

Can citizens say 'no'?

Tracking civil society's impact in Parliament



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IFAA's 'In Defence of our Constitutional Democracy' project, known as Decode, conducted research into NGOs' experiences of participation in South Africa's 'people's Parliament'.

NAZEEMA MOHAMED, BRUCE KADALIE & RACHAEL NYIRONGO focused on the GBV and climate change sectors and in conversations with participants found a mix of creative agency, commitment and determination alongside frustration and a sense of marginalisation.



Introduction

Active citizen involvement, a foundational element of South Africa's democratic framework, aims to ensure that all voices, especially those historically on the margins, are acknowledged and actively incorporated into policy decision-making. Yet this fine principle, clearly stipulated in the Constitution, encounters a fundamental contradiction when it comes up against the challenges of implementation.

In reality, South Africa's organised civil society today, itself the product of an powerful history of community-based resistance that overcame apartheid, is impeded from fulfilling this constitutional duty by severe shortages of capacity and resources. It is trapped in a tangle of bureaucratic inefficiencies, fragmented government coordination and limited public engagement and awareness.

That is not to say the will, and commitment to, active citizen engagement is lacking. The Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) has found through its 'In Defence of our Constitutional Democracy' (Decode) project that while the voice of civil society rings out loud and clear in the public domain, the activists on the ground frequently find themselves shunted to the margins when it comes to implementation.

They face constant frustration in their efforts to engage with government, even when their inputs and demands have been raised, and often taken into account. Decode's research identified a recurring pattern of vibrant public input during consultation phases, followed by diminished influence in subsequent implementation and oversight, revealing a gap between democratic participation and administrative delivery.

Decode has focused on climate change and gender-based violence (GBV), two priority areas in South Africa's development agenda that represent pressing security challenges and are sites of sustained civil society mobilisation. The project has engaged in research, interviews and workshops specifically related to the gender and climate sectors, with the focus on the strategies used by civil society organisations (CSOs) to shape parliamentary discourse, and their engagement with key legislation (including the Climate Change Bill, 2022 to 2024) and relevant public policy (the 2020 National Strategic Plan on GBV).

Decode offers a reflective review of what civil society has achieved in these sectors in terms of parliamentary participation, how it has engaged Parliament, and what challenges and barriers remain. It also assesses the extent to which South Africa's system of cooperative governance has enabled or constrained meaningful participation and policy impact in these domains.

By drawing on qualitative insights from interviews with former Members of Parliament as well as women, youth and climate activists, Decode aims to generate



actionable recommendations for the seventh Parliament. This comes in the wake of the 2024 elections and the broader reconfiguration of South Africa's political landscape.

Civil society in South Africa since 1994

The transition to democracy in 1994 marked a profound turning point for South African civil society. Under apartheid, civil society had largely functioned as a resistance movement, mobilising communities and providing alternative services in the absence of a legitimate state. With the democratic transition, many civil society leaders were absorbed into the new government to help establish the structures and norms of the post-apartheid state. While this shift was essential for nation-building, it created significant leadership vacuums within civil society organisations, weakening institutional memory and continuity at a critical moment.

Several research reports on civil society have been produced by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), in collaboration with Kagiso Trust and the National Development Agency and the Department of Social Development. This research notes that the early democratic period saw many civil society organisations re-orienting themselves – from resistance to development-focused roles. This transition was not always smooth. Funding streams began to shift toward state-led initiatives, leaving many organisations under-resourced or repurposed to deliver services under government contracts (National Development Agency, 2021; Bohler-Muller *et al.*, 2020; Ngudu & Motala, n.d.). In some cases, this led to depoliticisation and leadership gaps with organisations prioritising delivery over advocacy and accountability.

At the same time, the state's emphasis on building formal institutions and cooperative governance meant that structured participation – through public consultations, community forums and parliamentary submissions – began to replace the more confrontational, grassroots methods that had defined the anti-apartheid struggle. While these mechanisms reflected the democratic spirit of the Constitution, in practice they were often undermined by constrained resources and, at times, insufficient political will. This contributed to a decline in accountability, especially during the years of state capture, and fuelled growing public dissatisfaction with formal participation processes.

Dissatisfaction with limited progress led in time to new waves of activism – often led by youth, women and climate justice advocates – reviving the confrontational, rights-based ethos of pre-1994 civil society. Movements such as the [Treatment Action Campaign](#), [Abahlali baseMjondolo](#), [#FeesMustFall](#), [#TotalShutdown](#) and the [Climate Justice Charter Movement](#) have reclaimed civic space and challenged the state to respond to structural inequality, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the housing crisis, GBV and the climate crisis with greater urgency.

