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UNITED NATIONS DEMOCRACY PROMOTION THROUGH CIVIL SOCIETY EMPOWERMENT

A case study of The Gambia's democratic
transition

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Abstract

United Nations (UN) democracy promotion has increasingly emphasized civil society empowerment as a form of democracy support in developing countries. This study addresses the research question: How has United Nations (UN) democracy assistance been translated into democratic activities by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in The Gambia since the 2016 political transition, and how do these activities align with theoretical expectations about democratic deepening in post-authoritarian contexts? Drawing on qualitative interviews with CSO leaders and a UN official, complemented by UN reports and documents, the study examines how the UN supports CSOs and the activities this support enables during democratic transition. The analysis shows that UN support primarily takes the form of project funding, capacity-building initiatives, and institutional assistance, which interviewees perceive as enabling CSOs to engage more consistently in civic education activities and oversight-oriented initiatives. Rather than proving causal links, the study positions these activities within existing theoretical perspectives that emphasize the importance of civil society engagement for democratic deepening. The findings suggest that UN support contributes to the organizational capacity and scope of CSO activities in The Gambia in the drive for successful transition, while also highlighting important limitations of the study.

Key words: Democracy Promotion, United Nations (UN), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Civil Society, Successful Transition, Democratic Deepening.

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Source: Freedom Newspaper 2017

1. Introduction

“Gambia has Decided” was the most popular slogan in the streets of Banjul following the December 2016 elections in The Gambia. For many young people who had lived their entire lives under a 22-year authoritarian regime, this moment marked the first real experience of political change. The democratic transition generated renewed public interest in politics and increased civic engagement in national affairs. With support from the international community, civil society organizations (CSOs) also began to expand their activities. Today, it is often argued by politicians and observers that Gambians themselves ultimately brought about democratic change. However, the questions now are, is the same civil society participating in the country’s ongoing democratic transition? And how is international organizations democracy promotion contributing to their participation in this regard?

There is growing scholarly and policy interest in democracy promotion, to which this study seeks to contribute. This thesis examines United Nations (UN) democracy support through civil society empowerment in The Gambia following the 2016 political transition. The Gambia represents a post-authoritarian transition case, comparable to other contexts where international actors support democratic deepening through civil society empowerment. While international democracy support is often evaluated through its broader democratic outcomes, this study adopts a narrower focus. It examines the activities that UN support enables CSOs to undertake and situates these activities within theoretical expectations regarding the role of civil society in post-authoritarian contexts. In doing so, the study prioritizes empirical description and analytical alignment rather than causal evaluation of democratic impact.

In this study, democracy promotion refers to support provided by external actors, including states and international organizations, aimed at advancing democratic development in a particular country (Burnell, 2008). The broader literature on democratization is one of the most extensively studied fields within political science, yet many aspects remain contested. In particular, the conditions under which democracy becomes fully consolidated remain debated. Restoring democracy is one challenge, while consolidating it into a stable political system represents another. As a result, democratic transitions follow diverse trajectories, with some regimes experiencing stagnation or even democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Diamond, 1997; Schedler, 1998; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). While existing studies examine different stages of democratization, this research focuses specifically on the transition phase.

Following O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986), the transition stage refers to the immediate period during which authoritarian rule is replaced by democratic governance. This period involves the gradual introduction of democratic principles and institutional practices. In this study, the transition stage is understood more broadly to include the early years of democratic deepening before clear signs of consolidation emerge. Democratic systems are often fragile during this stage, making it a particularly important period for political development. Many institutional and political challenges remain unresolved, and early developments can shape the long-term trajectory of the political system. Consequently, scholars have devoted significant attention to explaining the factors that influence democratization processes across regions and historical periods (Merkel, 2004; Evans & Whitefield, 1995).

In the contemporary international system, international organizations play an increasingly visible role in political processes, including democracy promotion. Support for democratization has become an important objective for both established democracies and international organizations. This engagement is partly motivated by the challenges faced by states undergoing political transition. First, political elites in newly transitioning systems often lack experience with democratic institutions, as these systems represent a significant departure from previous authoritarian structures. In some cases, emerging elites may also attempt to shape new institutions to serve their own interests (Schedler, 1998; Bermeo, 2016). Second, citizens in newly democratizing societies may have high expectations for rapid political change while lacking full familiarity with democratic rights, institutions, and responsibilities (Schedler, 1998; Diamond, 1997).

In this context, international organizations such as the UN can play a supportive role. As external actors, they can act as relatively neutral partners while providing technical expertise, resources, and experience drawn from other political transitions. Through such support, international organizations may help local actors establish realistic priorities and strengthen democratic institutions. One increasingly common strategy is the empowerment of CSOs. By supporting CSOs through funding, training, and technical assistance, international organizations seek to strengthen local actors capable of promoting democratic participation and accountability.

It is almost becoming a consensus in democracy literature that a strong civil society is a necessary tool for both successful transition and democratic consolidation. CSOs can contribute to democratic development by holding elected officials accountable, advocating for citizens' rights, and encouraging broader political participation (Joyner, 1999; Borzyskowski & Kartal, 2021; Kamstra & Knippenberg, 2014). In this sense, civil society constitutes a key stakeholder in shaping democratic governance. Strengthening CSOs during the early stages of democratization may therefore support democratic deepening and institutional development.

In some cases, mobilized civil society has even played a direct role in challenging authoritarian regimes, as seen in movements such as the Arab Spring. And when democratic restoration occurs, civil society often continues to shape the political environment by promoting participation, accountability, and institutional oversight (Putnam, 1993; Diamond, 1999; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Carothers, 2007). However, strong civil societies do not emerge automatically. Citizens must be informed about political processes, possess access to civic education, and have channels for engaging with public institutions. These conditions require time to develop and are often absent under authoritarian rule. As a result, external actors—including states and international organizations such as the UN—frequently provide support aimed at strengthening civil society capacity and enabling CSOs to contribute more effectively to democratization processes (Kamstra & Knippenberg, 2014).

1.1. Research Problem

Building on the foregoing discussion of democracy promotion, political transition, and civil society engagement, this study turns to a more focused empirical puzzle concerning the implementation of UN democracy assistance in democratic transition. The puzzle of this research is to explore how UN democracy support is translated into concrete civil society activities in The Gambia following the 2016 political transition. Specifically, the study aims to

investigate the activities that UN support has enabled CSOs to carry out in practice, and how these activities align with theoretical perspectives on democratic deepening in post-authoritarian settings.

Accordingly, the research question guiding the study is: How has United Nations (UN) democracy assistance been translated into democratic activities by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in The Gambia since the 2016 political transition, and how do these activities align with theoretical expectations regarding democratic deepening? The theoretical expectations are drawn from democracy promotion and civil society theories, which posit that supporting civil society actors can foster democratic deepening through participation, accountability, and institutional strengthening in post-transition settings (Diamond, 1999; Putnam, 1993; Edwards, 2014; Schedler, 1999; Carothers, 2010; Fukuyama, 2014; et al). And The Gambia represents a relevant case due to its recent democratic transition in 2016.

In attempting to answer the research question, the study applies a methodological approach of interview of nine informants of CSO leaders and a UN official, and used UN reports and documents to investigate these relationships. The study builds on the theoretical grounds of understanding the UN empowerment of civil society in The Gambia. With the revelations from the interviews, the research can provide empirical evidence in discussing the mechanisms around this relationship and by extension develop on the theoretical framework. The research finds out that the primary support UN provides to CSOs is through funding their democratization initiative projects, training schemes for capacity building, institutional support, and expanding their networking and relevance. In turn, the CSOs could carry out democratic functions of serving as school of democracy to the public and watchdog capacity to institutional powers. These support mechanisms are offered when the CSOs request for support in implementing their projects or sometimes UN propose to partner with CSOs for conducting certain activities. At the same time, the study highlights how administrative procedures and access constraints how this support is used in practice.

In other words, the study shows that UN support enables CSOs in The Gambia to carry out key democracy-related activities, particularly in the areas of civic education, and government oversight. These efforts help citizens engage with democratic institutions and promote accountability, strengthening everyday democratic participation towards ongoing successful transition. The Gambia represents a useful case for examining international democracy support in a context of recent political transition. Following the end of more than two decades of

authoritarian rule in 2016, the country has experienced a process of democratic opening in which civil society and international actors have played visible roles. In this sense, The Gambia shares similarities with other post-authoritarian contexts where external support aims to strengthen local democratic institutions through cooperation with CSOs.

The paper is structured over six Chapters. The following Chapter 2 examines background of the study and the relevant literature on the discourse. Chapter 3 then discusses the theoretical framework of the study with a breakdown of the relationship of the independent and dependent variables. Chapter 4 explains the research design—the methodological approaches implied, with the description of the data collection methods, sampling, and case selection. Chapter 5 presents and analyzes the data, thereby revealing the mechanisms around the phenomenon. The final Chapter 6 discusses findings of the research and draws conclusions, with the ethical issues and limitations of the research also discussed.

2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews existing literature on democratization, civil society, and international democracy promotion, with particular attention to the role of the UN. The purpose of the review is not to provide an exhaustive account of all factors influencing democratic transition or consolidation, but to identify theoretical perspectives that are relevant for understanding how external support may enable civil society activities in post-authoritarian contexts. The chapter therefore situates the present study within broader debates while also clarifying the specific analytical focus adopted. The literature review is in two folds. It merges Democracy Promotion literature with central focus on UN's perspective, and that of CSOs' roles in democratization processes. In this way, the study captures the state of art in this domain and empirical studies therein albeit the research topic for better positioning of the paper in scholarly sphere.

2.1. Democracy Promotion

Democracy Promotion industry is widely growing, with the literature equally attracting considerable attention in democracy studies. And democracy promotion itself, has slowly grows into being a core value in international affairs, dominating the agendas of foreign aids allocation by advanced democracies as well as leading international organizations.

In discussing democracy promotion as a world value, while earlier scholarship argued that democracy had become deeply embedded as an international norm (McFaul, 2004), more recent research confirms that democratic principles continue to structure international expectations of political legitimacy, even as their implementation remains uneven and increasingly contested (Zürn et al., 2012; Hyde, 2011; Baudry, P., 2016). Recent data indicate that international support for democracy-related activities remains substantial, even if it is not reported as a single aid category. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data show that official development assistance allocated to governance and civil society programs—including democracy promotion, human rights, and civic participation—consistently accounted for a significant share of total aid flows throughout the late 2010s (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2021). Within this broader category, more targeted assessments suggest that core democracy support also remained considerable, with European donors collectively providing several billion US dollars annually for democracy-related assistance during the 2010s (Youngs et al., 2022). These figures indicate that democracy-related support continues to occupy a notable place in international aid portfolios.

