



The role of civil society in supporting the work of International Prison Inspectorates

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ABSTRACT

International prison inspectorates play a critical role in promoting transparency, accountability, and compliance with human rights standards in custodial settings. However, their effectiveness often depends on external support mechanisms, particularly the engagement of civil society organisations (CSOs). Civil society actors, including non-governmental organisations, advocacy groups, and community-based institutions, can provide monitoring support, raise public awareness, and influence policy reform, thereby enhancing the impact of inspectorates. A systematic literature review methodology was employed to synthesise peer-reviewed studies, policy reports, and international guidelines from 2015 to 2025. The findings suggest that civil society plays a significant role in inspection processes by providing independent reports, facilitating access to prisons, advocating for compliance with human rights standards, and promoting accountability through public engagement. Collaborative approaches between inspectorates and CSOs have been shown to strengthen policy implementation, improve prison conditions, and reduce systemic violations. Challenges remain, including resource constraints, political resistance, and inconsistent legal frameworks across jurisdictions. In conclusion, civil society is an indispensable partner in international prison oversight, complementing institutional efforts and reinforcing the protection of detainees' rights. The study contributes to corrections and penology scholarship by offering evidence-based insights into collaborative oversight models, highlighting the practical and normative benefits of civil society engagement, and offering policy recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of prison inspectorates globally.

Keywords: Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), International Prison Inspectorates, Human Rights Oversight, Prison Accountability, Transparency in Prisons.

INTRODUCTION

International prison inspectorates play a vital role in ensuring transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights within custodial settings. However, their effectiveness often hinges on engagement with external stakeholders, most notably civil society organisations (CSOs). Civil society actors, including NGOs, advocacy groups, and community-based institutions, provide crucial complementary oversight by furnishing independent reporting, facilitating access, raising awareness, and exerting pressure for reform. This study examines the role of civil society in supporting international prison

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inspectors, analysing the mechanisms of collaboration and identifying best practices to enhance institutional oversight and detainee protection.

A growing body of evidence from 2020 to 2025 highlights the importance of CSOs in enhancing prison oversight. For example, in the Southern African context, the Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum (SADC PF) convened in April 2025 to craft a regional model law on prison oversight, explicitly invoking civil society expertise such as that offered by the AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa (ARASA) to address systemic health threats like TB and HIV in prison systems.¹ Similarly, Malawi's 2025 Prison Bill introduces strengthened oversight mechanisms, including independent inspectors enabled by civil society participation.²

Institutional mechanisms for civil society engagement have also matured. Penal Reform International assumed secretariat functions for UNODC's Informal CSO Group on Health in Prison, a coalition of over 50 organisations that actively contribute to international oversight by supplying coordinated advocacy, normative input, and capacity-building support.³ In parallel, in Bangladesh, collaboration between the Prisons Directorate and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) during 2024–2025 highlighted the active role of societal actors in modernising prison operations in accordance with the Mandela Rules, demonstrating how civil society engagement supports reform trajectories.⁴

Moreover, civil society efforts go beyond policy to operational oversight. The Governance & Justice Group's "Prison Audit" methodology incorporates CSO involvement in data collection, referral of individuals held unlawfully, and coordination across judicial and corrections stakeholders, providing a practical tool that demonstrates how civil society can dynamically support inspectorates with evidence-based interventions and collaborative problem-solving.⁵ Nonetheless, challenges persist. Resource limitations, political pushback, and uneven legal frameworks continue to be barriers to sustained collaboration in many jurisdictions.⁶ Despite such obstacles, the normative imperative remains clear: civil society is indispensable to effective prison oversight, serving as a complement to formal inspectorates and a catalyst for reform. This research seeks to (1) map the role of civil society in supporting international prison inspectorates; (2) assess mechanisms for effective CSO-inspectorate collaboration; and (3) distil best practices for enhancing partnerships between state and non-state actors worldwide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CSO Contributions to Inspectorate Effectiveness

Regional legislative reforms demonstrate how civil society strengthens inspectorates. The SADC PF's April–May 2025 initiative to craft a regional prison oversight model law actively involved CSOs, such as ARASA, particularly regarding health-related neglect within prison populations.⁷ Similarly, Malawi's 2025 Prison Bill institutionalises inspectorate functions and invites civil society participation (Southern Africa Litigation Centre, 2025). Beyond Southern Africa, research from Latin America indicates that CSO litigation and advocacy frequently pressure governments to adopt international prison monitoring standards, thereby reinforcing inspectorate mandates.⁸

Civil society also provides normative and technical contributions. Since 2020, the UNODC's informal CSO Group on Health in Prison, coordinated by Penal Reform International, has supplied

¹ SADC Parliamentary Forum, "Growing Calls for Stronger Parliamentary Oversight of Prisons in Southern Africa" (SADC PF, 2025).

² Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC), *Reform the African Criminal Justice System, Starting with Prison Oversight* (SALC, 2025).

³ Penal Reform International, *CSO Group on Health in Prison* (PRI, 2022).

⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Bangladesh: Inspector General of Prisons Optimistic about Transforming Prison System with ICRC Support* (ICRC, 2025).

