

LABOUR PROTECTION IN CIVIL SOCIETY WORKSPACES

Executive **Summary**



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Background and Purpose

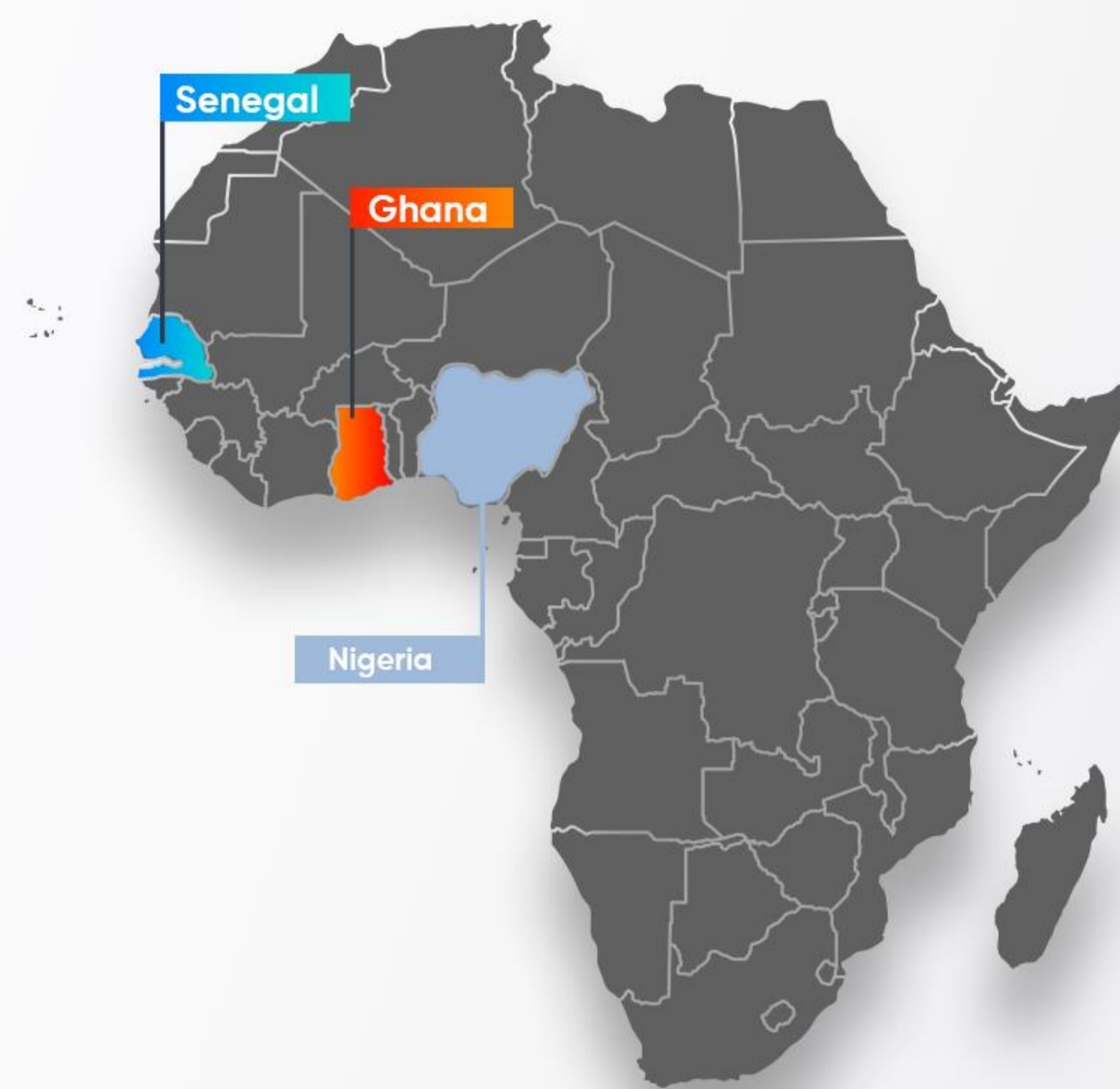
Over the last two decades, West Africa has witnessed significant democratic progress, enabling a vibrant civil society ecosystem. Today, over 3,000 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) actively contribute to the region's development goals, particularly in human rights, education, and governance. However, despite their external advocacy for social justice, CSOs often fall short in upholding decent labour standards internally. This study, initiated by the South Saharan Social Development Organization, investigates labour protection within CSOs in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal, focusing on employment dynamics, social protection, safety, and worker voice.