Holding democratic elections is perhaps the most significant sign of democratic transition that lays foundations for a change from authoritarianism. To Halperin (1993) when people attempt to hold free and fair elections and establish a constitutional democracy, the United States and the international community should not only assist but should "guarantee" the result. Those measures should be institutionalized in organizations like the UN and the Organization of American States (OAS), which would be responsible for carrying out missions to ensure the success of constitutional democracy (Halperin 1993: p105). In such, External actors—be it states, NGOs, or international institutions' legitimacy and practice of promoting democracy has increased in the last two decades on solid grounds that "people have a right to democracy has gained support" (McFaul, 2004: p155).

The leading actors of democracy promotion are western democratic states such as the United States, Sweden, Germany; International Organizations of UN and European Union (EU); Regional blocs and NGOs. However, most at times, states offer democracy aid through UN programs around the globe. In this regard, the well-established actors are the UN and EU. The United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) was established in 2005 as the only UN entity with a dedicated mandate to support democratization. Since its inception, UNDEF has grown significantly: by the late 2010s, it had received over USD 200 million in voluntary contributions from more than 40 member states and had supported over 800 projects in more

than 120 countries, primarily targeting civil society organizations engaged in democratic governance, human rights, and participation-oriented initiatives (UNDEF, 2021).

2.1.1. United Nations (UN) Democracy Promotion

In the international community, UN champions democracy promotion in the developing world. Even though, the word “democracy” does not appear in the UN Charter (Borzyskowski and Kartal 2021), Newman (2004) buttresses that the span of UN’s activities in this area is huge and the range of issues the organization must grapple with in undertaking this demanding work is also vast. The activities range from technical assistance in drafting and implementing election laws to nation-building based on democratic governance (Newman 2004: p196). Borzyskowski and Kartal (2021) argue that UN does not promote any form of democracy since there is no agreement among member states on the ideal model of democracy. However, UN promotion of national elections renders electoral democracy as the smallest common denominator among member states and on obvious grounds that it is difficult to envision democracy without elections. The emphasis on elections can also be referenced to UN agreements going back to the 1948 call for “periodic and genuine elections” which is regularly re-affirmed by UN member states in their biennial UN General Assembly resolutions (Borzyskowski and Kartal 2021: p6-7).

Ponzio (2004) argues that along with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Office for Project Services, the UN Development Fund for Women, the UN Volunteers, the UN Capital Development Fund, the UN Centre for Human Settlements, and the UN Secretariat departments dealing with political affairs, economic and social affairs, and peacekeeping, the UNDP made promoting democratic governance a core operational activity in the 1990s (Ponzio 2004: p208-209). He further buttresses that the UNDP’s approach to democracy assistance—be it support for electoral management bodies and parliaments or facilitating constitutional reforms and decentralization processes—can be labelled primarily as “long-term” and “developmental”, giving primacy to building indigenous governing capacity (Ponzio 2004: p208-209). This often positions the entity’s efforts stand in contrast to short term interventions associated mainly with political efforts to stabilize a country and build the foundations for recovery and peace. As a result, “the UNDP’s contributions to democracy-building rarely capture significant media coverage and public interest, in a manner comparable to that received, for example, by many UN electoral assistance missions in post conflict environments” (Ponzio 2004: p208-209)

Conversely, the literature has done a great deal in exploring UN electoral Assistance. In fact, it is the most widely covered and studied area of UN democracy promotion. It is usually termed as the major indicator for external support for democracy and perhaps the most common form of UN democracy promotion. However, different studies approach the phenomenon from different angles. To Lührmann (2015) UNEA aims to enhance quality of and public trust in elections. Both outcomes are potentially conducive to democratization, and at the same time, citizens' trust in the clean management of elections is important for democratic legitimacy. Therefore, UN presence and activities to a large extent contribute to this trust. However, the question of UNEA effectively reaching its desired outcomes and whether such outcomes lead to democratization, seems to be somewhat dependent on the behavior of incumbent and elected political regimes (Lührmann, 2015: p175). Furthermore, she views that electoral assistance can both help authoritarian rulers to improve their legitimation strategy and may also contribute to democratization processes (Lührmann, 2015: p174).

On the bright side, the findings of Dietrich and Wright (2015) suggest several insights into the relationship of foreign aid, democratic transition, and consolidation in Africa in general. They argue that as economic aid is said to be a catalyst for transitions to multiparty regimes, democracy aid stabilizes multiparty regimes and decreases the incidence of electoral misconduct, which they interpret as increasing horizontal accountability. Importantly, the two observed that neither of these outcomes may necessarily threaten incumbent governments in institutionalized multiparty regimes (Dietrich and Wright 2015). However, their studies find little evidence that either economic or democracy aid improves competitiveness of the opposition, which is a necessary condition for a change of government. This, therefore, suggests that democracy promotion primarily occurs through government-led political reform channels (Dietrich and Wright 2015: p232). Although this study does not focus specifically on the UN, it is relevant for the present analysis as it highlights general mechanisms through which external democracy assistance may influence domestic political actors. These insights help situate UN democracy support within the broader literature on international democracy promotion.

2.2. Civil Society Support

Civil society empowerment as a form of democracy promotion is equally taking shape now more than ever. The literature in the domain covers a wide area therein, ranging from conceptualizing the concept, the roles and procedures, as well as challenges of CSO support.

To Borzyskowski and Kartal (2021), this type of democracy support is more recent than others and has only been institutionalized in 2005 with the formation of the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF). However, the initiative has significantly grown since then. In between 2005 and 2020, UNDEF has reportedly provided support to more than 120 countries with assistance total of some 180 million dollars (Borzyskowski and Kartal, 2021). These UNDEF projects usually last two years with varying grants amount of between \$100,000 and \$300,000 USD to seven major intervention areas of; strengthening civil society capacity for interaction with government, community activism, women, youth, media, rule of law and human rights, as well as knowledge tools (Rich 2010). UNDEF initiative strongly adheres to the notion that democracy does not only depend on strong state institutions and elections but also “needs a strong civil society” (Borzyskowski and Kartal, 2021: p12-13)

In discussing civil society as a public sphere, Edwards (2014) argues that such ideas could be traced back to Aristotle, who views a disposition in seeking each other’s company and forming political friendships to search the common good as a characteristic of all good citizens. Although, there is a disagreement in ancient Greece style as public sphere, since only certain people are termed qualified citizens (Edwards 2014; p67). However, the public sphere is important contemporary political affairs because dialogue politics offers an important route, if not the only route, in reaching a legitimate normative consensus around a plurality of interests and positions, assuming certain conditions such as equality of voice and access and a minimum of censorship so that the relevant information is available to all, are met (Edwards 2014; p71). This concept of civil society as a public sphere provides a useful lens for examining how the UN democracy support enables CSOs to facilitate participation, dialogue, and access to information in post-2016 The Gambia.

Edwards (2014) further argues that “civil society is simultaneously a goal to aim for, a means to achieve it, and a framework for engaging with each other about ends and means” (Edwards 2014; p129). As these three forms face toward each other and somehow integrate their different perspectives into a mutually supportive framework, then the idea of civil society becomes “a great deal about the course of politics and social change and serve as a practical framework for organizing both resistance and alternative solutions to both social and economic problems” (Edwards 2014; p130). Edwards’ analysis also showcases linkages to different schools of thought in establishing various perspectives of ‘the civil society’ phenomenon. As he explains, theories of the good society help to keep our gaze on the goals and challenges that motivate the search for freedom and human progress; while theories of associational life help to explain how

to meet these challenges through the medium of non-state action, which always necessary but not sufficient; and theories of the public sphere, on the other hand, connect the two together by providing a framework for argument and negotiation social goals and the strategies required to meet them (Edwards 2014; p130).

Similarly, civil society being, in Henderson's (2002) words, "more than a romanticized concept" —a vibrant civil society is a necessary condition for democracy, is strongly established in the literature (see, for example, Hyden, 1997; Inglehart, 1997; Kenneth, 1997; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Putnam, 1993; de Tocqueville, 1969: cited in Henderson, 2002). Henderson (2002) buttresses that civic groups are related to democratic stability in two main ways. Internally, they promote cooperation, solidarity, public-spiritedness, and trust; and externally, they aggregate interests and articulate demands for ensuring the government's accountability to its citizens. Some scholars argue that this dense infrastructure of groups plays a vital role to make democracy work (Putnam, 1993; cited in Henderson, 2002: p139–40).

Moreover, Kamstra and Knippenberg (2014) argue that supporting NGOs in stimulating democratization is a prominent strategy among donors of international development aid. This strategy is deeply rooted in a normative conception of the merits of civil society: "In the eyes of many donors and recipients, and even of many democratic theorists, the idea that civil society is always a positive force for democracy, indeed even the most important one, is unassailable"; with its desirable functions of serving as a check on state power, helping include the poor and marginalized, and educating citizens on the norms and values of democracy (Kamstra and Knippenberg, 2014: p583). The analysis of their studies was based on Tocqueville notion of civic associations being characterized as "schools of democracy", with educational, communicative, representational, and cooperative roles. Admitting that their study somehow corroborates with Democracy-promoting NGOs being frequently criticized for not practicing what they preach as they found none of them simultaneously having strong channels of communication with the state and the citizens, or even directly representing the voice of ordinary citizens (Kamstra and Knippenberg, 2014). However, the two's study found that "Ghanaian NGOs perform different versions of the theoretical roles, with different organizational characteristics" and help to understand that "NGOs do not necessarily need to practice what they preach" by first assessing how democratic the NGOs in their sample are, before addressing the question of how that affects their ability of performing democratic roles (Kamstra and Knippenberg, 2014: p601).

Similarly, the literature also establishes civil society's "watchdog role" to state power where citizens hold the government accountable for their actions and inactions. In discussing different types of accountabilities of state power, Mechkova, Lührmann and Lindberg (2018) term Diagonal accountability reflecting to the extent at which civil society and media actors constrain governments either indirectly through providing information for and as well enhancing the effectiveness of, other accountability actors, or directly by putting pressure on them (Goetz and Jenkins 2005; cited in Mechkova, Lührmann and Lindberg, 2018). They stress that a robust civil society plays a critical role in holding governments accountable beyond elections (Besley 2006; Johnston 2005; Peruzzotti and Smulowitz 2006; cited in Mechkova, Lührmann and Lindberg, 2018); and CSOs are important for increasing the political awareness and impact of their members (Lipset et al. 1956; cited in Mechkova, Lührmann and Lindberg, 2018: p3). In the same vein, Grimes (2012) examines whether the strength of civil society affects corruption using panel country data of which the results corroborate the findings of existing case studies; "a vibrant civil society mitigates corruption but only provided that conditions such as political competition, press freedom, and government transparency exist in the country" (Grimes, 2012). This insight highlights the relevance of examining civil society activities, especially those aimed at accountability and transparency, within post-transition contexts.

