responsiveness to external pressure without structural change.

Civic Education Provision: Another key area of focus is civic education, which was mentioned 30 times. By educating citizens about their rights, CSOs empower them to hold the government accountable. According to one respondent, "CSOs have equipped the citizens with necessary information and tools… leading to an empowered citizenry capable of demanding effective accountability."

While respondents praised civic education as empowering, this study interrogates whether CSO-driven civic education is genuinely transformative (building citizen agency to challenge corrupt authority) or merely instrumental (teaching compliance with existing systems). This distinction is critical within civic agency theory because empowerment without confrontation risks reinforcing the status quo rather than challenging it.

Follow-up on Audit Recommendations: Some CSOs actively engage in following up on the recommendation's issues with the Government Auditor General. As one respondent noted:

> *"We present the Auditor General's recommendations and conduct research in certain key areas where we identify issues with specific projects that communities believe were not executed properly. These findings are shared in forums for stakeholders to discuss what went wrong and how they can address these situations, such as issues involving sub-*

> *county headquarters, schools, roads, and bridges that were not adequately addressed, prompting them to provide explanations."*

Generally, CSOs create forums for dialogue between citizens, auditors, and policymakers. However, the effectiveness of such dialogue depends on whether state institutions treat CSO inputs as genuine influence or tokenistic consultation designed to signal responsiveness without change.

Policy Development: According to eight CSOs, they were involved in the creation of anti-corruption legislation, supporting crucial legislative frameworks such as the Whistleblower Protection Act and the Anti-Corruption Act. One respondent noted:

> *"In the area of legislative reform, we have actively advocated for implementation of anti-corruption laws and frameworks, and we are looking at efforts that can shape key policies, like the Anti-Corruption Act and the Whistleblowing Protection Act, and some of the leadership aspects, especially governance and the rule of law."*

This involvement should be problematized: while CSOs gain visibility in policymaking, the extent of their influence is debatable. Civil society theory warns against "invited spaces," where governments consult CSOs symbolically without granting real decision-making power, raising questions about tokenism versus genuine policy influence.

Provision of Evidence on Corruption: Another significant number of respondents from 10 CSOs said that they conduct needs assessments to establish the gaps in compliance with anti-corruption laws or get to know the strategies that might be effective in fighting against corruption, as reflected by the following excerpts:

> *"We do research, policy research, and in this research we have been undertaking activities that look at utilization of public resources; we have been doing activities about illicit financial flows in the oil and gas sector and illicit financial flows in the natural resources sector, and we have also been looking at research activities related to utilization of public resources at the local government level…"*

> *"Conducting community-based research: We conduct research and surveys to understand the impact of corruption on local communities and to inform our advocacy and intervention strategies."*

This evidence-based advocacy enhances CSO legitimacy as knowledge producers in the public sphere. Yet their effectiveness depends on whether such evidence translates into systemic change or remains at the level of reports with limited uptake by state actors.

These contributions highlight the critical role CSOs play in policy advocacy, community empowerment, and keeping public officials accountable.

Challenges Faced by CSOs

Notwithstanding their important contributions, CSOs encounter various obstacles that limit their ability to effectively combat corruption; these obstacles can be divided into internal and external factors.

Internal Challenges

Nearly all respondents cited financial challenges, with heavy reliance on donor funding a major concern. One respondent stated, “We do project-based interventions... anti-corruption initiatives are supposed to be long-term.” This dependence frequently results in project-based funding that limits long-term anti-corruption efforts. This reflects the paradox of autonomy, as civil society theory highlights how dependence on donor funding undermines the claim to independence, distorts priorities, and orients interventions toward donor-driven agendas rather than community needs (Vakulenko, 2022). This dynamic is consistent with Edwards and Hulme’s (1996) critique of NGO performance and accountability, which warns that donor-driven funding models often compromise civil society’s autonomy and weaken its legitimacy. Their framework helps explain why Ugandan CSOs struggle to balance responsiveness to donors with responsiveness to local constituencies, reinforcing the perception that many initiatives are externally driven rather than organically rooted.

Inability to “walk the talk” was another factor mentioned by respondents. Several respondents expressed concerns regarding internal corruption within some CSOs themselves. As one respondent noted, “There is a conflict of interest... some of our people are compromised, and thus certain issues hit a dead end.” Numerous respondents (20) voiced concerns about internal corruption within some CSOs themselves, pointing out that some staff and leaders are compromised, undermining their credibility and impact in the anti-corruption space. This undermines CSOs’ legitimacy. When watchdogs are themselves compromised, they risk hybridization—becoming co-opted by political elites—and losing their moral authority, which erodes public trust and weakens social capital.