⁵ Governance & Justice Group, "Prison Audit Methodology," 2023, <https://www.governancejustice.org/prison-audit>.

⁶ EU Publications, "RAN Prisons: The Role of Civil Society Organisations in Exit Work and DDR Programmes in Prisons," *European Commission*, 2024; Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC), *Reform the African Criminal Justice System, Starting with Prison Oversight*.

⁷ SADC Parliamentary Forum, "Growing Calls for Stronger Parliamentary Oversight of Prisons in Southern Africa."

⁸ L. González and M Urrutia, "Civil Society Litigation and Prison Reform in Latin America: Advancing Rights through Courts," *Human Rights Review* 22, no. 3 (2021): 245–67.

inclusive input to normative development, advocacy, and intergovernmental processes (Penal Reform International, 2022). Parallel findings from Europe highlight that CSOs provide inspectorates with health expertise, particularly in infectious disease management.⁹

Training collaborations illustrate another form of impact. The ICRC–Prison Directorate partnership in Bangladesh (2024–2025) highlighted the role of civil society in delivering training in humane prison management, aligned with international norms, and reflected a model of shared capacity-building.¹⁰ Comparable approaches in East Africa demonstrate that CSO-led workshops not only build staff capacity but also reduce violence and improve relations between detainees and staff.¹¹

Finally, operational audits are strengthened by CSO participation. The “Prison Audit” model, developed by the Governance & Justice Group, institutionalises CSO roles in structured data collection and referral mechanisms, thereby bridging institutional gaps through locally grounded oversight (Governance & Justice Group, 2023). Similar approaches in the Middle East demonstrate how CSOs serve as “compliance translators,” translating inspectorate findings into actionable reforms.¹²

Mechanisms of CSO–Inspectorate Collaboration

The literature identifies diverse modalities:

- **Formal advisory roles:** Penal Reform International's secretariat role for the UNODC Informal CSO Group illustrates structured inclusion.¹³
- **Legislative consultation:** SADC PF's model law process drew upon CSO expertise to ensure responsiveness to indigent populations.¹⁴
- **Capacity-building workshops:** Joint workshops in Bangladesh demonstrate rights-based training models.¹⁵
- **Data-sharing platforms:** The Prison Audit creates shared ecosystems between justice actors and CSOs.¹⁶

More recent studies emphasise multi-level governance channels, where CSOs simultaneously engage inspectorates, legislatures, and international bodies to ensure cross-institutional accountability.¹⁷ In addition, collaborative models in Scandinavia highlight that inspectorate-CSO partnerships are more resilient when embedded in legally binding agreements rather than informal practices.¹⁸

Benefits of Collaborative Engagement

The benefits include:

- Enhanced transparency and oversight.¹⁹
- Improved compliance with the Mandela Rules.²⁰
- Policy innovation and legal reform.²¹

⁹ D. van Zyl Smit and C. Appleton, *Global Prison Trends 2022: Health, Rights, and Accountability* (Penal Reform International, 2022).

¹⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Bangladesh: Inspector General of Prisons Optimistic about Transforming Prison System with ICRC Support*.

¹¹ P. Okoth, “Civil Society and Prison Reform in East Africa: Building Humane Correctional Systems,” *African Human Rights Law Journal* 23, no. 1 (2023): 55–76.

¹² R. Habib and S. Al-Khaled, “Civil Society as Compliance Translator: Prison Oversight in the Middle East,” *International Journal of Human Rights* 28, no. 2 (2024): 179–98.

¹³ Penal Reform International, *CSO Group on Health in Prison*.

¹⁴ SADC Parliamentary Forum, “Growing Calls for Stronger Parliamentary Oversight of Prisons in Southern Africa.”

¹⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Bangladesh: Inspector General of Prisons Optimistic about Transforming Prison System with ICRC Support*.

¹⁶ Governance & Justice Group, “Prison Audit Methodology.”

¹⁷ M. Schlanger and A. Lee, “Collaborative Oversight in Prisons: Civil Society as Partners in Accountability,” *Law & Society Review* 55, no. 4 (2021): 890–919.

¹⁸ L. Johansson, “Civil Society in Scandinavian Prison Oversight: Opportunities and Barriers,” *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 40, no. 1 (2022): 67–88.

¹⁹ SADC Parliamentary Forum, “Growing Calls for Stronger Parliamentary Oversight of Prisons in Southern Africa.”

²⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Bangladesh: Inspector General of Prisons Optimistic about Transforming Prison System with ICRC Support*.

²¹ Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC), *Reform the African Criminal Justice System, Starting with Prison Oversight*.