Conversely, the literature also covers the downsides of CSO's development and democratic roles. Internally, findings on some operational manners by virtue of the nature of their existence reveals some issues regarding the effective carrying out of their duties. Henderson (2002) stresses CSO's inefficiency considering "tragedy of the commons" or the "prisoner's dilemma" theories, as it is often characterized to be in the collective interests of all but the self-interest of none to contribute to the general welfare. This renders building civil society a collective action dilemma, and one on a grander scale than most other projects that involve cooperation (Henderson, 2002). They reveal that "the large number of individuals working for Western foundations as well as within the domestic NGO community ensures that no one individual, by implementing a particular policy or grant project, can drastically alter the direction of civic development in Russia" (Henderson, 2002: p145) As a result, Russian NGOs are often responding to U.S. formed agendas, problems, and needs instead of setting their own agenda. "This encourages NGOs to reflect U.S. priorities rather than "objective" Russian NGO needs" (see, for example, Mendelson & Glenn, 2000; Sperling, 1998, 1999; cited in Henderson, 2002: p155). While this dynamic can help explain potential tensions between international donors

and CSOs, this study does not treat the theory as its main analytical framework. Instead, it uses the concept mainly to highlight possible coordination challenges and differing priorities between actors. The empirical analysis focuses more broadly on how UN support is delivered and used by CSOs in practice.

Externally, CSO's are also receiving many challenges regarding restrictions from governments that are developing concerns among scholars and practitioners of democracy promotion. Christensen and Weinstein's (2013) studies found that increased international spending on democracy promotion activities is now being countered by restrictions on the amount and for what purposes NGOs can accept foreign funds. At the time of the "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, Thomas Carothers also identified a "backlash" against international NGOs and foreign funding for local organizations (Christensen and Weinstein, 2013: p78).

Likewise, Dupuy, Ron and Prakash (2016) also stress that rising levels of controlling NGO finance legislation are retarding the sector's global growth and "undermining policy optimism about civil society's ability to further economic development, support democracy, and spread liberal norms" (Dupuy, Ron and Prakash, 2016: p306). Instead, the Western initiative of global civil society promotion rather faces growing government opposition in those recipient countries. The three further argue that promoting human rights, democracy, and development can appear politically threatening for incumbents, and so makes sense to construct barriers against them in finding ways to contain the "domestic political challenges posed by foreign-funded civil society" (Dupuy, Ron and Prakash, 2016: p306). Nonetheless, their evidence does not suggest that governments oppose civil society promotion in essence, but rather they are opposed to the initiative through foreign aid especially considering domestic political competition (Dupuy, Ron and Prakash, 2016).

In sum, the reviewed literature highlights multiple ways in which civil society may contribute to democratic development, including civic education, interest articulation, oversight activities, and public engagement. At the same time, the literature also points to important limitations, including the difficulty of assessing impact and the risks associated with external funding. This study builds on these insights and draws on the literature to identify theoretically relevant activities and uses them as an analytical lens for examining UN-supported CSO activities in The Gambia. Moreover, while the literature attributes a wide range of democratic functions to civil society, this study focuses specifically on civic education and oversight-oriented activities,

as these functions are both theoretically prominent and empirically observable in the context of UN-supported CSOs in The Gambia.

2.3. The Gap

Indeed, Democracy promotion literature has quite covered an extensive area. From conceptualizing the phenomenon, different scholars articulated the term well even whereas there is a variation in definition and terms used—democracy support, promotion, export, or enforcement. Although some studies focus on how the issue is taking shape in becoming a global norm, others question the type of democracy being promoted by which actor. The literature has also well explored the international organizations dimension of democracy promotion especially that of the UN, which is central to this study, from the institutional foundations created by the entity in encouraging the cause to the processes through which it directly and indirectly involves itself in.

While some studies emphasize the positive role of international support for civil society—arguing that external funding and capacity-building can strengthen participation, accountability, and democratic engagement—other scholars highlight potential downsides. These include the risk of creating dependency on external donors, weakening local ownership, and encouraging organizations to align their activities with donor priorities rather than local needs. As a result, there is an ongoing debate in the literature about whether international support ultimately strengthens or constrains the development of CSOs. By examining how UN support is used by CSOs in The Gambia, this study provides empirical insight into how these dynamics unfold in practice during democratic transition.

Despite extensive literature on civil society and democracy promotion, relatively little empirical work examines how UN democracy support is translated into concrete civil society activities at the organizational level, particularly in post-authoritarian contexts. Existing studies often focus on democratic outcomes or donor strategies, leaving a gap in our understanding of how supported CSOs perceive, utilize, and implement international assistance. This study addresses this gap by providing a descriptive and theoretically informed analysis of UN-supported civil society activities in The Gambia following the 2016 transition.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter focuses on a specific relationship within the broader democratization process: the relationship between UN support and CSO capacity and activities. Rather than theorizing the full causal chain from international support to democratic consolidation, the framework limits its analytical scope to examining how UN support enable CSO activities in practice that democratic studies associate with democratic deepening.

The study develops on the theoretical standpoint that not only institutional frameworks but also a strong civil society is needed for democracy building (Joyner 1999; Borzyskowski & Kartal 2021). When institutions constrain the ruling elites from arbitrary acts, a strong civil society serves as a watchdog to those norms and mount pressure on the government in demanding rights, freedoms, and justice. It is obvious that a transformation from an authoritarian regime to democracy is a complex process that requires a lot of elements in place and performance from different actors of which CSOs is no exception of. Democratic restoration happens in an undemocratic setting, which means the previous system in place is not familiar with functioning in a democratic manner. To change such a system requires a significant reform on nearly all sectors of state apparatus which is often complicated and involves an array of several actors holding their ends of the bargain.

Left to the institutions alone, the task becomes almost impossible, since institutional norms and procedures are put in place by the governing laws and policies but upholding them to the latter is done by people in the capacities of public servants and private sector to some extent. And as no new democratic government replaces the entire public servants from the old regime, some elements of the former procedures persist to exist in current system, flushing away of which requires some external pressures. This is where the civil society comes in as a major stakeholder in democratization processes that possess the ability of pushing newly restored democracies to uphold the democratic principles. Unlike the internal actors who might have an invested interest in shaping the newly established procedures towards achieving their ends, civil society could be termed as a distant entity from the state whose efforts are directed towards constraining state arbitrary rule of favoring a few politicians. This renders a responsibility of keeping a young democracy at edge partly hanging on the shoulders of CSOs.

Building on this standpoint, the study further theorizes that, for CSOs to be effective in carrying out their democratic functions, they need external support to a certain degree (Kamstra and Knippenberg, 2014). For the obvious reasons mentioned earlier about newly democratic

regimes, CSOs equally find it difficult to maneuver in newly set up democratic systems. Moving from a usually tensed environment of authoritarian regimes where their actions are censored or even their existence being suppressed in totality, CSOs are usually weak from the onset. As a result, democratic restoration also means creating an environment for building up strong foundation for effective CSOs in a country. At this stage, CSOs lack the necessary resources and sometimes even the expertise to be able to effect any meaningful democratic change.

Without external intervention, it will be almost impossible to execute projects such as civic education and political sensitizations. In the same vein, such intervention cannot come from the state as that will not only jeopardize the CSO efforts but will defeat the whole purpose of serving as a watchdog to the state. Similarly, the private sector alike could sometimes be critical about supporting initiatives that might not serve their interest. However, the international organizations in this respect seem to be the most appropriate entity for CSOs support as they showcase very little interest other than promoting democratic principles in this context. In this way, the UN being the champion of global democracy promotion in the world, the study views the need for UN democracy support through civil society empowerment necessary for a successful democratic transition.

Figure 1.

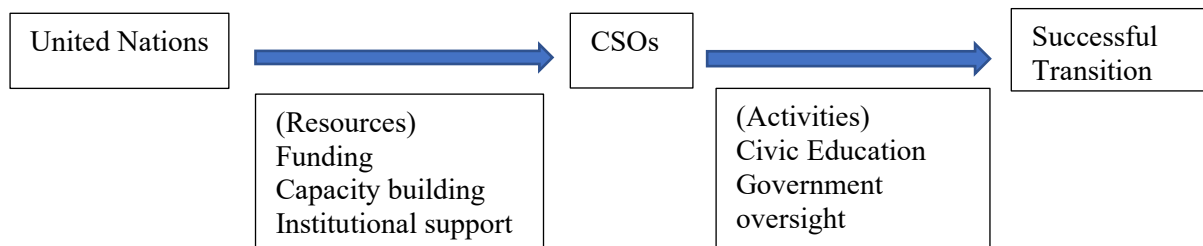


Figure 1. illustrates the interlinks of how successful democratic transition is achieved using theoretical grounds of this study. The framework, however, excludes other contributing factors such as strong institutions, and focuses empirically on this analytical relationship: UN support to CSO capacity and activities to deliver Successful transition. When democracy restoration happens in a country, which occurred in December 2016 in The Gambia, institutions are reformed to reflect democratic tendencies. And since democracy is fragile in the beginning, it needs strong actors both within the state apparatus—to uphold norms and principles, and external—to keep the state under check and insert pressure for democratic virtues. A vibrant

civil society is a necessity for the latter. As explored in this study, the CSOs' role here is more of external approach where they supplement the institutional efforts in the processes.

The international organizations alike, particularly UN play a role at this initial stage. From the model, the UN provides resources in the form of funding, capacity building and institutional support to CSOs which enable CSOs to effectively carry out democratic functions such as civic education and government oversight activities in contributing to successful transition. The study reveals the empirical findings around this relationship by disentangling the mechanisms through which the relationship works. While the study does not attempt to reveal empirical evidence on the causal relation of CSO roles in driving successful democratic transition, it, however, links how a strong civil society subsequently contribute to the process through the democratic roles they play as supported by the theoretical framework discussed here.

The research also follows a theory development approach where the study is carried out with some knowledge about the themes in the beginning but leaves room for the empirical findings to further reveal more themes after the data collection. The study used this approach because from the literature, two mechanisms were discovered connecting to the theoretical framework—Resources and Functions. The study remains open to identifying additional themes, variations, and contextual dynamics that emerge inductively from the empirical findings during data analysis. This renders theory development occurring through refining and elaborating existing concepts in view of observed CSO activities, rather than through testing predetermined hypotheses.

The study investigates how the support reaches CSOs by analyzing Resources which come in the form of financial assistance, training and capacity-building, and technical support. Under Functions theme, the study outlines the democratic roles CSOs play in The Gambia—serving as school of democracy to the citizenry and watchdog to the state, which show tendencies of contributing to successful democratic transition. Civic education and watchdog-oriented activities are widely identified in the literature as core mechanisms through which civil society is expected to support democratization, by enhancing citizen participation and strengthening accountability respectively (Putnam, 1993; Diamond, 1999; Schedler, 1999; Edwards, 2014).