Decode builds on this trajectory, recognising the shifting nature of civil society in South Africa's democracy. By focusing on GBV and climate change the project offers



a lens into how civil society actors are engaging Parliament and navigating South Africa's system of cooperative governance to push for deeper, systemic change.

GBV and civil society engagement with Parliament

South Africa has one of the highest rates of GBV in the world, a fact that has made the issue central to both government policy and civil society mobilisation. The National Strategic Plan (NSP) on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide (2020) was a key milestone in the formal recognition of GBV as a national crisis. However, the success of this plan depends heavily on implementation, funding and coordination across government departments—areas where civil society has consistently played a watchdog and advocacy role (Republic of South Africa, 2020).

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa has enacted a suite of progressive legislation to promote gender equality and address GBV, including the Domestic Violence Act (1998), the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Amendment Act (2007), and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000). These legislative developments were informed by persistent activism, legal advocacy and community mobilisation. However, significant challenges remain in translating these legal frameworks into effective implementation.

Civil society organisations, particularly those led by women and young activists, have significantly shaped public discourse and legislative efforts related to GBV. Campaigns such as #TotalShutdown, [Rape Crisis](#) and [Sonke Gender Justice](#) have brought survivors' voices to the fore, demanded structural change and pressured Parliament to act. These organisations have submitted written inputs to parliamentary committees, organised mass actions and provided expert testimony during hearings on legislation relating to domestic violence, sexual offences and policing.

The gender focus of Decode in its 2024–2025 implementation cycle included desktop research aimed at providing a historical and contextual overview of South Africa's legislative efforts toward gender equity and the eradication of GBV, with a particular focus on the role of civic organisations and social movements in shaping and engaging with parliamentary processes. This study culminated in an analysis of the establishment of the [National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide \(NCGBFV\) Act](#), highlighting the critical actors that influenced this legislative milestone.

Central to this research was the assessment of how civil society has leveraged parliamentary mechanisms to shape gender-related legislation. Organisations such as the Commission for Gender Equality, Sonke Gender Justice and People Opposing Women Abuse were instrumental in both advocacy and participatory processes during legislative drafting.

The study revealed that smaller, community-based organisations often struggle to engage Parliament due to limited resources, digital exclusion and bureaucratic barriers. These structural issues need to be addressed if the promise of the NSP is to be



realised. A social compact on GBV, with clear roles for Parliament, civil society and the Executive, could provide the collaborative foundation needed to shift from policy to sustained impact.

The NCGBVF Act, a landmark outcome of the [2018 Presidential Summit against Gender-based Violence and Femicide](#), itself a response to the #TotalShutdown movement, established a statutory body to coordinate GBV responses across government and civil society. Key contributors to its development included Rise Up Against Gender-Based Violence, Women's Legal Centre, Tshwaranang Legal Advocacy Centre, Sonke Gender Justice, Sweat, Mosaic, the Callas Foundation, the Triangle Project and the Commission for Gender Equality. These stakeholders contributed to the drafting, mobilisation and public consultation processes, pushing for a survivor-centred, multisectoral response to GBV.

Decode reached out to a number of these organisations, prioritising those directly involved in the #TotalShutdown movement, to gather experiential insight into their engagement with parliamentary structures, the challenges encountered and the real-world effects of gender-focused legislation.

The interviews yielded valuable qualitative data, despite the fact that many of the organisations approached are experiencing acute resource and capacity pressures, which are greatly exacerbated by the recent withdrawal of US funding for gender advocacy by the Trump administration. Many organisations are overstretched, operating with minimal staff while navigating increasing demand for their services.

The interviews highlighted both the strategic acumen deployed by civil society in achieving legislative gains and the persistent obstacles to holding institutions accountable. The testimonies underscored the enduring tension between progressive lawmaking and practical enforcement, and the importance of resourcing institutions mandated to implement gender-responsive policies.

The interviews explored civil society's role in shaping the NCGBVF Act, including key moments of influence, engagement with parliamentarians and organisational strategies. Challenges in public participation and improvements for broader representation were also examined, as well as opportunities for strengthening enforcement mechanisms and civil society's accountability role.