The survey also highlighted the issue of inadequate skills and manpower. One respondent underlined that “to engage in anti-corruption work, one must be highly courageous... it is essential to be a very principled individual. Finding individuals with these characteristics is challenging.” This capacity gap reinforces scholarship on the weak institutionalization of CSOs in the Global South (Malekpour et al., 2017), where human resources and technical expertise remain critical bottlenecks in sustaining civic agency.

Insufficient technological infrastructure was also cited: “We do not have the means internally to work... One responder said, ‘Our internal local IT is still weak.’” The reliance on traditional methods highlights a digital divide that reduces CSO effectiveness in documentation, dissemination, and coalition-building, especially when compared with better-resourced international NGOs.

External Challenges

More than half of the respondents cited insecurity. As one respondent recalled, “It’s a very risky venture... I have friends who have been shot because they were strong anti-corruption campaigners.” This aligns with theories of shrinking civic space, where authoritarian regimes restrict civil society through harassment, intimidation, and surveillance. Uganda reflects a broader Global South trend, also observed in Tanzania and Ethiopia, where governments use security tactics to silence watchdogs (Katusiimeh, 2024).

Lack of political will to fight corruption was mentioned by respondents: “A major obstacle to combating corruption is the government’s lack of genuine commitment.” One respondent characterized anti-corruption institutions as “more decorative and largely dysfunctional,” underscoring their ineffectiveness. This reflects the literature on “window-dressing” reforms: governments establish anti-corruption bodies to satisfy donors but strip them of real enforcement power (Fox, 2016). The result is a hollow institutional landscape that frustrates CSOs’ efforts to build accountability.

Apathy was another external challenge: “People often feel powerless and disillusioned... I think it’s a natural part of life.” This reflects erosion of social capital and trust. As Putnam (1993) argued, when citizens lose faith in collective action and institutions, civic disengagement follows, weakening both horizontal trust among citizens and vertical accountability relationships with the state.

Additional external challenges included overwhelming community demands, lack of evidence in corruption cases due to official non-cooperation, political interference, and blackmail among CSOs. These dynamics illustrate coalition fragility, where mistrust and competition hinder collective civil society action. Without stronger “vertical integration” (Fox, 2016) between grassroots and elite CSOs, fragmented accountability efforts fail to shift entrenched corruption structures.

DISCUSSION

This study underscores the pivotal role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Uganda’s anti-corruption landscape. The findings reveal that CSOs contribute significantly through advocacy, civic education, and watchdog functions, despite operating within a restrictive and politically hostile environment. These contributions align with earlier scholarship highlighting the centrality of civic mobilization and awareness-raising as the foundation for accountability and empowerment (Claassen et al., 2020; Gautam et al., 2024).

Comparatively, Uganda’s experience reflects broader patterns in the Global South, where CSOs often face repression yet continue to act as watchdogs. Similar trends are evident in Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania, where civic actors employ advocacy and litigation to confront entrenched corruption under authoritarian conditions (Oluda, 2025; Katusiimeh, 2024). This

situates Uganda within a global scholarly debate on the resilience of civil society under shrinking civic space, affirming that CSOs play transformative roles even in contexts of repression.

One of the most consistent findings is the contribution of CSOs to civic education, which empowers citizens to recognize their rights and responsibilities in resisting corruption. This role resonates with Katusiimeh (2004) and Timidi et al. (2024), who argue that informed citizens are indispensable to democratic accountability. Viewed through the lens of deliberative democracy, civic education enhances the capacity of citizens to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes, thereby broadening democratic resilience in fragile states.

As watchdogs, CSOs bridge the gap between formal accountability mechanisms and enforcement. They monitor audit recommendations and ensure that findings are acted upon, thus addressing one of the chronic weaknesses in Uganda's accountability architecture (Mulati, 2022). Evidence from Hondora (2018) and Oluda (2025) suggests that CSOs also play instrumental roles in shaping legislation and catalyzing reforms when state institutions lack initiative.

Nevertheless, one of the striking findings of this study is the perception that CSO engagement accelerates governmental responsiveness. Advocacy often leads to quicker service delivery or action against officials (Haris & Katusiimeh, 2020; Wetterberg & Brinkerhoff, 2018). Yet, this raises a critical question: does faster responsiveness indicate genuine accountability or merely superficial compliance to external pressure? The literature suggests that without structural reforms, responsiveness may mask persistent institutional weaknesses, a phenomenon also observed in other African contexts (Maguchu & Ghozi, 2021).