However, the study further theorizes that there are more mechanisms through which UN and CSOs' relations operate—Mode of Intervention and Challenges—which shall be further revealed in the empirical analysis. The paper will therefore return to theoretical discussion after the analysis of the findings to further discuss the discovered themes. Yet, for the purpose of

unpacking the themes under this section ahead of analysis for easy follow, an overview of these themes is given here too. The study investigates how the support is rendered by analyzing Mode of Intervention which reveals how the partnership between the donor—UN and CSOs are built and developed over time, as well as the ways they interreact with one another. Either of the parties reach out to initiate partnership, however, other important mechanisms within this realm to be later revealed by the empirical evidence shall be discussed in detail thereafter. The study also discusses Challenges as a theme under analysis even though this theme is not necessarily a mechanism but rather an issue that runs through all other mechanisms. Challenges here basically refer to obstacles of the democracy aid provision in general that hinder the outcomes of the support. It could be faced by both parties—the donors (UN) and the recipients (CSOs) during their interaction with one another which in one way or the other either affect the nature of the projects or the impact they generate.

In the end, CSOs being supported by UN towards democracy building activities could therefore be interpreted as UN contributing to building a vibrant civil society as in the case of The Gambia. The findings of this study on the mechanisms of UN support to CSOs in The Gambia shall reveal how powerful CSOs later become towards effectively playing their democratic roles. However, the study will not go further to establish the causal relationship of CSOs roles and democratization but links the tendencies of their functions to subsequently contributing to successful democratic transition. This viewpoint is guided by the Joyner (1999); Borzyskowski & Kartal (2021) theoretical reasoning discussed earlier that a vibrant civil society is a need for democracy building. With the study revealing two key roles that somewhat shape the democratic transition in the country indicates the level of how vibrant the civil society has become in The Gambia.

Building on the literature discussed above, this study derives a set of expectations regarding how UN support to CSOs should function in a post-authoritarian context such as The Gambia. A broad consensus in the literature suggests that civil society plays a crucial role in democratic deepening, particularly through functions such as civic education, advocacy, and holding state actors accountable. At the same time, international support from UN is expected to enhance these roles by providing resources—funding, training, and technical support. Based on these perspectives, the study proceeds with the following expectations: First, UN support is expected to primarily take the form of financial assistance, capacity-building, and institutional support, which enable CSOs to expand their activities and organizational reach. Second, CSOs receiving such support are expected to engage in activities associated with democratic deepening,

particularly civic education and oversight functions aimed at promoting political participation and accountability respectively. These expectations guide the empirical analysis and assess whether the observed activities and mechanisms align with these theoretically derived expectations, and where they diverge.

4. Research Design

This chapter outlines the methodological approach and research design employed in the study. Given the descriptive and exploratory nature of the research question, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews and using relevant reports and documents. The aim is not to establish causal relationships, but to examine how UN support is perceived by CSOs in practice to enable democratic activities towards successful transition in the post-2016 Gambian context.

4.1. Methodology

The study carries out a qualitative research methodology as it finds that to be most appropriate by virtue of the research question of the study. The research naturally situates itself in qualitative spectrum as one of the methods that focuses on a particular context—democratic transition in The Gambia, thereby lending the research to an idiographic style of analysis (Gerring, 2017). With this methodology approach, the study focuses on describing and analyzing the forms of civil society activities enabled by UN democracy promotion in The Gambia following the 2016 democratic restoration, how such support is utilized in practice, and how these activities relate to theoretical expectations regarding civil society's role in democratic deepening. The study is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with representatives of selected CSOs and one UN official. The interviews are best understood as qualitative elite interviews, in which respondents are treated as knowledgeable informants regarding organizational practices, funding arrangements, and activity portfolios.

However, it is difficult to attribute success directly to the UN given the research design employed in this study. The qualitative and exploratory nature of the research focuses on describing and interpreting civil society activities associated with UN democracy support rather than measuring causal effects or isolating the UN's contribution from other domestic and international influences. CSOs often operate within complex environments involving multiple donors, state institutions, and societal actors; making it methodologically challenging to

determine whether observed activities or perceived changes can be attributed to UN support alone. Accordingly, the study does not seek to evaluate impact, but rather to examine how UN democracy support is translated into practice at the level of civil society engagement.

The research attempts to reveal the actions pulled by UN in the drive for empowering the civil society in The Gambia over the years, particularly from the latter stage of the authoritarian regime to the aftermath of democratic restoration of 2016. In this way, the mechanisms around such actions are investigated to understand UN democracy promotion through civil society empowerment and how they link to successful democratic transition in terms of improvement in the civil and political rights scores of recent times. Building on the viewpoint that civil society is a major stakeholder in democracy building that plays a vital role in placing checks on institutional powers (Joyner 1999; Borzyskowski & Kartal 2021; et al), this study generally provides insights for both the civil society's critical ability of keeping newly established democracy in order, and UN's role in support for building a strong civil society in the first place.

The four analytical themes—Resources, Functions, Mode of Intervention, and Challenges—discussed earlier, are used as descriptive categories that structure the empirical analysis. They capture, respectively, the types of support provided by the UN, the activities CSOs engage in, the ways in which such support is delivered, and the constraints shaping these activities. The themes are treated as organizing apparatuses that help link theoretical expectations to empirical observations. Nonetheless, as established in this study, UN support to CSOs in The Gambia is important, as it strengthens them in various ways through their democracy promotion initiatives. This in the end contribute to creating a vibrant civil society in the country that carry out two key democratic functions of school of democracy and watchdog capacity towards successful transition. By vibrant, the study refers to how active and effective a civil society is in contributing to democratization processes. This is determined by relying on anecdotal evidence of the various activities CSOs are seen to be carrying out which have tendencies of deriving democracy in a country to certain degree.

4.2. Data collection

The research conducts qualitative interviews as data collection method. Reflecting on the aims of the research, the study is interested in examining a particular concept—democracy promotion, through understanding the phenomenon in the form of the efforts of an entity—international organization, in an event—democratic transition, of a given country (van Manen,

1990 cited by Roulston & Choi, 2018). As a result, the study finds it most appropriate to employ qualitative interviews as primary data collection to focus on participants' experiences and obtain their detailed descriptions (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Additionally, the study draws on official UN reports and program documents to complement the interview data by providing information on how support programs are structured and implemented. In this way, the selected methods enable the study to fully explore the mechanisms as well as linking the independent variable—UN support, and dependent variable—vibrant civil society.

The study carries out an interview of nine participants of CSOs leaders and a UN official to understand the phenomenon. The interviews were semi-structured where two sets of interview guides were created, one for CSOs and the other for UN. The questions were open-ended, and the informants had the freedom to speak at length, after which follow-up questions were asked for further clarifications. As the researcher was not able to travel to Gambia due to global pandemic and limited time factor, all the interviews were carried out on digital platforms with most of them via Zoom and only two on WhatsApp. With their consent, all the interviews were recorded to be referred at for data analysis. However, all the informants were guaranteed unanimity that their identities will not be disclosed, and the recordings will not be shared.

The recordings were transcribed, and the information categorized under the themes developed by the researcher for analysis. Most of the interviewees (eight participants) are CSO leaders and the remaining one participant being a UN official. All the eight CSO informants hold top leadership roles in their organizations with three of them being co-founders of their organizations, and the UN informant is an official with vast experience of working with CSOs in various capacities at different UN agencies. All the CSO informants have over a decade experience of advocacy related works in The Gambia, with two over two decades. Similarly, the UN official interviewed also has over a decade experience of working with CSO related activities across different UN agencies such as UNDP and UNICEF. Interestingly, all the CSO informants are male while the UN informant being female.

The research intentionally selected more CSO leaders because a variety of experiences are expected from this category as they are the center of the research and understating their efforts and experiences matter the most to the study. These participants directly worked on numerous projects regarding democratization initiatives that were in one way or the other supported by UN. In such, they can reveal insights of both how UN efforts contribute to the dynamics of civil society push for democratization in the country as well as the mechanisms around the

subject matter. As for the UN official, is needed to provide the study with the donor perspective of international dimension of democracy promotion in general and UN support to CSOs for democratization processes in particular. The informant gave internal insights of UN initiatives of CSOs empowerment in building a vibrant civil society which could subsequently be linked to contributing to the overall successful transition in The Gambia.

The study focuses on CSOs that have been actively involved in political related issues in The Gambia from 2005 onwards. Although, the work of CSOs involvement in democratization, just like democratization process itself, is vast and require long period of time with traces of an array of elements combined overtime. As a result, one event might trigger a democratic restoration, but it is often hard to associate it to any single effort. However, the abovementioned timeframe is considered relevant to the study as nearly all CSOs whose efforts are widely noticed in the country's democratic transition contain large youth membership, who could not have been involved in any such initiatives prior to 2000.

Moreover, the study targeted all CSOs involved in democracy and political advocacy in The Gambia which is few (about 4) considering the environment has only been recently friendly for such activities. Nonetheless, the rest of the CSOs do not focus on democracy advocacy as their central area of intervention but do involve in democratic and political related activities, and the study included such organizations. Conversely, the research could have carried out a comparison of CSOs supported by UN and those that do not; but it turned out to be the case that, all the CSOs involved in democracy advocacy in The Gambia have in one way or the other partnered with the UN in implementing activities, which could be seen as a result of the tiny nature of CSO population in this realm and the widespread support offered by UN.

4.3. Sampling

The research carries out purposive sampling where the researcher identifies the active CSOs in the country's democratization processes and target their leadership for interviews as well as the senior UN officials that work on the agency's democracy promotion initiatives. Snowball sampling technique is also used as the interviewees later suggested other potential informants to the researcher and sometimes even provided contact details of the persons. The study uses purposive method because the sampled population here can be easily identified and found as the CSO leaders are popular in the country for their activities that take rounds on media platforms. The active CSOs in the interested period were identified through talking to people that are into advocacy works in the country and then the websites of these organizations were

visited to both understand their operations as well as their activities. The sample consists of CSOs that have received UN support and are active in areas related to civic education or oversight-oriented activities. The study does not claim to represent the full universe of CSOs operating in The Gambia, nor does it include organizations that receive support from other donors or no international support. This sampling strategy reflects the exploratory focus of the research question but limits the ability to make comparative claims.

However, it was easy to reach out to the CSO leaders and get them interviewed but the experience with getting UN officials was not a pleasant one. The study initially planned to interview two to three UN officials, but this was not possible because the researcher could not succeed even after several attempts. When reached out to the UN officials by sending emails requesting for interviews, the responses were that they have limited authorization to participate in such activities or need delegated authority to speak on behalf of the institution which took forever to get. Some even requested that the interview questions be shared with them and would then respond in writing. The questions were sent but still participation from their end was declined. It was until at the latter stage that the single interviewee came onboard.

Notwithstanding, the UN reports and program documents used helped here in supplementing the information provided by the UN official. The primary material used is the “*The Gambia National Development Plan 2018-2021*” published by the UNDP in collaboration with the government of The Gambia. Other materials include several reports available on UN websites regarding their work in the country, especially elements relating to the study—SDGs activities with CSOs. However, there were no accessible specific UN annual reports that indicates CSOs and activities funded, such information were collected in pieces from different reports and articles on the websites.