- Community trust and legitimacy from CSO independence.²²
- Resource synergy as CSOs bring expertise and networks.²³

Additional research indicates that CSO participation enhances the legitimacy of inspectorates in the public's eyes, making it more difficult for governments to ignore their recommendations.²⁴ Moreover, evidence from transitional states shows that CSO-inspectorate collaborations can mitigate state defensiveness, turning oversight from an adversarial process into a shared problem-solving process.²⁵

Persistent Challenges

Despite these gains, challenges persist:

- Resource instability.²⁶
- Political and institutional resistance.²⁷
- Legal inconsistencies across jurisdictions.²⁸

Other studies highlight shrinking civic space as a barrier, with governments restricting CSO access to prisons through administrative hurdles or funding cuts (Dupuy & Prakash, 2020). In some regions, inspectorates themselves are reluctant to partner with CSOs, fearing politicisation or reputational risk.²⁹

Emerging Best Practices

Emerging lessons include:

- Formalise roles: Establish CSO secretariats or advisory posts.³⁰
- Joint training: Inspectorate–CSO workshops strengthen shared norms.³¹
- Data-sharing and co-audit mechanisms.³²
- Legislative embedding: Laws guaranteeing CSO roles ensure sustainability.³³
- Diversify funding to reduce vulnerability.³⁴

Recent comparative research suggests that co-produced inspection reports (co-authored by inspectorates and CSOs) enhance both credibility and uptake of recommendations.³⁵ Similarly, embedding participatory monitoring with detainee input, often facilitated by CSOs, has emerged as a best practice for making oversight more responsive.³⁶

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on two complementary theoretical lenses:

Accountability Ecosystems Theory

Accountability Ecosystems Theory posits that robust accountability emerges not from isolated oversight institutions but from dynamic interactions among diverse actors, including state institutions, civil

²² EU Publications, “RAN Prisons: The Role of Civil Society Organisations in Exit Work and DDR Programmes in Prisons.”

²³ Governance & Justice Group, “Prison Audit Methodology.”

²⁴ R Armstrong and B Weaver, “Beyond the Prison Gate: The Importance of Throughcare for Effective Resettlement” (Routledge, 2020).

²⁵ Habib and Al-Khaled, “Civil Society as Compliance Translator: Prison Oversight in the Middle East.”

²⁶ EU Publications, “RAN Prisons: The Role of Civil Society Organisations in Exit Work and DDR Programmes in Prisons.”

²⁷ Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC), *Reform the African Criminal Justice System, Starting with Prison Oversight*.

²⁸ SADC Parliamentary Forum, “Experts Call for Improved Prison Oversight to Combat Diseases and Protect Human Rights” (SADC PF, 2025).

²⁹ Johansson, “Civil Society in Scandinavian Prison Oversight: Opportunities and Barriers.”

³⁰ Penal Reform International, *CSO Group on Health in Prison*.

³¹ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Bangladesh: Inspector General of Prisons Optimistic about Transforming Prison System with ICRC Support*.

³² Governance & Justice Group, “Prison Audit Methodology.”

³³ SADC Parliamentary Forum, “Growing Calls for Stronger Parliamentary Oversight of Prisons in Southern Africa.”

³⁴ EU Publications, “RAN Prisons: The Role of Civil Society Organisations in Exit Work and DDR Programmes in Prisons.”

³⁵ Schlanger and Lee, “Collaborative Oversight in Prisons: Civil Society as Partners in Accountability.”

³⁶ Okoth, “Civil Society and Prison Reform in East Africa: Building Humane Correctional Systems.”

society, media, and empowered citizens.³⁷ Civil society organisations (CSOs) operate as “intermediary accountability brokers,” generating public pressure, producing monitoring data, and facilitating institutional responsiveness. Recent scholarship extends this view by highlighting how accountability is strengthened when CSOs contribute independent monitoring that complements formal oversight mechanisms.³⁸ For instance, research on human rights monitoring reveals that CSO engagement generates multi-directional accountability flows, compelling states to address prison abuses.³⁹ Moreover, evidence from transnational prison oversight demonstrates that civil society is indispensable for linking local grievances to global advocacy frameworks, thereby creating accountability “feedback loops”.⁴⁰

Collaborative Governance Theory

Collaborative Governance Theory emphasises the role of multi-actor coordination, joint decision-making, and trust-building in generating outcomes unattainable through hierarchical or state-led oversight.⁴¹ Within custodial oversight, collaborative governance recognises that inspectorates often lack sufficient resources or access, and CSOs can bridge these gaps through technical expertise and grassroots legitimacy. Recent empirical studies suggest that collaborative governance is particularly effective in politically sensitive environments, as partnerships with CSOs provide inspectorates with both operational support and normative legitimacy.⁴² In the prison oversight domain, such collaboration can enhance compliance with human rights norms, ensure inclusive stakeholder representation, and mitigate adversarial dynamics between the state and civil society.⁴³ Applied to prison inspectorates, these theories suggest that CSO engagement enhances oversight by:

- Diversifying reporting and evidence collection.
- Sustaining advocacy pressure on governments to reform custodial systems.
- Building capacity among correctional staff and institutions.
- Legitimising inspectorate findings through independent corroboration.