Decode interviewed key informant Advocate Sehaam Samaai, a seasoned human rights lawyer and Commissioner of the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE). Samaai has more than 25 years of experience in legal advocacy and civil society engagement. Her perspective, grounded in long-standing work with community organisations and public institutions, offers an informed reflection on the evolving GBV response landscape in South Africa.

Reflecting on the origins of the 2020 National Strategic Plan on GBV and Femicide, Samaai said the 2016 Total Shutdown movement was instrumental in



catalysing national attention. The movement, which comprised diverse constituencies including women, students and LGBTQI+ activists, put forward a set of demands to the Presidency that later informed the pillars of the NSP.

Civil society organisations such as Rise Up Against Gender-Based Violence, the Women's Legal Centre, and the National Shelter Movement contributed significantly to shaping the NSP's priorities, which include prevention, access to justice, economic empowerment and survivor support. Samaai highlighted the collaborative nature of the process while emphasising that the true test of the NSP lies in its implementation, not its formulation.

She noted the following major obstacles to realising its objectives.

- **Inadequate and delayed funding:** Samaai observed that despite the NSP's call for a dedicated GBV fund, resources remain largely unallocated. The burden of implementation has often fallen on underfunded CSOs that are reliant on donor funding. She cited the Institute for Southern Litigation in Africa, which has labelled the NSP "toothless" due to its inadequate resources.

- **Weak interdepartmental coordination:** The current oversight role played by the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities (DWYPD) has proven to be insufficient for coordinating cross-departmental responses. Samaai argued that GBV intersects with numerous sectors, including health, housing and education, and therefore requires a higher level of coordination. She advocated for the establishment of a "super-cluster" model under the Presidency, similar to the South African National AIDS Council.

- **Limited private sector involvement:** The role of the private sector in addressing GBV was minimal, said Samaai. She pointed to the lack of enforceable obligations for corporate contributions to GBV initiatives, despite the sector's broad societal influence. Samaai recommended binding commitments akin to Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) codes to ensure sustained private sector engagement.

The interview underscored the vital role of CBOs, particularly during the Covid-19 lockdown period. Samaai noted that local groups, rather than larger non-governmental organisations (NGOs), often provided direct services such as shelter, food support and frontline counselling, yet these organisations remain marginalised in funding structures, which tend to favour well-resourced, urban-based entities. She called for a more equitable redistribution of resources, urging that funding and policy influence be extended to grassroots actors who are often closest to affected communities.

Samaai drew parallels between South Africa's responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the GBV crisis. She identified the former as a successful model of multi-sectoral coordination, marked by dedicated structures and consistent international



funding. In contrast, the GBV sector has yet to replicate this level of institutional alignment and investment.

Samaai concluded with several key recommendations.

- **Enforceable funding mechanisms:** Treasury should release the GBV fund with clear, accessible criteria for civil society applicants. Reliance on donor funding is not a sustainable model.
- **Improved government coordination:** Oversight of the NSP and related strategies should be elevated to the Presidency to ensure alignment across departments.
- **Inclusive policymaking:** Efforts should be made to ensure that rural women, sex workers and LGBTQI+ survivors are included meaningfully in policy design and monitoring processes.
- **Funding equity:** Funding audits should be conducted to ensure that grassroots organisations receive a fair share of available resources.

Decode also held a focus group discussion with Caroline Peters, founder of the Callas Foundation, and Bayanda Ndumiso and Katlego Sepotokele of the Triangle Project to reflect on civil society's role in shaping the NCGBVF Act. Peters, a seasoned African feminist and human rights defender, founded the Callas Foundation in 2018 amid a surge in femicide and gang violence on the Cape Flats. Her organisation has since become a leading force in intersectional GBV work, combining advocacy, service delivery and public education. Ndumiso serves as Political Advocacy Coordinator at the Triangle Project, where he leads initiatives to strengthen LGBTQI+ representation in policy-making. The Triangle Project has championed issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in political dialogue, advancing inclusive participation. Sepotokele, Triangle's Legal and Policy Coordinator, contributes to advocacy campaigns on GBV, hate crimes and legislative reform, with an emphasis on accountability and equitable implementation.

The focus group explored the significance of civil society influence on legislation, public participation challenges, enforcement mechanisms and prospects for continued collaboration. The informants agreed that the NCGBVF Act is the result of

'We refused to let femicide stats just be numbers. We named our dead. We told our stories. We disrupted the silence.'



significant grassroots mobilisation and advocacy. Peters identified the 2018 Presidential Summit on GBV as a defining milestone: “We refused to let femicide stats just be numbers. We named our dead. We told our stories. We disrupted the silence.”