Overall, the methodological approach is designed to align closely with the research question by prioritizing descriptive analysis over causal inference. By clearly specifying what the data can and cannot support, the study maintains transparency and analytical rigor while providing insight into how UN-supported civil society activities are experienced at the organizational level. The CSOs included in this study can broadly be considered typical in terms of their functions and structures within The Gambia’s civil society landscape, particularly with regards to advocacy, civic education, and accountability-related activities. They are relatively well-established, visible, and professionally organized actors with direct engagement in UN democracy support initiatives. However, they are also atypical to a certain degree in terms of

focus, especially during the authoritarianism when they aspire for a regime change and had some radical tendencies in their approach. This reflects the study's purposive sampling strategy, which prioritized relevance to the research question rather than representativeness of all CSOs. Consequently, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all CSOs in The Gambia, but instead provide in-depth insight into the practices of CSOs most directly involved in supported democratization efforts. Equally, potential sources of bias and limitations related to interview-based data, sampling, and triangulation are acknowledged and discussed in detail in the concluding discussion chapter.

4.4. Case Selection

The Gambia was selected as a single case study due to its recent transition from long-standing authoritarian rule in 2016 and the subsequent expansion of international engagement aimed at supporting democratic deepening. The case provides an opportunity to examine how UN democracy support operates in a setting where civil society space has recently reopened, and the findings can be generalized to understanding democracy promotion in post-authoritarian contexts.

4.4.1. The Context of The Gambia

The Gambia is becoming a textbook example for successful democratic transition in the ongoing what Larry Diamond¹ will probably characterize as fourth wave of global democratization. The country went through a twenty-two yearlong authoritarian rule that began with a military coup in 1994. The regime highly underperformed in fundamental democratic practices, especially with indicators relating to protection of civil rights and freedoms (see Freedom House reports 2000-2016). However, the 2016 presidential elections brought about a regime change when a coalition of seven opposition political parties won the elections. The regime change brought transformations in the dynamics of political spectrum of the country for it is not only the first change of government through the ballot boxes in her political history, but it is also a remarkable experience for Gambians of all demographics united in finally ending an authoritarian rule. With the new regime's electoral promises, coupled with international support, hopes began to rise and expectations increased.

¹ In *The End of Third Wave and Global Future for Democracy*, Diamond (1997) describes the post-Soviet era as the end of the third wave of global democracy. Going by this notion, the argument here is that the current wave of global democratization wherein authoritarian regimes in mainly the developing world are being replaced with democracies could be termed as the fourth wave.

Whether the new government fulfilled its electoral promises is a topic for another discussion, but there is indeed a significant improvement in the democratic performance from 2016 onwards. The country's democratic scores such as indicators measuring civil liberty index, freedom from political killings and torture, freedom of expression, etc., from V-Dem and Freedom House to Democracy Index have significantly improved (see V-Dem and Freedom House reports 2010-2020). This brought the tiniest West African country on the spotlight for concerns about democratization in the current era and area of focus for successful transition. For example, the country afterwards attracts more democracy aid from the west and serves as a good sample for international research, such as direct budget support by EU in 2018 and Transparency International's 2017 afro barometer survey, respectively.

In the same vein, it also well gathers the ingredients for understanding different elements of successful democratic transition, most importantly how it unfolds overtime. For the simple fact that both the civil society and international support are undoubtedly essential to the democratization processes of The Gambia, this study investigates the relationship of the two to reveal the mechanisms surrounding it. The study takes this approach because the impacts of such initiatives are hard to measure and come much later. In essence, understanding UN CSOs empowerment and CSOs role in successful transition in The Gambia becomes both an interesting and a challenging study for democracy scholars. This renders the study to serve both as a big step towards better understanding the relevance of aid to civil society and civil society role in successful transition.

4.4.2. Why United Nations?

United Nations is a major donor to The Gambia in nearly all aspects of development. According to World Bank, UN agencies, together with IMF, EU, African Development Bank, and World Bank are the largest development partners to The Gambia (World Bank, 2021). As conventional in the donor world, partnering in development is largely directed to state where donors provide aid for funding of government projects or direct budget support sometimes. However, the need for providing support to civil society too is taking motion in the international donor world. Many international organizations, especially those with physical presence on the grounds of developing countries tend to not only extend their operations to support civil society projects in line with their intervention areas but even directly partner with CSOs in implementing their (International Organizations) own projects. In this regard, UN is one of the biggest supporters of CSOs in The Gambia. The different UN agencies in the country

both select CSOs as implementing partners as well as honor requests from CSOs when reached out for support. As a result, CSOs are both able to come up with programs and activities to address socio-political issues in the society and brought onboard by the different UN agencies in the implementation of SDGs in the country. All of which could contribute to CSOs effectively carrying out their democratic functions in The Gambia, especially in the crucial transition stage of the country's democratization processes.

5. Analysis

In this chapter, the paper begins with providing analytical framework as guiding tool for analysis of the findings as well as operationalizing civil society activities for objective measurement. The paper then presents the empirical findings primarily based on interview data, complemented by insights from UN reports where relevant. The data is analyzed using four major themes namely—Resources, Functions, Mode of Intervention, and Challenges. The paper generally summarizes the common trends found in the responses received and give examples in quotes where appropriate. However, throughout the analysis, the expressions are entirely developed on the views gathered from the interviews and the UN materials used. The chapter examines patterns in how support is utilized and discussed by informants and organizes these findings in line with the analytical framework discussed below.

5.1. Analytical framework

The study employs an analytical framework that links UN democracy support to observable CSO activities through two theoretically grounded themes: Resources and democratic Functions. The framework identifies and interpret how external democracy support is translated into concrete practices at the level of CSOs in achieving democratic transition. The first theme is Resources, and it captures how UN support reaches CSOs which includes financial assistance, training and capacity-building, and technical support. These resources are treated as enabling mechanisms that shape the types of activities CSOs can undertake. The analysis examines how interviewees describe the relationship between UN support and organizational practice. The second theme is Functions, and it is derived from the literature on civil society and democratic deepening. It focuses on two categories of activity emphasized in prior research: civic education and oversight-oriented activities. Civic education refers to activities aimed at increasing citizens' awareness of democratic rights, responsibilities, and

political processes. Oversight-oriented activities, on the other hand, refer to initiatives intended to monitor, scrutinize, or publicly question the actions of political authorities and institutions. These categories serve as sensitizing concepts that guide the interpretation of empirical material.

In sum, the two themes provide a structured lens for analyzing the empirical data. The framework allows the study to map how different forms of UN support are associated with particular types of CSO activities, and to assess whether these activities align with theoretical expectations regarding participation and accountability in post-transition contexts. In this way, the framework supports a descriptive and interpretive analysis that connects empirical observations to broader debates in the democratization literature.

5.1.1. Operationalization of Civil Society Activities

To examine how UN support relates to CSO activities, the study operationalizes civil society engagement through the two categories of activities that are frequently emphasized in the literature and observable in empirical material: civic education and oversight-oriented activities. This choice is grounded in established scholarship on civil society's contribution to democratization, which highlights its dual role in fostering citizen participation and strengthening accountability (Diamond, 1999; Edwards, 2014). Civic education is widely seen as a mechanism through which civil society cultivates democratic norms, political awareness, and participatory capacity among citizens, thereby expanding the social foundations of democracy. Oversight-oriented activities, in turn, correspond to the literature's emphasis on civil society as a countervailing force that monitors power, exposes abuses, and pressures institutions toward greater transparency and responsiveness (Grimes, 2012; Schedler, 1999). These mechanisms reflect two core dimensions of democratic deepening—participation and accountability—and provide analytically tractable categories for linking theory to observable practice.

5.2. Resources

Here, we examine the first dimension of the analytical framework—Resources, focusing on identifying how different forms of support shape the practical conditions under which CSOs operate. The primary form of support UN provides to CSOs in The Gambia is funding for their projects and activities. Funding is a major issue when it comes to advocacy in The Gambia. As a developing country where a good number of the population lives below poverty line, people

only struggle to meet the basic necessities of life. As much as activism could be in the hearts of patriotic citizens, without finance it is hard for any meaningful progress to be made, as nearly all activities will require some token of economic capital. By virtue of their existence, CSOs have limited sources of income to not only carry out projects but even run the affairs of the organization. As an independent entity of its own, it is impossible to expect state funding of CSOs unless the goal is to jeopardize the whole purpose of keeping the state on check for democratic operations. And for such a tiny economy that do not have Multi-National Corporations or any other form of big companies that could provide large budget for initiatives like that as part of their social cooperate responsibility, the private sector also becomes dormant in funding CSO projects. In the end, international organizations become the major donors to CSOs in The Gambia, with UN being the leaders.

The UN operations in The Gambia to a large extent, requires working with the civil society as most of the SDGs cannot be tackled only through engaging the state but the citizens equally (see UNDP AcclabGM 2020 Annual Report). In such, they partner with CSOs to implement projects and carry out certain activities in the country. This contributes to the successes of CSOs democratic initiatives both in terms of magnitude and scope. They could have their intended activities and proposals but with UN funding, the projects are materialized or are able to reach a wider coverage. When the CSO informants were asked if they would attribute the successes of the discussed projects to the UN funding, all of them agreed to give much credit to the UN. One of them puts it as follows:

Of course, funding is one of the biggest challenges that civil society organizations face in this country. And therefore, I mean this kind of ad hoc funding... I will call it ad hoc because election is a continuous process..., of course might not be able to, you know, address many issues, but have been definitely helpful in carrying out such kind of activities... I think that's what this kind of fundings are for, because usually it is voluntary, but then, at least people are motivated by stipend or, you know, not spending their money while giving their time... So funding is critical, and UN has been supportive on that to a large extent. (I4)

Additionally, the informants also mentioned that such funding packages extend to easing off the financial burden of running the organizations' offices. By cutting administrative costs from the funded projects, CSOs also depend on the funding packages to pay salaries, purchase office equipment, or pay office bills and utilities.