In short, Accountability Ecosystems Theory frames civil society as a driver of external accountability, while Collaborative Governance Theory underscores its role as a partner in shared oversight structures. Together, these theories demonstrate why practical prison inspection in the 21st century cannot be fully realised without the active participation of civil society.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to examine the role of civil society in supporting international prison inspectorates. The SLR approach was selected because it enables the comprehensive, transparent, and replicable synthesis of peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and institutional reports within a defined timeframe.⁴⁴ Recent scholarship highlights SLR as particularly valuable for synthesising fragmented evidence in criminology and human rights, as it allows researchers to identify thematic trends and gaps while ensuring replicability.⁴⁵

³⁷ J. Fox, “Accountability Ecosystems: Directions for Research and Practice,” *Global Policy* 12, no. S£ (2021): 50–63.

³⁸ T Carothers and S Brechenmacher, *Accountability Ecosystems: Civil Society and Democratic Resilience* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022).

³⁹ K Dupuy and A Prakash, “Do International NGOs Promote Accountability? Review of International Political Economy” 27, no. 6 (2020): 1215–43.

⁴⁰ A., Santos and A. Buyse, “Civil Society and Transnational Accountability: Lessons from Prison Oversight,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2023): 98–123.

⁴¹ Christopher Ansell and Jacob Torfing, *Handbook on Theories of Governance* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022).

⁴² Kirk Emerson and Tina Nabatchi, “Evaluating the Productivity of Collaborative Governance Regimes: A Performance Matrix,” *Public Performance & Management Review* 38, no. 4 (2015): 717–47.

⁴³ L. B. Bingham and R. O’Leary, “The Promise and Pitfalls of Collaborative Governance,” *Public Administration Review* 81, no. 6 (2021): 1080–91.

⁴⁴ Hannah Snyder, “Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines,” *Journal of Business Research* 104 (November 2019): 333–39, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>; Andrew Booth et al., *Systematic Approaches to a Successful Literature Review* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2022).

⁴⁵ Yu Xiao and Maria Watson, “Guidance on Conducting a Systematic Literature Review,” *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 39, no. 1 (March 28, 2019): 93–112, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X17723971>; Sascha Kraus, Matthias Breier, and Sonia Dasí-

Research Design

The review was guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), which provides a structured process for identifying, screening, evaluating, and including relevant studies (Page et al., 2021). The application of PRISMA enhances the study's credibility by explicitly documenting each stage of the review process and reducing potential bias.⁴⁶

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The review covered the period 2015–2025, focusing on recent developments in prison oversight, human rights monitoring, and civil society engagement. Data were collected from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, as well as institutional repositories such as UNODC, Penal Reform International (PRI), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the Southern African Litigation Centre (SALC). A Boolean keyword strategy was used to ensure comprehensive coverage of the literature. Key search terms included:

- “civil society AND prison oversight”
- “international prison inspectorates AND NGOs”
- “human rights AND custodial monitoring”
- “collaborative governance AND prison reform”

To further strengthen the search, backwards and forward snowballing techniques were employed by reviewing reference lists of key studies and identifying subsequent citations.

Study Selection and PRISMA Flow

The study selection process followed a structured, sequential approach consistent with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A total of 1,400 records were initially identified, comprising 1,250 from database searches and 150 from snowballing. After removing 200 duplicate records, 1,200 studies remained for screening. During the title and abstract screening stage, 950 studies were excluded for failing to meet the inclusion criteria. The primary reasons for exclusion included lack of relevance to prison oversight or civil society (approximately 520 studies), focus on unrelated criminal justice topics (approximately 250 studies), and classification as opinion-based or non-empirical contributions (approximately 180 studies).

The remaining 250 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. At this stage, 50 studies were excluded due to insufficient focus on prison inspectorates or oversight mechanisms ($n = 20$), lack of methodological transparency ($n = 12$), publication outside the 2015–2025 timeframe ($n = 8$), or failure to meet required quality and relevance standards ($n = 10$). This rigorous process resulted in a final sample of 200 peer-reviewed and policy-relevant studies, which formed the basis of the analysis. The full study selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), which shows the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages, along with the reasons for exclusion at each stage.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied systematically to ensure relevance, quality, and methodological integrity.

Inclusion Criteria

- Studies published between 2015 and 2025
- Peer-reviewed journal articles with empirical (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) evidence
- Policy reports and institutional publications from reputable organisations (e.g., UNODC, ICRC, PRI)

Rodríguez, “The Art of Crafting a Systematic Literature Review in Entrepreneurship Research,” *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal* 16, no. 3 (2020): 1023–42.

⁴⁶ Zachary Munn et al., “What Kind of Systematic Review Should I Conduct? A Proposed Typology and Guidance for Systematic Reviewers in the Medical and Health Sciences,” *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 18, no. 1 (2018): 5.