This movement, she explained, was largely organised online and reflected a groundswell of public anger at rampant femicide and impunity. “One minute it was a few of us, the next, thousands. WhatsApp groups turned into provinces, then national forums. We were survivor-led,” Peters stated, underlining the organic and decentralised nature of the mobilisation.

Ndumiso highlighted the Triangle Project’s efforts to mainstream LGBTQI+ concerns in the broader GBV policy framework. Triangle’s work began with training political leaders on LGBTQI+ rights and continued with fostering direct engagement with parliamentary processes. He described this strategy as essential to “create social cohesion and inclusion in decisions that influence political will”.

Triangle’s approach emphasised intersectionality and focused on equipping marginalised communities with the tools to engage constructively. “Your own body, your own agency, and your own struggles are directly influenced by decisions being made every day,” he remarked, stressing the need for active citizenship beyond voting.

Both organisations have had mixed experiences in engaging Parliament. Peters expressed frustration with formal channels, recounting extensive past involvement in legislative drafting and amendment processes, including in the Sexual Offences Bill and Domestic Violence Act. Despite this history, she now feels excluded. “I’ve had sittings in Parliament, on the floor with committees. We’ve done so much. But now, it feels like we’re no longer invited.”

She attributed this disengagement to a lack of resources and the erosion of civil society’s access to the budgeting process. “Parliament needs to resource the legislation,” she said. “What’s the use of all this legislation if it’s just paper?”

Ndumiso, by contrast, described a more strategic long-term engagement with political parties. Triangle’s political advocacy school brought future parliamentarians into its orbit, fostering internal party champions for LGBTQI+ and GBV issues. Despite some parties reneging on public commitments – such as the DA’s vote against the Hate Crimes Bill – Triangle has seen real gains, including the election of openly LGBTQI+ councillors.

Sepotokele added that Triangle’s submissions to Parliament stress budgetary concerns and implementation challenges. “We don’t want another paper tiger like the CGE [Commission for Gender Equality],” she warned, calling for enforceable mandates and real accountability.



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All participants identified resource constraints as a major barrier to participation. Peters noted, "We are under-resourced. I should be in strategic positions to engage, but our organisations aren't funded for that." She depends on informal networks and cross-organisational support for training and events, such as sharing venues and printing resources.

Sepotokele echoed this concern, arguing that the current framework does not allow for meaningful participation by underfunded organisations. She also stressed the need for civil society to be recognised as equal partners: "We must be more than tokens. Civil society must have enforcement and oversight roles."

Ndumise pointed out that political parties often treat LGBTQI+ and GBV issues as peripheral. This tokenism is compounded by leaders' fear of internal backlash and the difficulty of maintaining a nonpartisan position while engaging parties. He also raised safety concerns for LGBTQI+ activists who challenge party orthodoxy.

Peters advocated for a more powerful National Council with the authority to allocate funding and enforce compliance. "Enforcement must be more than paper promises," she said. "The Council needs real power to hold departments accountable. And civil society must be equal partners in that accountability."

Sepotokele reinforced this point by noting the importance of budgetary transparency and legal consequences for noncompliance. Triangle's monitoring of policy implementation, particularly around the Prevention and combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Act, illustrates the crucial watchdog role that civil society plays.

All three informants underscored the importance of coalition-building and collaboration. Peters described the informal "kitchen network" born during the Covid-19 pandemic, which continues to share resources and support among community organisations. "That's the magic of civil society," she reflected.

Ndumise called for the institutionalisation of coalitions: "Coalitions must be embedded in our daily work, not just during crises." He proposed pooled funding models, shared data platforms, and continued pressure on Parliament as key strategies. Sepotokele stressed the need for capacity building and long-term monitoring.



“Implementation is where the real work begins – raising awareness, tracking outcomes, and ensuring accountability.”

The gender focus in Decode’s research affirms the necessity of maintaining robust civic engagement with Parliament and underscores the vital role that feminist and social justice organisations play in shaping democratic outcomes in South Africa. The discussions with the Callas Foundation, Triangle Project and Advocate Samaai highlight both the progress achieved through grassroots mobilisation and the considerable gaps that remain in the implementation of gender-equity legislation.

As Peters observed, civil society “refused to let femicide stats just be numbers,” and this ethos of survivor-centred, lived-experience advocacy continues to drive accountability efforts. Similarly, the Triangle Project’s strategic engagement with political parties demonstrates the importance of equipping marginalised communities with the tools to influence policy from within and outside formal structures.