Another resource UN offers CSOs in The Gambia is training schemes for capacity building. Advocacy requires some level of education, experience and skills which are not entirely offered in the conventional schooling system. This is even much more critical for democracy advocacy where one must deal with different stakeholders that are often politically powerful and privileged in several ways. Therefore, to effectively carry out any meaningful democratic function, CSO members and staff need to have access to relevant information, understand how different actors interact in the political system, and be familiar with the appropriate and practical tools to achieve their ends (Edwards, 2014; Diamond, 1999). The UN provides different capacity building programs targeting different goals, ranging from developing leadership skills to political awareness to CSOs in the country. The training schemes are usually initiated by the UN and they higher either academic institutions or resource persons that could sometimes even come from abroad. A UN official responded to the question regarding other ways of UN support to CSOs in The Gambia by the following:

“At UNDP, we have accountability and leadership project and that simply support the civil society organizations to build their capacity on promoting democracy, good governance but also engaging with communities, different groups, vulnerable groups, people that are hard to reach, to ensure that they are also able to participate in the democratic process of the country. The specific project that I work on—transitional justice and human rights, we also very closely work with civil society organizations and grassroot organizations to ensure they are able to participate in the truth-seeking process of transitional justice as a whole. We also built on their capacity to really promote the TJ agenda—transitional justice agenda, the constitutional building agenda, and really, in governance, and respect for human rights. So yes, of course, there are so many organizations that the UN has been supporting in these regards.” (I9)

Over the years, the knowledge and skills gained from the training schemes have prepared the CSO leaders in The Gambia to the extent of effectively administering vibrant CSOs that could be said to have been instrumental in the successful democratic transition of The Gambia. The dissemination of knowledge and skills do not stop at that, the CSO leaders that undergo the UN training schemes continue to serve as instructors to further pass on the knowledge to the large membership of their respective organizations and beyond. In the end, it is fair to say, a well-informed civil society that challenges the state on the violation of their rights and understand their responsibilities, is the result (see Edwards, 2014; Diamond, 1999).

Moreover, the UN also provides administrative support to CSOs in The Gambia to operate as independent efficient entity in the socio-political system. Activism done at the individual level

where certain people with a particular public interest advocates for a cause is usually common and sometimes yield results but a well-coordinated advocacy mechanism, especially in driving a political change, requires a formation of a well-rounded establishment. Hence, CSOs are seen as the representation of civil society and the pursuants of the true public interest to some extent. However, that structural setup also comes with administration both in terms of human capital and office structures. As mentioned earlier, CSOs in The Gambia happened to be very financially constrained even though there might exist well talented and determined people with interesting ideas to drive political change in the country. Nonetheless, UN offers them administrative support in the form of office equipment, in addition to capacity building schemes previously discussed. This was illustrated by nearly all the CSOs informants interviewed and one of them expressed as follows:

“Other ways of support is more of institutional support... because you need capacity to grow and to deliver up to expectation. So based on that we have been working with UNFPA, and they have really been supportive when it comes to administrative costs, and also trying to see how the capacities of staff are enhanced.” (I1)

Evidently, these support mechanisms enable the CSOs to efficiently operate within a modern system and effectively play their roles in effecting a successful democratic change in The Gambia. The resources provided by UN facilitate CSOs to effectively carry out their activities thereby contributing to democratization processes. As a result, it is quite understandable for the informants to associate the successes of their projects to the UN support rendered to them. Hence, at this point, it can be established that support to the CSOs in The Gambia through providing resources is an important step towards building a vibrant civil society for democratization processes. These findings are consistent with theoretical perspectives that emphasize organizational capacity as a precondition for sustained civil society engagement.

5.3. Functions

Now, we turn to the second dimension of the analytical framework by analyzing the democratic functions reflected in CSO activities guided by the theoretical backgrounds and analyze how observed practices align with expectations regarding participation and accountability. The study reveals two key functions CSOs play in the democratization processes in The Gambia, and the UN strengthens the CSOs along this line in several ways. These are serving as a school of democracy to the public and watch dog to the government, all of which contribute to creating

a vibrant civil society that is politically aware and can challenge the state's undemocratic acts at different levels.

5.3.1. School of Democracy

Civic education is undoubtedly a prerequisite for a politically informed society in a democratic setting. For a country like The Gambia that has only 50.8% adult literacy rate from Knoema 2015 reports, quite a good number of citizens do not even understand their basic political rights and responsibilities. And for the mere fact of the realities of underdevelopment, especially in the areas of accessing necessities of life, a good number of citizens, particularly in the rural Gambia seem to be completely deprived from access to information and political opportunities. Over the years, CSOs efforts in democracy education through various projects of awareness campaigns, creating platforms for political participation, sensitizations on civic and political issues, and leadership training schemes; have done a great deal in closing this gap. The informants reveal that UN bodies have been helpful in strengthening CSOs along this direction by both providing funding for the various projects and capacity building on political advocacy. The funding alone is a critical part that makes the implementation possible or being able to reach a wider coverage and more relevant areas, for example the rural regions. In the end, they associate the successes of many projects and activities to the UN funding in most cases, as illustrated below.

“Yes, I would attribute the successes to UN funding because, generally, it is as a result of the financial support that some of those very many communities were able to be reached.” (I2)

In the same vein, UN also provides training schemes to CSO leaders on areas relating to pressing issues in the country—for example transitional justice program from 2017 to 2021, after which CSOs formulate projects and activities around to further disseminate the acquired knowledge down to the broader mass society. Most of the activities here were relating to Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRRC) and Constitutional Review Commission (CRC)—the two major democratic initiatives that dominated the transitional period in the country from 2017 to 2021. The TRRC was commission set up in 2018 to reveal the human rights violations of the former authoritarian regime where victims and perpetrators gave testimonies of their accounts of what happened on a national televised program. Through Transitional Justice Group, SCOs involved in research and giving recommendations to TRRC. The CRC on the other hand, came in response to the new regime's plans of creating a new constitution by collecting citizens' views on the then aspiring new constitution. The project took up the

initiative of nationwide consultations through several supportive activities such as townhall meetings in all parts of the country—urban and rural. They invite all stakeholders—including young people, women, and marginalized ethnic and religious groups, to give feedback on the processes of formulating new constitution. The Transitional Justice Group was arguably one of the most influential CSOs' participations in the early stages of The Gambia's democratic transition. And the CSO projects around these commissions were mainly geared towards involving the public in the developments of the two democratic transition projects. These cases therefore serve to contextualize the types of activities CSOs were involved in during key political processes in the country's democratic transition.

5.3.2. Watchdog capacity

If there is one aspect the CSOs have been very successful at in The Gambia's transitional period is serving as a watchdog to the state. Their role in keeping the government accountable, demanding for rights and freedoms, as well as putting checks on state undemocratic acts have undeniably contributed to shaping the current political spectrum of The Gambia. In 2021 alone, the CSOs challenged the state—the national assembly and Banjul City Council—in courts on issues they deemed unconstitutional, both of which cases have been ruled in their favor. The issues were that the members of the country's legislative body—house of the parliament, attempted to allocate to themselves 54-million-dalasi loan during budget preparations, and the mayor of the capital city—Banjul attempted to provide attestations for voter cards to residents of the city. Both cases severely attracted public reaction in criticism and the CSOs taking it upon themselves to fight for public interest and set the records straight was highly celebrated among the citizens. However, the UN's role in strengthening the civil society towards this function comes in different forms that are most at times indirect in nature.

First and foremost, capacity building is key here too. Equipping the CSOs with adequate knowledge and skills serve as a strong basis for preparing them in understanding citizens' rights and responsibilities as well as the right channels to achieving their goals. The UN also sponsor media programs and other activities that are used by CSOs as platforms to criticize undemocratic acts or scrutinize government policies. In this way, the CSOs engage the public in conversations on national issues through radio and television programs with open call-in segments, thereby creating platforms for public discussion and opinion formation. These media engagements extend CSO activities beyond organizational spaces and into the broader public sphere, allowing citizens to articulate concerns, contest ideas, and collectively reflect on

political developments. By facilitating dialogue between civil society actors and the wider population, such platforms contribute to participatory political culture and help normalize public deliberation as part of democratic life.

The activities described by informants correspond to civic education and oversight-oriented roles identified in democratic theory, though their presence alone does not indicate democratic deepening. However, CSOs conducted civic education campaigns that helped citizens understand democratic processes and participate in decision making in The Gambia. On the other hand, they keep the state in check by holding public officials and political institutions accountable for their actions. Therefore, these activities can be linked to CSOs contribution to successful transition in The Gambia.

5.4. Mode of Intervention

UN encounter with CSO in The Gambia in partnering to carry out democratic initiatives happens to be a two-way approach, either by reaching out to CSOs for implementing certain projects or accepting requests from CSOs sometimes. Generally, UN operates in manner where they have their thematic areas of intervention in every country for each calendar year (see UNDP The Gambia SDGs, 2020). That is to say that all UN agencies in the country have specific targeted goals of kind of projects they will be involved in or activities they will carry out in the year, which are of course broadly motivated by the SDGs. This is normally a long list that includes several things, but the focus of this study is democracy promotion initiatives and democracy related activities. CSOs on the other hand, also have their interest areas of intervention which usually varies widely, depending on the CSO at count and what opportunities are available or the issues that dominate public interest at the time. In most instances, after finalizing on the annual plans of activities to be carried out, UN agencies contact CSOs in The Gambia on the areas they would need partnership for implementation of projects, training schemes or other support packages available. A trend of this notion is noticed in all interviews of CSO leaders as expressed by one of them below; and the view is not contradicted by the UN perspective either.

“Most of the time, UN will have their own programmatic areas they will want their implementing partners to align their activities to. This is what is presented to them, and they fund those activities. These are of course, in line with their yearly activities or plans they have for that year.” (I5)

The information is usually communicated to National Youth Parliament and Tango—the umbrella body for all CSOs in the country, through which the interested organizations will develop concept papers and submit to the involved UN body. The UN will then select the ones they will work with, which could sometimes be more than one partner depending on the nature and size of the project. It has also been revealed to this study that, in some cases, organizations are directly contacted by the UN for partnership. This is usually because of experience of working relationship with such partners.

However, it is also possible for CSOs to request for funding for their projects or even administrative support from the UN. An example was given by one informant on the creation of the Transitional Justice Group, which was a setup formed for civil society involvement in TRRC and CRC.

“The Transitional Justice Group was definitely a CSO initiative. Ermm, we did it on our own because we felt it was important to have a body like that as a civil society. So, we did that on our own and later approached the UN for funding.” (I3)

This approach works when the initiative is in line with a UN thematic area or an interested activity on their list, if not, it is hard for such requests to be materialized. In instances where UN accepts to fund the project or partner with the organization on a particular initiative, they (the UN) sometimes request for adjustments or recommendations. There is a consensus among the informants that the recommendations are usually minor changes mostly relating to doing some activities differently or adjustment of figures in certain cases. This is not regarded as a major conflict as it is usually solved with adjusting to the recommendations or simply offering clarification on certain issues.

Conversely, the conflict the scenario creates is whether CSOs do formulate project proposals just to attract UN funding or are they are really interested in the impact they will create, or even if they only take up initiatives in line with their organization goals. The study finds this important because finance is critical to CSOs’ effective existence in The Gambia and the fact that the UN system operates strictly within a thematic framework, the research wants to understand if there are tendencies of CSOs acting as an extended arm of UN implementing UN goals rather than CSOs’ agendas. Nonetheless, the informants do not concur with that assumption, instead they strictly put across that they are more focused on their organizational goals and intervention areas, and where they cannot come to terms with donors on their agendas, they decline funding. When consulted other materials such as UN and CSO reports

and websites, the findings corroborate this viewpoint as sometimes certain UN projects are gone unimplemented due to lack of agreement with implementing partners.