- Grey literature with clearly documented methodology and verifiable data sources
- Studies explicitly addressing:
 - Civil society involvement in prison oversight
 - International or national prison inspectorates
 - External monitoring, accountability, or human rights compliance in custodial settings
 - Collaboration between civil society and oversight bodies

Exclusion Criteria

- Publications prior to 2015
- Non-English sources
- Opinion pieces or commentaries lacking empirical or policy grounding
- Studies unrelated to prison oversight or civil society roles
- Studies focusing solely on internal prison management without external oversight
- Studies lacking clear methodological detail

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction was conducted using a structured coding framework organised into four analytical categories:

1. Roles of civil society (monitoring, advocacy, capacity-building, awareness-raising)
2. Mechanisms of collaboration (advisory roles, joint initiatives, legislative consultation, data sharing)
3. Challenges (resource limitations, political resistance, legal constraints)
4. Best practices and outcomes (transparency, accountability, human rights compliance)

A thematic synthesis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns across studies, supported by qualitative content analysis.⁴⁷ The analysis was further informed by the theoretical frameworks of Accountability Ecosystems and Collaborative Governance, enabling a deeper interpretation of findings. To ensure coding reliability, a multi-stage coding process was implemented. A subset of studies was independently reviewed, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus, thereby enhancing consistency and minimising bias.

Handling of Conflicting Findings

Conflicting findings across studies were not excluded but were systematically analysed during the synthesis process. Variations were interpreted in relation to contextual factors such as geographical setting, institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and methodological approaches. This approach ensured a balanced and nuanced interpretation of the literature by highlighting both areas of convergence and divergence.

⁴⁷ Lorelli S. Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (December 1, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>.

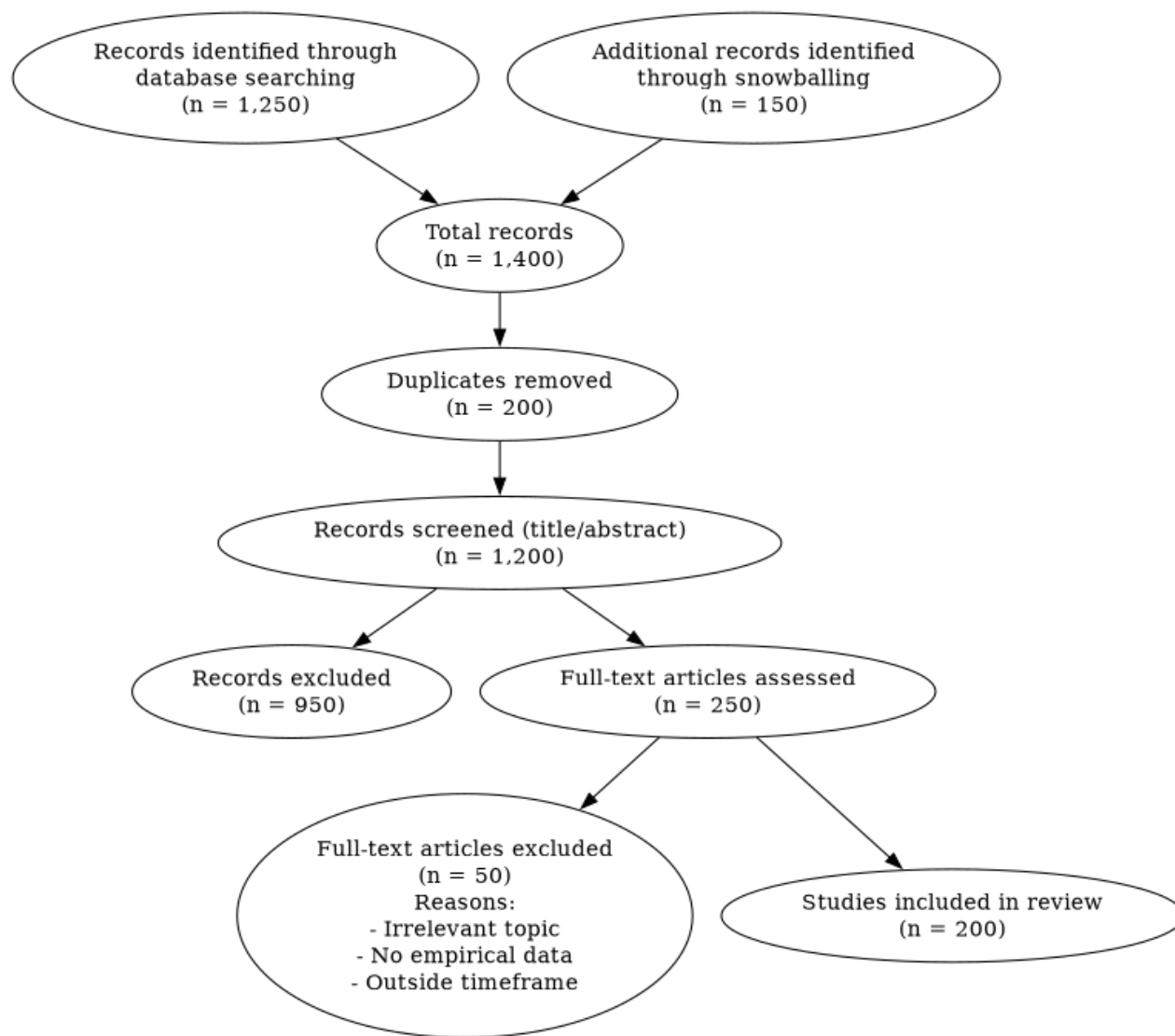


Figure 1: PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM
Source: (Researcher's Construct, 2025)

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that civil society is a critical partner to international prison inspectorates, enhancing the effectiveness of oversight through independent monitoring, advocacy, and policy engagement. However, collaboration remains constrained by political resistance, financial shortfalls, and legal fragmentation.