Another innovative finding relates to the use of cultural forms of civic engagement, such as music, dance, and drama (MDD). While barazas and media outreach remain common, MDD offers a culturally embedded mechanism for mobilizing communities around anti-corruption values (Oluwadamilare, 2024). These vernacular forms should be understood as part of Africa's broader traditions of resistance and civic mobilization. For instance, cultural performance was central to South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle (Bosch, 2017). By situating Uganda's CSOs within these traditions, the study highlights how cultural repertoires enhance legitimacy and ensure resonance with grassroots communities in ways donor-driven approaches cannot.

The study also observed a gap between what is reflected in documentary reviews and what CSOs reported as grassroots engagement strategies. While interviews revealed innovative use of MDD and community change agents, such strategies remain underrepresented in academic and policy documentation. This disjuncture raises questions about legitimacy: when grassroots practices are ignored in formal narratives, CSOs risk being depicted as elite-driven. Yet, their effectiveness in anti-corruption work is often rooted

in culturally grounded, community-driven engagement. Bridging this gap is crucial for sustaining credibility and reinforcing the authenticity of civil society in Uganda.

These findings also illuminate the tension between the "civil" and the "political" in civil society. As Chandhoke (2001) argues, civil society organizations must constantly navigate the boundary between autonomous civic action and participation in state-led or donor-defined political spaces. In Uganda, CSOs embody this dilemma: while they mobilize communities and act as watchdogs, they are simultaneously drawn into policy consultations and legislative reforms that may serve to legitimize state power without yielding substantive change. This dual role complicates their legitimacy, as they risk being perceived both as challengers of the state and as participants in its political projects.

Overall, the findings suggest that Uganda's CSOs contribute not only to direct anti-corruption outcomes but also to broader debates on collaborative governance and democratic resilience. Their activities demonstrate the possibilities and limits of co-production between state and non-state actors in contexts marked by repression, donor dependence, and weak institutions. By combining formal watchdog strategies with vernacular cultural repertoires, CSOs illustrate the hybrid pathways through which accountability can be advanced in the Global South.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that civil society organizations (CSOs) in Uganda play an indispensable role in the country's anti-corruption efforts. Through advocacy, civic education, monitoring of public institutions, and policy influence, CSOs help foster awareness, accountability, and responsiveness in governance. Their contributions mirror the experiences of other Global South contexts—such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania—where CSOs act as watchdogs despite political repression and fragile governance systems. By situating Uganda within these comparative debates, the study affirms the resilience and adaptability of civil society in constrained environments.

At the same time, the findings underscore persistent challenges that constrain CSO effectiveness. Chronic underfunding, internal governance weaknesses, limited capacity, and external threats—including repression, public apathy, and weak political will—create a paradox. CSOs are widely acknowledged as critical to anti-corruption, yet their ability to transform governance remains stymied by structural impediments. This paradox resonates with broader theoretical debates on the fragility of coalitions, the tension between autonomy and dependency, and the contested legitimacy of civil society in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes.

Despite these constraints, the study highlights promising innovations. Cultural and vernacular forms of civic engagement—such as music, dance, and drama (MDD)—remain powerful vehicles for mobilizing grassroots communities. These strategies, rooted in African traditions of resistance, provide legitimacy and resonance that donor-driven approaches often lack. Likewise, CSO advocacy has succeeded in prompting quicker government responsiveness, although whether this reflects genuine accountability or superficial compliance remains an open question. These findings suggest that Uganda's civil society occupies a hybrid space, combining watchdog functions with culturally grounded mobilization to advance accountability.

In light of these insights, several recommendations emerge, applicable not only to Uganda but to other countries in the Global South facing similar governance challenges. First, CSOs must diversify funding sources to reduce donor dependency and safeguard autonomy. Second, strengthening internal governance and leadership integrity is crucial for restoring legitimacy and public trust. Third, investment in technology, evidence-based planning, and digital activism can expand civic space and mobilize wider participation, even under restrictive conditions. Fourth, building stronger coalitions and pursuing *vertical integration* of accountability efforts—from local citizen action to national reform—can amplify impact (Fox, 2016). Fifth, continuous civic education should leverage culturally embedded methods such as MDD and barazas to inspire active citizen engagement, especially among marginalized groups. Finally, national and international stakeholders must work together to safeguard civic space, as legal protections for freedom of expression, association, and assembly remain fundamental to civil society's effectiveness.

Ultimately, the Ugandan case illuminates the complexities of civil society's struggle against corruption in fragile contexts. While structural and procedural barriers persist, CSOs continue to demonstrate resilience through advocacy, cultural mobilization, and coalition-building. *Their contributions, though contested and constrained, are indispensable for democratic resilience and the pursuit of accountability.* Uganda's experience therefore enriches global debates on how civil society in the Global South navigates fragility and repression while sustaining a vision of more transparent, participatory, and accountable governance.

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