Amid donor-driven funding cycles and regulatory inconsistencies across countries, civil society workers face heightened precarity. Common challenges include reliance on short-term contracts, exclusion from social protections, and limited channels for grievance redress. Recognizing these trends, this report develops and applies a multidimensional framework of labour protection grounded in rights-based theory and International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions.

Theoretical Framework

The study synthesizes five labour protection theories—**Classical**, **Marxian**, **Human Capital**, **Precarious Labour**, and **Rights-Based**, and argues that only a rights-based approach provides a holistic framework to protect workers' economic, social, personal, and political rights.

International standards such as the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, the Decent Work Agenda, and Convention 190 on violence and harassment inform the proposed multidimensional framework. This model enables CSOs to assess worker protections in four dimensions: employment conditions, workplace safety, social protection, and voice/representation.



Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach:

Survey: 106 CSO workers across Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal responded to an anonymized digital survey on employment terms, access to benefits, representation, and workplace safety.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): 20 interviews with CSO leaders, donors, labour experts, and policymakers provided depth and institutional insights.

Convening: A validation workshop with stakeholders ensured triangulation, practical grounding, and co-development of recommendations.

Respondents represented a variety of CSO sizes and structures—including international NGOs (INGOs), national CSOs, and local donors—enabling comparative analysis across contexts.



Key Findings

01 Employment Dynamics

The CSO sector is dominated by project-based employment.



Donor funding cycles and the use of volunteer/consultant roles often exacerbate inequality within organizations, creating a two-tier labour system.



55.24%

of workers feel underpaid.

44.76%

of respondents lack transparency on salary-setting processes.

Smaller CSOs and INGOs exhibited the highest levels of employment precarity due to unstable funding.

Over 30%

reported chronic job insecurity.

Career stagnation is widespread, especially in medium-sized organizations.

02 Social Protection

Many workers lack access to essential protections such as health insurance, pensions, and paid leave.



Some INGOs offer better benefits but do not extend them to project-based or partner staff, reinforcing structural inequity.



43%

of CSOs provide a combination of pension, insurance, and maternity leave.

17.3%

Coverage falls to 17.3% in small NGOs.

Volunteers and consultants are excluded almost entirely from these benefits.

Key Findings

03 Workplace Safety and Rights

While a few organizations have exemplary safeguarding protocols, most lack the capacity or systems to implement protective policies effectively.



41.9%

of respondents witnessed or declined to respond to workplace harassment or discrimination.

Only 24.8%

confirmed the existence of enforceable grievance mechanisms, most of which are inactive.

72.38%

Access to safety provisions in high-risk areas is limited, particularly for staff working in conflict-affected zones.

72.38%

reported that their organizations promote diversity and inclusion, with INGOs performing better than local CSOs.

04 Worker Voice and Representation



34.29%

of respondents belong to unions or collective bargaining platforms.

72.38%

In many CSOs, decision-making is top-down, with minimal opportunity for staff input.