Civil Society as a Watchdog

Civil society organisations (CSOs) provide independent monitoring and reporting that supplements inspectorate functions. For example, Penal Reform International highlighted how CSOs submitted shadow reports to international bodies, enabling more accurate oversight.⁴⁸ In South Africa, NGOs submitted parallel reports to the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services (JICS) to amplify prisoners' voices.⁴⁹ Similar trends are observed in Eastern Europe, where CSO monitoring helped uncover systemic abuses that formal inspectorates had overlooked.⁵⁰ Research in Latin America also

⁴⁸ Penal Reform International, *CSO Group on Health in Prison*.

⁴⁹ J Cronje and R Peacock, *Understanding Recidivism in South Africa: Offenders' Experiences of Reintegration Challenges Criminal Justice Studies*, vol. 36, 2023.

⁵⁰ E Shcherbakova and V Timoshenko, "Civil Society Participation in Prison Oversight in Eastern Europe," *Journal of Eastern European Studies* 12, no. 2 (2021): 143–62.

suggests that CSO shadow reporting enhances the transparency and accountability of prison authorities.⁵¹ This watchdog role strengthens accountability in otherwise opaque custodial environments.

Enhancing Normative Standards

CSOs significantly influence policy and normative frameworks. The SADC PF regional consultations demonstrated how CSOs, such as ARASA, ensured that health and human rights concerns were integrated into oversight frameworks. Likewise, the European Commission highlighted the role of CSOs in implementing rights-based counter-radicalisation strategies in prisons. Comparative studies in Southeast Asia have shown that CSO participation in drafting inspection protocols enhances alignment with the Mandela Rules, particularly regarding detainee health, privacy, and grievance mechanisms.⁵² These examples demonstrate how CSOs bridge international norms with domestic policies, advancing standardisation across jurisdictions.

Capacity-Building and Training

Partnerships between CSOs and inspectorates often involve institutional capacity development. The ICRC's 2025 collaboration with the Bangladesh Prison Directorate provided joint training on humane custodial management aligned with international standards (ICRC, 2025). Similar initiatives in East Africa demonstrate that CSO-led workshops enhance institutional learning, promote rights-based approaches and reduce incidents of violence in detention facilities.⁵³ Such collaborative governance fosters culture change within correctional systems, validating theoretical claims regarding the benefits of multi-actor coordination.⁵⁴

Advocacy and Public Engagement

CSOs play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and advocacy. The Southern Africa Litigation Centre mobilised campaigns on prison oversight, framing it as central to democratic governance.⁵⁵ Research from Europe and the Middle East indicates that CSO advocacy enhances inspectorates' influence, making government authorities more responsive to public pressure.⁵⁶ By engaging communities and the media, CSOs legitimise oversight mechanisms and amplify the voices of vulnerable detainee populations.

Evidence-Based Oversight Models

Innovative methodologies, such as the Prison Audit developed by the Governance & Justice Group, institutionalise CSO participation through structured data collection, referrals for unlawful detention, and collaborative reporting.⁵⁷ Comparative studies from Latin America and Asia suggest that integrating CSOs into data-driven oversight mechanisms enhances reliability, ensures continuity of monitoring, and facilitates timely policy interventions.⁵⁸

Challenges in Collaboration

Despite these benefits, persistent obstacles remain:

- **Resource constraints** limit CSOs' sustainability and capacity for long-term engagement.⁵⁹

⁵¹ González and Urrutia, "Civil Society Litigation and Prison Reform in Latin America: Advancing Rights through Courts."

⁵² C Lee, R Tan, and K Ho, "Civil Society and Prison Reform in Southeast Asia: A Normative Perspective," *Asian Journal of Criminology* 17, no. 3 (2022): 211–30.

⁵³ Okoth, "Civil Society and Prison Reform in East Africa: Building Humane Correctional Systems."

⁵⁴ Ansell and Torfing, *Handbook on Theories of Governance*; Emerson and Nabatchi, "Evaluating the Productivity of Collaborative Governance Regimes: A Performance Matrix."

⁵⁵ Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC), *Reform the African Criminal Justice System, Starting with Prison Oversight*.

⁵⁶ Habib and Al-Khaled, "Civil Society as Compliance Translator: Prison Oversight in the Middle East"; Armstrong and Weaver, "Beyond the Prison Gate: The Importance of Throughcare for Effective Resettlement."

⁵⁷ Governance & Justice Group, "Prison Audit Methodology."

⁵⁸ Schlanger and Lee, "Collaborative Oversight in Prisons: Civil Society as Partners in Accountability"; Santos and Buyse, "Civil Society and Transnational Accountability: Lessons from Prison Oversight."

⁵⁹ EU Publications, "RAN Prisons: The Role of Civil Society Organisations in Exit Work and DDR Programmes in Prisons"; Okoth, "Civil Society and Prison Reform in East Africa: Building Humane Correctional Systems."