However, the research also revealed the structural limitations that inhibit sustained civic impact. The interviews identified chronic underfunding, exclusion from decision-making, and tokenistic consultation as key impediments to transformative change. Samaai’s call for the elevation of GBV coordination to the level of the Presidency echoes concerns voiced in the focus group about the need for enforceable mandates and cross-departmental accountability. Without such reforms, the National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide risks becoming yet another symbolic structure – what Sepotokele described as a potential “paper tiger”

Importantly, the findings draw attention to the marginalisation of CBOs, particularly in rural or under-resourced areas, whose proximity to survivors often places them at the frontline of service delivery. The current funding architecture privileges larger NGOs and urban-based entities, leaving critical grassroots actors without the support they need to sustain their work. A more equitable redistribution of resources and a deliberate inclusion of CBOs in policy development and monitoring is essential.

Going forward, Decode will continue to centre these voices in evaluating the efficacy of gender policy frameworks in real-world contexts. As this body of research grows, it will contribute to a clearer theory of change for feminist and queer-led organisations, grounded in solidarity, strategic collaboration, and institutional reform. Only through consistent, inclusive, and well-resourced civic engagement can gender-equity laws move beyond aspiration and deliver the justice they promise.

Climate justice and civil society engagement with Parliament

Climate change poses a major threat to South Africa’s social and economic stability. Civil society’s role in this space has grown substantially, with organisations



advocating for equitable, inclusive climate policy that addresses both environmental and social justice.

Movements such as the [Climate Justice Coalition](#), [Centre for Environmental Rights](#), [African Climate Alliance](#) (ACA), [the Green Connection](#), [Greenpeace Africa](#) and other organisations have helped bring grassroots voices into the legislative process. These organisations have used submissions, petitions and public hearings to press for binding emission targets, adaptation funding and community-based responses to climate risks.

In forums such as the 2022 Climate Change Emergency Roundtable, civil society pushed for climate-resilient agricultural practices, livelihood diversification and financial support mechanisms tailored for those most impacted by climate change. This advocacy contributed to a more integrated and equitable approach to climate action across sectors like agriculture, energy and water.

The 2024 passage of the [Climate Change Act](#) represented a milestone, and civil society organisations also played a key role in its development. Climate activists engaged extensively during public consultations, advocating for stronger emission reduction targets, clear enforcement mechanisms and accountability through carbon budgets. Their influence helped embed transparency and justice in the final legislation.

Decode interviewed representatives from three civil society organisations, ACA, Greenpeace Africa and The Green Connection, to document their experiences, challenges and critiques of Parliament's engagement processes. Their perspectives reveal that while some engagement channels exist, the current systems for public participation are deeply flawed.

Sibusiso Mazomba from the ACA and Siya Myeza from Greenpeace Africa both emphasised that civil society, particularly youth-led groups, played a foundational role in initiating and shaping the Climate Change Bill. Through the Youth Policy Committee, ACA coordinated inputs that focused on adaptation, resilience and justice. However, direct engagement with Parliament was limited and often inconsistent. From a Greenpeace Africa perspective, the civil society efforts were largely directed at the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), with very few formal opportunities for sustained dialogue with Parliament. Attempts to advocate for a dedicated parliamentary committee on climate change, for example, received no follow-up.



Photo: GroundUp

The challenges these organisations faced were strikingly similar. Despite their extensive preparation and consultation, their inputs were often excluded from discussions. Both Mazomba and Myeza described the engagement as ad hoc and extractive, where Parliament invited input but failed to build consistent relationships or institutionalise civil society participation. They also pointed to information asymmetries and capacity gaps that made meaningful engagement difficult, especially for youth-led and community-based organisations. The technical complexity of law-making meant that these groups had to self-organise to bridge the knowledge gap, often without government support. Myeza noted a broader public lack of awareness about how to engage Parliament, something he described as a systemic failure of the state, not civil society.

Lisa Makaula from The Green Connection echoed many of these concerns, while highlighting additional issues from a community justice perspective. She critiqued the top-down nature of the policy-making process, where government and business interests dominate and civil society voices, especially those opposing extractive industries, are sidelined. She stressed the importance of involving local communities and valuing their lived knowledge of climate impacts, something too often ignored in favour of technical or commercial expertise. Makaula also noted that corporations frequently reduce public consultation to a tick-box exercise, inviting communities into



workshops only after key decisions have already been made. In her view, legal frameworks like the Climate Change Act must institutionalise protections for affected communities and create accessible mechanisms for justice and accountability.