72.38%

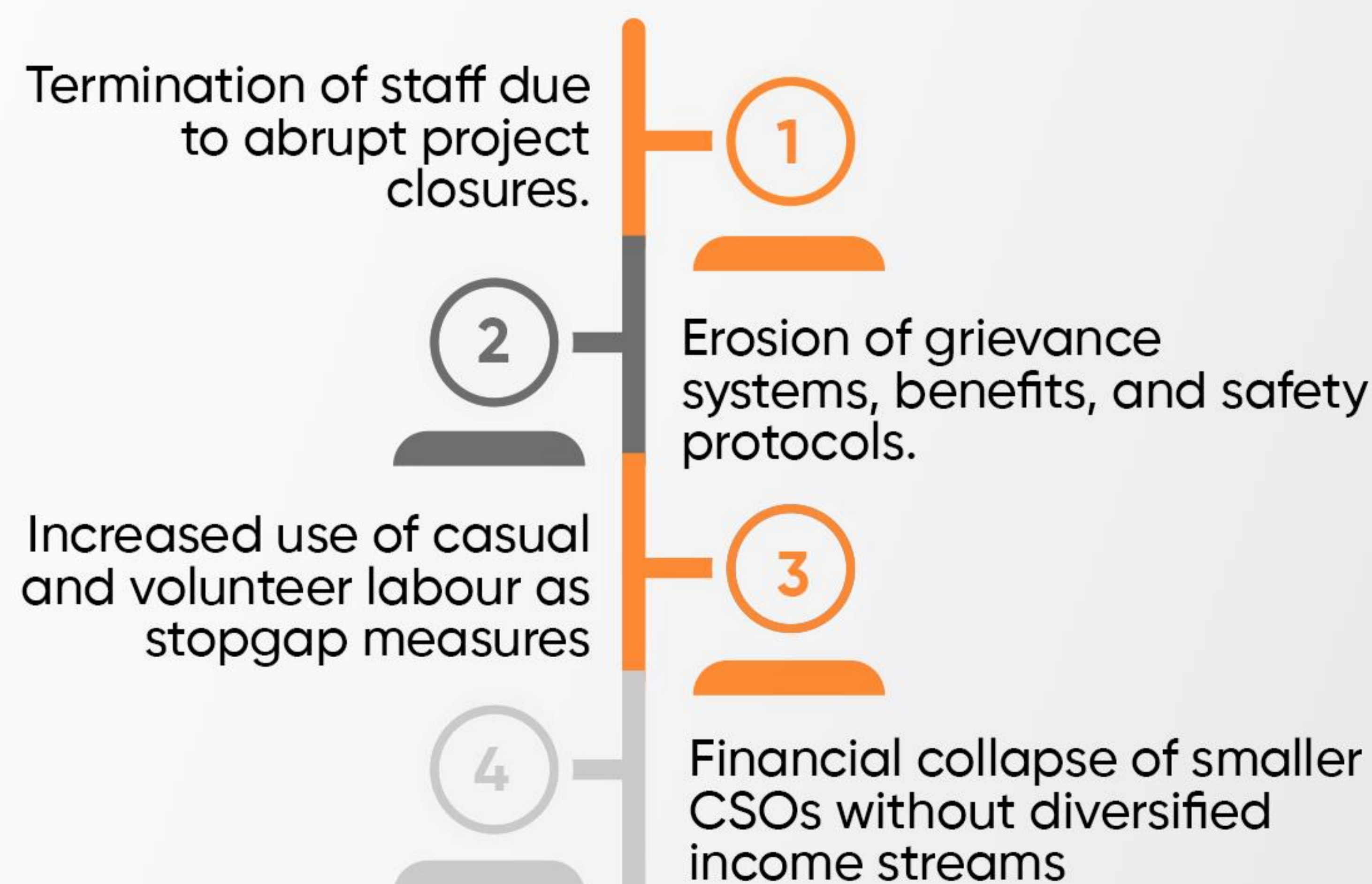
Small CSOs are least likely to support formal channels for employee representation.

72.38%

Power imbalances, coupled with fear of retaliation, discourage grievance reporting and limit worker agency.

Emerging Risks: Funding Shifts and Labour Fragility

The research highlights the growing vulnerability of CSOs amid donor withdrawal, particularly USAID and other US government funding agencies in the region. Key risks include:



Recommendations

To address the systemic challenges documented, the study proposes a rights-based accountability model where donors, CSOs, workers, and governments each uphold specific responsibilities.

For Donor:

- ❑ Adopt a CSO Labour Protection Index (CSO-LPI) to assess grantees' labour conditions.
- ❑ Link funding incentives to ethical employment practices.
- ❑ Allocate resources specifically for worker well-being (e.g. mental health, living wages).
- ❑ Support a digital Worker Resource Hub housing toolkits, grievance guides, and pro bono legal contacts.

For CSOs:

- ❑ Mainstream the four dimensions of labour protection across internal policies.
- ❑ Formalize wage and benefit structures to enhance transparency.
- ❑ Strengthen safeguarding and grievance systems through dedicated focal persons and oversight
- ❑ Institutionalize inclusive hiring, union rights, and staff participation in decision-making processes.

For Government:

- ❑ Regulate non-standard forms of employment (casuals, volunteers, interns) across sectors by limiting contract duration and mandating grievance systems.
- ❑ Develop penalties for organizations that systematically exploit these categories to avoid legal responsibilities.
- ❑ Embed labour protection clauses in national employment codes

For CSO Workers:

- ❑ Educate themselves on workplace rights and grievance channels.
- ❑ Organize for collective bargaining power.
- ❑ Engage with independent platforms for legal support and advocacy.



Conclusion

Labour protection within West African CSOs remains fragmented, underregulated, and dependent on external donor mandates. This report finds that workers, particularly in smaller CSOs and non-standard roles, face high levels of vulnerability with little institutional support.

Yet there are also beacons of hope. Some organizations are proactively integrating rights-based labour frameworks, and there is growing momentum for collective reform across donors, government, and CSO platforms. The multidimensional framework advanced in this study offers a path forward—anchoring labour protection in rights, reinforcing organizational sustainability, and aligning internal workplace standards with the values CSOs advocate for externally.

Strengthening decent work in CSOs is not only a moral imperative, it is central to building a more resilient, equitable, and impactful civil society across West Africa.