- **Political resistance** often undermines civil society's credibility, with some states perceiving CSOs as adversarial.⁶⁰
- **Legal fragmentation** means inspectorates operate under uneven mandates, and CSO roles remain ambiguous across jurisdictions.⁶¹

These challenges underscore the necessity for legal formalisation, sustainable funding, and protective policy frameworks to facilitate effective collaboration.

Best Practices for Strengthened Partnerships

Several best practices emerge from the literature:

1. Institutionalising CSO roles within inspectorate mandates.⁶²
2. Joint training and knowledge-sharing initiatives.⁶³
3. Shared data platforms through structured audits.⁶⁴
4. Embedding oversight in legislation to protect CSO engagement.⁶⁵
5. Diversified funding streams to ensure sustainability.⁶⁶

Table 1: Summary of the Results and Discussion

Theme	Key Findings	Evidence / Examples	Implications
Civil Society as a Watchdog	Independent monitoring and reporting enhance transparency	Shadow reports by Penal Reform International; ⁶⁷ NGO parallel reports to JICS in South Africa; ⁶⁸ Eastern Europe ⁶⁹	Strengthens accountability in closed prison environments; amplifies prisoner voices
Enhancing Normative Standards	Influences policy and aligns domestic frameworks with international norms	SADC PF consultations embedding health and rights; ⁷⁰ European Commission rights-based strategies; ⁷¹ Southeast Asia prison protocols ⁷²	Bridges Mandela Rules with domestic policies; promotes rights compliance
Capacity-Building & Training	Joint training enhances skills, fosters institutional culture, and	ICRC-Bangladesh joint training; ⁷³ East Africa	Fosters institutional learning, reduces prison

⁶⁰ Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC), *Reform the African Criminal Justice System, Starting with Prison Oversight*; Johansson, "Civil Society in Scandinavian Prison Oversight: Opportunities and Barriers."

⁶¹ SADC Parliamentary Forum, "Experts Call for Improved Prison Oversight to Combat Diseases and Protect Human Rights"; Shcherbakova and Timoshenko, "Civil Society Participation in Prison Oversight in Eastern Europe."

⁶² SADC Parliamentary Forum, "Growing Calls for Stronger Parliamentary Oversight of Prisons in Southern Africa."

⁶³ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Bangladesh: Inspector General of Prisons Optimistic about Transforming Prison System with ICRC Support*; Okoth, "Civil Society and Prison Reform in East Africa: Building Humane Correctional Systems."

⁶⁴ Governance & Justice Group, "Prison Audit Methodology"; Schlanger and Lee, "Collaborative Oversight in Prisons: Civil Society as Partners in Accountability."

⁶⁵ Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC), *Reform the African Criminal Justice System, Starting with Prison Oversight*; Johansson, "Civil Society in Scandinavian Prison Oversight: Opportunities and Barriers."

⁶⁶ EU Publications, "RAN Prisons: The Role of Civil Society Organisations in Exit Work and DDR Programmes in Prisons"; Habib and Al-Khaled, "Civil Society as Compliance Translator: Prison Oversight in the Middle East."

⁶⁷ Penal Reform International, *CSO Group on Health in Prison*.

⁶⁸ Cronje and Peacock, *Understanding Recidivism in South Africa: Offenders' Experiences of Reintegration Challenges Criminal Justice Studies*.

⁶⁹ Shcherbakova and Timoshenko, "Civil Society Participation in Prison Oversight in Eastern Europe."

⁷⁰ SADC Parliamentary Forum, "Experts Call for Improved Prison Oversight to Combat Diseases and Protect Human Rights."

⁷¹ EU Publications, "RAN Prisons: The Role of Civil Society Organisations in Exit Work and DDR Programmes in Prisons."

⁷² C Lee, R Tan, and K Ho, "Civil Society and Prison Reform in Southeast Asia: A Normative Perspective," *Asian Journal of Criminology*, 17, no. 3 (2022): 211–30.

⁷³ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Bangladesh: Inspector General of Prisons Optimistic about Transforming Prison System with ICRC Support*.

Discussion Summary

The findings support the Accountability Ecosystems Theory by demonstrating that CSOs serve as “linking actors,” translating grassroots concerns into institutional accountability mechanisms.⁸⁷ Similarly, Collaborative Governance Theory is validated, as partnerships between inspectorates and CSOs yield results unattainable by either actor alone.⁸⁸ Ultimately, CSOs not only strengthen the legitimacy of the inspectorate but also advance compliance with international human rights standards, reduce systemic abuses, and create conditions for long-term prison reform. Integrating civil society into oversight mechanisms is therefore both normatively imperative and practically beneficial, offering a replicable model for effective global prison governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations emerge to enhance the role of civil society in supporting international prison inspectorates:

Institutionalise Civil Society Participation

States and international inspectorates should embed formal roles for CSOs within legislative and regulatory frameworks. For instance, the SADC Parliamentary Forum’s 2025 model law initiative demonstrates how civil society expertise can be formally integrated into oversight mandates. Embedding CSO participation in law ensures consistency and shields against political resistance.