Notwithstanding, CSOs having to partner with UN boost their networking, credibility, and relevance. UN being a leading international organization in the country and a major donor to the state too, working with them open doors for CSOs to interreact with high profile officials both within and outside political capacities, and access information and other tools than can be used in their advantage. By extension, the visibility of UN at CSO projects adds onto how seriously they are taken by the state and the public at large which gives weight to their criticisms and state scrutiny. Below is one of the similar responses from CSOs leaders on the question regarding effect of UN partnership on such functions.

“...because normally when it comes to authorities, you invite them as an organization, they don't turn up... but if you invite them and inform them that UN system is the funding partner of this activity, the EU is the funding partner, they'll be like, Whoa! Then we need to be there... because at some point, that's why I was talking about their presence, they understand that these are people that will hold them accountable. They [the UN] provide them with certain funds and so on. So, if at all, they are supporting another grassroots organization to work on one or two things and they are not turning up, the UN could ask: what is happening? Are they really serious about the transformation? So, if the answer is no, I see no reason why UN should support some of those things.” (I1.)

5.5.Challenges

In any partnership of working together of any nature comes with some obstacles and UN CSO relationship in The Gambia is no exception. From the CSOs' perspective, a few challenges have been highlighted by the informants. Bureaucracy in the UN systems is the major one which sometimes make it difficult for the projects to be approved and implemented on time. Instead, a scenario is created where very little time is available for practically carrying out the activities and so CSOs end up working under time pressure. Due to the complex nature of how UN operates, CSO leaders expressed that they usually get responses from UN in the latter part of the year which explains that it is hard to get anything done in the beginning of the year when UN is involved as partners. As UN agencies operate by a calendar year, it is understandable that the beginning of the year will always be policy and administrative related works before eventually finalizing the allocated funds available and for which intervention areas. Therefore, it is comprehensible that releasing funds and offering other forms of support to CSOs would mostly come later in the year. One of them explained as follows:

“UN system is just slow, right. [laughs] ... and that impacts a lot on our projects because there is a lot of bureaucracy, submission of requests, submission of reports, approval of reports... And you realize in every quarter, you do your activities almost in the final month of the quarter. Yet they expect you to report by the end of the quarter and start planning for the next activity by the end of that quarter. So, we are always like playing catch up. Right. Towards the end of December is a huge hustle because with the UN way of working, your budget is within a 12-month period—from January to December. So, everything that is planned for the year has to be implemented before December. So as a result of that you have a lot of, I mean, pressure on the organizations coming to the third quarter towards December because, I mean, sometimes you have a bag lot of things to do as a result of the bureaucracy. And you are kind of forced to be working overtime to handle some of those things.” (I7)

On the other hand, the major difficulty UN encounters when partnering with CSOs in The Gambia is weak capacity of the organizations. The study is meant to understand that this is the reason why they create many training schemes for CSOs in the country. Advocacy comes with education and awareness, that’s how anyone can get any information out to the public or scrutinize any state policy, program, or arbitrary act. As mentioned earlier, CSOs in The Gambia have been dormant and suppressed for long under the authoritarian regime. Most of the people with the right education and skill sets did not find advocacy appropriate under such political atmosphere and rather took up safer opportunities available to them, while those with the interest and determination for the cause were usually those with the least capacity. As a result, the UN sometimes have projects and certain programs that require partnering with CSOs to implement but will find it difficult to get the organizations with adequate capacity.

The issue of the 22-year-long dictatorial rule also made it difficult for UN agencies to attract CSOs as implementing partners in programs relating to hot issues in The Gambia. Before the 2016 democratic restoration in The Gambia, issues relating to civil and political rights are usually regarded sensitive. The arbitrary arrests and detention of journalists, activists, and critics of the government were rampant enough to create an atmosphere of fear in the country where civil society shy away from addressing many issues in totality or sometimes carryout activities in manners that might not provoke the government. Eventually, the UN had certain programs on their agendas for the years prior to the regime change that were forfeited or not implemented as planned due to lack of CSOs that were willing and capable to take up such initiatives.

5.6. Summary of Findings

The table below provides an overview of recurring themes identified across interviews of the eight CSO leaders. The UN interviewee is excluded here as different set of questions (see appendix) were asked for understanding donor perspective. The numbers should not be interpreted statistically, but rather as an indication of how commonly certain perspectives were expressed among respondents.

Table 1: Overview of Interview Themes

Themes	Forms	Description	Number of interviewees	Interpretation
Resources	Financial assistance	Importance of UN funding for CSO activities	8/8	Central to operations
	Capacity building	Training and skills development	8/8	Central to operations
	Institutional support	Provision of admin equipment	6/8	Widely valued
Functions	Civic education	Awareness campaign, voter education, public consultation	8/8	Core activity
	Government oversight	advocacy, accountability activities, challenge state unconstitutional acts	7/8	Core activity
Mode of Intervention	CSOs request	CSOs applying for partnership in projects	8/8	Primary approach
	UN initiates	UN reaching out to CSOs for implementing SDGs	6/8	Common trend
	Legitimacy effect	UN backing increases credibility	7/8	Common trend
Challenges	Bureaucratic challenges	Timeline pressures, difficulties in accessing/managing funds	8/8	Core constraint

Across the interviews, a clear pattern emerges regarding how CSOs use UN support in practice. The findings show that UN assistance—primarily in the form of funding, capacity-building and technical support—enables CSOs to carry out a set of core activities. These activities include civic education—awareness campaigns and citizens consultations, community outreach and public discussions; and watchdog capacity—challenging state unconstitutional acts, advocacy and engagement with public institutions. UN support plays a crucial role in making these activities possible. Financial resources allow CSOs to implement projects, while training and

technical assistance strengthen their organizational capacity. In addition, UN involvement often enhances the visibility and credibility of CSOs that further strengthen their efforts. At the same time, the findings indicate that bureaucratic constraints and weak CSO capacity sometimes shape how effectively this support can be utilized.

In analyzing the empirical findings of the study, the paper presents mechanisms of UN support to CSOs across four themes—Resources, Functions, Mode of intervention, and Challenges. While Resources and Functions were known themes before data collection, Mode of Intervention, referring to the partnership arrangements, came out to be an important theme that was only revealed during data collection. Challenges on the other hand, is not necessarily a mechanism on its own but rather an issue that runs through all the other mechanisms and is so discussed as a theme because of that influence it has on the mechanisms. Under Mode of Intervention as a theme, the study reveals how the partnership comes about, who initiates it, and how it grows over time. The UN or the CSOs reach out for collaboration depending on whether the UN has a project that requires implementing partners or the CSOs needing funding for their projects. The study also investigates the obstacles experienced from both the donor perspective and civil society viewpoint under the Challenges part of the analysis. The research reveals the major issues constraining the partnership relationships of the UN and CSOs which come in the form of bureaucratic constrains of UN operations and weak capacity of CSOs in The Gambia.

However, the major contribution to the theoretical development of the study is revealing the Mode of Intervention as a mechanism of UN support to the CSOs in The Gambia for drive towards successful democratic transition. Before carrying out data collection, the study expected the UN and CSOs to have some form of networking but did not well establish how exactly this relationship works and how exactly this mechanism empowers CSOs. After data collection and analysis, the empirical findings now reveal that the relationship between UN and CSOs grows over time especially after a successful experience. In this way, the UN as a powerful donor with massive resources, become aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the CSOs and knows not only which CSOs to contact for which project but also how best to develop the organizations through training schemes, administrative supports, etc.

Additionally, partnership with the UN boosts the credibility and relevance of the CSOs in the country as they attract more attention and their activities being taken more seriously especially by the state authorities when UN is mentioned as a partner. The relationship increases the

networking capacity too as they interreact with high caliber of individuals and institutions that are crucial to driving the politics of the country, as UN interactions sometimes create platforms that render the CSOs direct access to these political figures. In this way, the partnership contributes to the ability of the CSOs to effectively perform watchdog capacity of democratic function.

Overall, the analysis indicates that UN support is perceived by CSO representatives as enabling organizational capacity and facilitating engagement in civic education and oversight-oriented activities. Through these democratic activities CSOs are seen to be contributing to successful transition in The Gambia. The findings provide descriptive insight into how international democracy support is experienced and operationalized by civil society actors in a post-authoritarian context.

5.6.1. Evaluation of Theoretical Expectations

This section assesses the extent to which the empirical findings align with the theoretical expectations outlined earlier.

Expectation 1: UN support provides financial resources, capacity-building, and technical assistance to CSOs. The findings largely support this expectation. The empirical material shows that UN support in The Gambia primarily takes the form of financial assistance, training programs and institutional support, which enable CSOs to implement various activities. Interview evidence suggests that such support is essential for organizational functioning and project implementation.

Expectation 2: CSOs use this support to engage in democracy-related activities such as civic education and watchdog capacity. This expectation is also supported. The analysis demonstrates that CSOs utilize UN support to carry out activities such as public awareness campaigns, public discussions and consultations, hold public officials accountable and advocacy efforts. These activities correspond to the roles attributed to civil society in the literature.

However, it was not a theoretical expectation for UN interaction to provide legitimacy to CSOs and the relationship to encounter some bureaucratic and technical obstacles. These mechanisms were later revealed by empirical findings and so viewed as developing the theory further. The study revealed that UN involvement provides not only material resources but also a form of legitimacy, which strengthen CSOs' position in relation to both the state and the

public. At the same time, while CSOs sometimes face challenges in accessing, managing, or effectively utilizing UN support, UN sometimes finds CSOs to lack the capacity needed to implement certain projects. Overall, the findings suggest that UN support broadly functions in line with theoretical expectations. The findings did not diverge, instead they add to the mechanisms that UN relationship provides a seal of approval to CSOs, and implementation is sometimes shaped by practical constraints.

6. Concluding Discussion

This chapter summarizes the main findings of the study and discusses their implications in relation to the research question and theoretical framework. It shows how UN democracy support is translated into concrete civil society activities in The Gambia following the 2016 political transition, highlighting the role of UN-supported CSOs in promoting democratic participation. The chapter also reflects on the methodological approach and outlines key limitations of the study to ensure transparency in interpreting the findings.

The study has revealed the mechanisms of the UN democracy promotion through civil society empowerment in The Gambia. Part of the UN country development plan which is also in line with the national development agenda, require them to use approaches where civil society will be inclusive in tackling the pressing development issues of the country. The Plan is motivated by the SDGs but considering the recent political environment of The Gambia with regards to democratic restoration in 2016, the socio-political development goals have indeed dominated the agendas. The transition period of the aftermath of the 2016 regime change has impacted nearly all aspects of public life in The Gambia, with a total change in the dynamics of how different actors in political sphere interact. To some extent, the scenario has contributed to shaping the development agendas for the country more towards addressing good governance and democracy related issues. At the same time, the CSOs also become more visible in the political affairs as they have grown both in quantity and cover wider intervention areas, especially with issues relating to public scrutiny of government decisions which was absent in the previous authoritarian regime.