Across all three interviews, a clear critique emerged: Parliament lacks the institutional will and structures to support meaningful civil society participation. Engagement remains largely symbolic, with civil society functioning more as external pressure groups and parallel knowledge producers, rather than as integrated partners in legislative development. Government has also delegated much of the work of public education and mobilisation to civil society, but without the necessary support or recognition.

Nonetheless, participants saw emerging opportunities, particularly with the formation of the Government of National Unity and a renewed campaign for a dedicated climate committee in Parliament. There was also optimism about exploring alternative entry points such as the Parliamentary Public Education Office.

These reflections point to a critical need to reimagine how Parliament and government engage with the public on climate policy. Building a just and inclusive climate transition will require more than symbolic consultation. It also demands structural change to make participation meaningful, consistent and grounded in justice.

Reflections from exiting parliamentarians

Decode also conducted interviews with MPs from the sixth democratic Parliament who offered candid reflections on the state of public participation and civil society engagement. MPs recognised the historical importance of civil society in advancing democratic accountability but expressed concern about flagging citizen participation. “People have lost interest in Parliament,” one said in an interview.

Several parliamentarians noted that while formal mechanisms exist – such as public hearings and committee submissions – these are often underutilised or poorly resourced. They also acknowledged that Parliament must do more to close the feedback loop by responding to submissions and showing how civil society input informs decision-making.

Recommendations

Based on the research and interviews, Decode proposed the following recommendations:

1. Strengthen participatory mechanisms in Parliament

- Simplify parliamentary submission and participation procedures, particularly for community-based and youth-led organisations.



- Provide accessible, multilingual information about public consultations, including in calls for submissions and formats for engagement.

- Use digital and offline platforms to make participation more inclusive, especially where internet access is limited.

2. Address structural barriers to engagement

- Expand capacity-building initiatives for CSOs, particularly those in rural and under-resourced areas.

- Share and strengthen available resources (e.g., legal or research assistance) to improve the quality of civil society submissions. This could be developed through intra-NGO collaboration or collaboration between Parliament and NGOs.

3. Promote intergenerational dialogue and youth inclusion

- Institutionalise youth parliaments and mentorship programmes linking former and senior MPs with younger activists.

- Recognise and support youth-led initiatives in both funding and policy forums.

4. Create a social compact framework

- Develop thematic social compacts (e.g., on GBV and climate) that define the roles of Parliament, civil society and government departments.

- Embed co-governance principles into standing rules of Parliament and committee operations.

5. Improve feedback and follow-up mechanisms

- Require all parliamentary committees to report back on committee decisions and actions taken, including written responses to public submissions.

- Include civil society representatives in post-legislative scrutiny and monitoring processes.

6. Recognise local and community knowledge in policy-making

- Institutionalise the inclusion of traditional, indigenous and community knowledge as valid and relevant inputs in legislative and regulatory processes.

- Create channels for frontline communities – particularly those affected by climate change and extractive industries – to provide input early in policy design, not only at consultation stages.



Conclusion

The Decode project has illuminated the tensions, challenges, possibilities and enduring promise of South Africa's participatory democracy. While structures for civil society engagement exist, the lived experience of activists and community organisations shows that these mechanisms are often inaccessible, inconsistent or ineffective. Interviews with civil society activists have exposed systemic barriers, from information asymmetries and capacity gaps to the tokenistic nature of many public consultations.

Yet, Decode also revealed a remarkable resilience and ingenuity within South African civil society. From gender justice to climate advocacy, citizens are not only demanding accountability – they are shaping legislation, building alliances and redefining the meaning of democratic participation. A stronger, more responsive Parliament – rooted in a renewed social compact – can unlock the transformative potential of this engagement.

Decode's research highlights the strategic and impactful role played by a new generation of activists – many of whom were born after 1994 – in shaping key policy debates. These activists, described as “born frees,” have grown up in a democratic society yet are deeply critical of its shortcomings. Their activism reaffirms the enduring strength of South Africa's participatory culture.

Moving forward, the lessons from Decode must inform the work of the seventh Parliament and the broader governance ecosystem. In defending our constitutional democracy, the path forward lies in deeper collaboration, greater inclusion, and sustained public engagement.

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INTERVIEWS

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Lechesa Tsenoli, former Deputy Speaker to Parliament. Interviewed 3 October 2024

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