In exploring the mechanisms of UN activities in CSO support show tendencies of UN strengthening CSOs in their democratic functions during this transitional period in The Gambia. The different bodies of the organization provide funding for the various CSOs' projects and activities, training schemes for capacity building, and institutional and

administrative support to their offices. These resources offered to the CSOs helped with their growth and development over time and contribute to creating a vibrant civil society in the country.

Beginning with funding, CSOs can carry out different and more democracy related projects such as activities relating to creating platforms for political participation, and civic education and political awareness campaigns throughout the country. Transitional Justice initiative for example, which was entirely funded by the UN, enabled the CSOs to engage citizens country wide—particularly the marginalized groups of women and youths in the rural areas, to be inclusive in the political decision-making processes. They conducted townhall meetings even in the remote areas where they invite citizens, especially young people, to take part in making laws that govern them vis a vis CRC; and give their reactions on the TRRC procedures.

Moreover, UN provision of capacity building and institutional support to CSOs as well strengthen their existence in the country as the organizations do not only become institutionally well-structured but also the staff are well trained and more capable of their duties. The training schemes usually target CSO leaders, but knowledge and skills are further disseminated down to the regular members of the organizations and subsequently to the public through awareness campaigns and democracy education activities.

The two major functions of the CSOs that contribute to the successful transition in The Gambia are serving as school of democracy to the public and watchdog to institutional powers. Evidence shows that CSOs have been indeed active in these two ways that arguably yielded results in shaping the transition processes in the country. Traces of the different awareness campaigns geared towards promoting political soundness and participation throughout the country seem to have contributed to the ways the citizens approach politics and political issues since the change of government. It is quite understandable that political issues do not even come up in normal conversations among citizens in the authoritarian regime which, in a way, disconnect the civil society from the political affairs of the state. However, with the democratic restoration from 2016, the political landscape of the country changed, and the civil society became more involved in the political affairs. The CSOs democracy teachings and awareness campaigns have been driving forces in this change as their activities including media programs create platforms for discussions on pressing issues in the country with different stakeholders' participation. In other words, CSOs' democracy teaching initiatives arguably contribute to

creating a well informed and more politically interested civil society in The Gambia which could be linked to successful transition in the country.

Similarly, the watchdog capacity of the CSOs proves to have been contributing to shaping the transitional stage in the democratization processes in The Gambia. The CSOs initiatives of engaging the institutional authorities into dialogues about citizens perspectives of political issues, scrutinizing government decisions, and challenging undemocratic acts through demonstrations and even using legal means as recently seen; have shaped a thing or two in the process. The two court cases won by the CSOs against the state apparatus mentioned earlier, for instance, showcase a particular trend in the direction which the transition is heading. Coming from an authoritarianism, it is one thing for the CSOs to test the courts against institutional malpractices, but it is another for the courts to rule against the state. I will argue that that indicates how instrumental the civil society is in the democratic transition processes.

In response to the research question, the findings suggest that UN support is perceived by CSO representatives as enabling organizational capacity and facilitating engagement in civic education and oversight-oriented activities. These activities align with theoretical expectations regarding the role of civil society in democratic deepening. In other words, a central finding of this study is that UN support enables CSOs to carry out core democratic functions, particularly serving as school of democracy to the public and watchdog to the state. Without this support, many of these activities would be difficult to sustain or not operate at such large scale.

At the same time, the study shows that partnering with UN provides seal of approval to CSOs activities facilitating their contribution to successful transition. The activities described by interviewees highlight the practical role of CSOs in supporting democratic processes in The Gambia. Civic education initiatives, public awareness campaigns, and advocacy efforts help citizens understand democratic institutions, encourage participation in political processes, and promote accountability among public officials. In a context of recent democratic transition, such activities are particularly important, as many citizens are still becoming familiar with democratic norms and practices. Through these tasks, CSOs contribute to strengthening the everyday functioning of democratic engagement rather than directly determining political outcomes.

6.1. Ethical Issues and Limitations

This research does not raise major ethical concerns, which can arise when studies risk exposing or endangering participants (Huberman and Miles, 2002). Such risks might have existed prior to the 2016 regime change in The Gambia, when the political environment was more restrictive and civil society actors could have faced repercussions for participating in research. In the current democratic context, however, the study is unlikely to expose informants to such risks and may instead contribute to understanding the country's ongoing political transition. A potential concern relates to bias in how CSOs describe their relationship with UN. Since many CSOs depend on international organizations for financial support, interviewees may have been cautious in their responses when discussing the UN. To reduce this risk, the study ensured anonymity for interview participants. In addition, the interviews suggested that CSOs are not solely dependent on the UN, as several organizations indicated that they decline UN funding when proposed projects do not align with their areas of work.

A key limitation of the study is the relatively small sample size. Due to time and resource constraints, only nine informants were interviewed. A larger number of CSO participants might have provided a broader representation of civil society perspectives. Similarly, including more representatives from different UN agencies could have offered a more comprehensive view of international assistance from the donor side. To partly address this limitation, the study supplemented interviews with UN documents, CSO reports, and media sources describing relevant activities and programs.

Another challenge concerns issues of research validity. Huberman and Miles (2002) distinguish between descriptive, theoretical, and interpretative validity. In this study, theoretical and interpretative validity are supported through the use of established theoretical frameworks and careful interpretation of both interview material and documentary sources. Descriptive validity, however, can be more challenging when working with activists, who may have strong interests in shaping narratives related to their work. To mitigate this issue, the study critically assessed interview responses and cross-checked information with reports and other relevant materials where possible.

The research may also be affected by social desirability and self-assessment bias, as interviewees were asked to reflect on their own organizations' activities and achievements. Interviewees may therefore emphasize positive outcomes or the importance of their work. However, the study primarily focuses on understanding how the relationship between the UN

and CSOs operates in practice. Most interview questions therefore focused on operational processes rather than personal evaluations. Finally, the study does not triangulate interview data with perspectives from other actors such as government officials, journalists, or beneficiaries of civil society initiatives due to time constraints. It also does not compare UN-supported CSOs with organizations receiving other types of international support or no external support. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive insights into the functioning of UN–CSO cooperation rather than as a causal evaluation of its broader democratic impact.

Despite these limitations, the study makes several contributions. Empirically, it provides a detailed account of how UN democracy support is experienced and utilized by civil society actors in a post-authoritarian context that has received limited scholarly attention. Analytically, it demonstrates how international democracy support can be examined at the organizational level without overstating causal claims. Another contribution of the study comes to the aspect of theoretical development. The research in general uses the theory development approach where it lays theoretical expectation of UN and CSOs partnering for project implementation, leaving room for data collection to reveal the mechanisms around the phenomenon.

Nonetheless, through the process, in addition to revealing more mechanisms—Mode of Intervention and Challenges, the study reveals that CSOs partnership with UN increases their (CSOs) credibility and relevance especially under the eyes of the state authorities in addition to training schemes and administrative support offered. As illustrated in the analysis chapter, when CSOs invite state officials to the programs with a mention of UN as partners, the invitations are taken more seriously by not only honoring them but even sending senior officials as representatives. As a result, this increases the impact of such events whether in the form of self-censorship by the state or approaching CSOs' contributions and criticisms with utmost concerns. What these revelations add on to the theory is that UN partnership with CSOs also increase the visibility, relevance, and credibility of CSOs, which push the impacts of their activities and functions in democratization processes.

Moreover, the findings have implications beyond The Gambia as they suggest that international democracy support is most effective when it enables CSOs to carry out certain activities. These insights may be relevant for understanding similar interventions in other post-authoritarian or transitional contexts, where civil society plays a key role in democratic deepening. Future research could build on this study by adopting comparative designs that examine different

donors, support modalities, or national contexts. Incorporating additional data sources, such as surveys, participant observation, or administrative records, could also help address some of the limitations identified here.

In conclusion, this study examines how United Nations democracy support enables civil society organizations in The Gambia to undertake activities associated with democratic deepening. By documenting how CSOs use this support in practice, the research highlights forms of civic engagement such as advocacy, public awareness, and participation that democratic theory identifies as important during political transitions. In doing so, the study provides an empirically grounded account of how international democracy support operates through civil society empowerment in a post-authoritarian context.

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Appendix

Interview guide for CSOs

Theme A: Resources

1. How successful was/were your project(s) so and so funded by UN? Please give details about how the project(s) was/were implemented.
2. Would you attribute these successes to UN funding? Why and how?
3. In which other ways have UN assisted your organization or project(s)?
4. What other resources have they provided you with?
5. How did the organization benefit from these resources? What overall changes resulted on the organization?

Theme B: Functions

6. In which ways have these support created an environment for you to effectively carryout your democracy roles in the country? what specific functions?
7. Overall, how does your working relationship with UN facilitate your cause towards function so and so?
8. Has this relationship also contributed to your active role in so and so in The Gambia? how?
9. In your opinion, would it have been rather different in total absence of UN? how different?

Theme C: Mode of Intervention

10. How did UN intervene in supporting? Was/Were the project(s) proposed by UN or the organization requested for support?
11. Were adjustments requested from project proposal or recommendations given by UN?
12. What kind of adjustments or recommendations?

Theme D: Challenges

13. What challenges/obstacles have UN working style (asking for adjustments and giving recommendations for instance) created for you? The ways they affect your work...
14. What other challenges do you face from your partnership with UN?

Note: Before the interview, a background check is done on the CSO the informant is a leader at, the democracy related projects and activities they have participated in, and all other relevant information are accessed beforehand. During the interviews, the part of the questions “so and so” are replaced with specific project names, activities, or roles mentioned, depending on the context.

Interview Guide for UN Officials

Theme A: Resources

1. In which ways does UN provide support for CSOs in The Gambia?
2. How is the UN funding for CSO democracy projects in The Gambia created? At which level is it formulated? What is the process?
3. Generally, which types of CSO democracy projects does UN support? Is there a set of criteria?
4. Does the type of CSO that requests for funding matter? Which types do you preferably work with? Why?
5. Do you keep long term relationship with certain CSOs, or support is always project based? If the former, which ones? Why?

Theme B: Mode of Intervention

6. Does the UN initiate certain programs for CSOs to undertake? Why and how does this work?
7. Is there an increase or decrease in the UN allocated funding for CSO democracy projects in The Gambia for before and after the regime change? How and why?
8. Does UN monitor the implementation of these funded projects? How?
9. How do the impacts of these projects matter to UN? How do you measure success in this regard?

Theme C: Difficulties

10. What does the UN find out when the funded projects are monitored, in terms of challenges etc?
11. What difficulties does UN encounter in dealing with CSOs in The Gambia, both before after the regime change? Also, what opportunities alike?