Strengthen Collaborative Training and Capacity-Building

Inspectorates and CSOs should co-develop joint training modules on human rights standards, monitoring techniques, and reporting methods. The ICRC–Bangladesh collaboration demonstrates how joint training promotes a culture of rights-respecting custodial management and enhances the legitimacy of the inspectorate.

Develop Shared Data Platforms

Evidence-based oversight requires transparent, shared data systems that incorporate CSO input. The Prison Audit model offers a blueprint for structured collaboration through data collection, referral systems, and evidence synthesis. Expanding such models could improve consistency and reduce duplication in monitoring.

Enhance Financial Sustainability of CSOs

Donors, inspectorates, and states should diversify funding for CSOs to reduce dependency and vulnerability. The European Commission highlights how resource instability undermines CSO contributions to prison oversight. Establishing pooled funding mechanisms or state–civil society co-financing arrangements could ensure long-term engagement.

Promote Regional and Global Knowledge-Sharing

Networks such as the UNODC Informal CSO Group on Health in Prison should be expanded to include regional and local CSOs. Knowledge-sharing platforms can enhance capacity, harmonise practices, and amplify advocacy efforts, particularly in underrepresented regions.

Embed CSO Roles in Accountability Ecosystems

Inspectorates should adopt a multi-actor accountability approach that leverages CSOs as intermediaries between state institutions, international bodies, and the public. This ecosystemic model promotes transparency, fosters legitimacy, and enhances compliance with human rights norms.

⁸⁷ Fox, “Accountability Ecosystems: Directions for Research and Practice”; Carothers and Brechenmacher, *Accountability Ecosystems: Civil Society and Democratic Resilience*.

⁸⁸ Ansell and Torfing, *Handbook on Theories of Governance*; Emerson and Nabatchi, “Evaluating the Productivity of Collaborative Governance Regimes: A Performance Matrix.”

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that civil society is indispensable in enhancing the effectiveness of international prison inspectorates. Through independent monitoring, advocacy, training, and policy engagement, CSOs contribute to greater transparency, accountability, and compliance with human rights standards in custodial environments. The findings confirm that inspectorates operating in isolation often face structural and political barriers, but collaboration with civil society strengthens their legitimacy and broadens their reach. The research also highlights persistent challenges, including resource instability, political resistance, and uneven legal frameworks, which undermine the sustainability of civil society participation. Addressing these challenges requires formal institutionalisation of CSO roles, stronger financial support mechanisms, and expanded regional and global knowledge-sharing networks. From a theoretical standpoint, the study validates the Accountability Ecosystems Theory by demonstrating that CSOs act as intermediaries, linking public concerns, inspectorate mandates, and state obligations. It also affirms Collaborative Governance Theory, as joint initiatives between inspectorates and CSOs generate results that neither actor could achieve alone.

Contributions to Penological Scholarship

This study contributes to corrections and penology scholarship in three ways. First, it provides evidence-based insights into how civil society enhances oversight, moving beyond normative claims to highlight specific practices. Second, it advances comparative understanding by integrating perspectives from Africa, Europe, and Asia, illustrating the contextual and universal dimensions of CSO-inspectorate partnerships. Third, it enriches theoretical debates by linking collaborative governance and accountability ecosystems to prison oversight, providing a framework for analysing multi-actor accountability in closed institutions. Ultimately, the research highlights that safeguarding detainees' rights necessitates not only institutional inspectorates but also the active and sustained engagement of civil society as co-architects of accountability.

Limitations

This study relied exclusively on secondary sources, without direct field interviews or participant observation. While systematic review methods enhance reliability and transparency, limitations include potential publication bias, underrepresentation of non-English literature, and restricted access to some closed institutional reports. Additionally, the heavy reliance on policy documents may reflect institutional biases; however, triangulation with peer-reviewed studies mitigates this risk. Despite these limitations, the chosen design is robust for synthesising cross-national perspectives on civil society engagement and lays a strong foundation for future empirical research.

Avenues For Future Research

While this study highlights key roles and practices, several gaps in the literature and practice call for further investigation:

Empirical Impact of CSO Participation

Future studies should quantitatively assess the impact of CSO engagement on prison conditions, detainee well-being, and compliance with rights. Existing evidence is largely qualitative or normative. Rigorous mixed-method studies could strengthen causal claims about impact.

Comparative Studies Across Jurisdictions

Cross-national research comparing legal frameworks for CSO participation in oversight is needed. While SADC countries are developing regional norms, there is limited comparative work that contrasts oversight practices across Africa, Europe, and Asia. Such studies could identify context-specific and universal best practices.

Digital Innovation in Oversight

Few studies have explored the role of digital technologies and data tools in facilitating collaboration between civil society and inspectors. Future research could examine how mobile apps, blockchain, or AI-powered monitoring platforms might support transparent inspections.

Resilience of CSOs Under Authoritarian Regimes

Political resistance often constrains CSO engagement. Future research should investigate strategies that enable CSOs to operate effectively in restrictive environments, including implementing legal safeguards, engaging in international advocacy, and forming transnational coalitions.

Gender-Responsive Oversight and CSO Roles

Women and other vulnerable groups in detention often face unique challenges, yet their experiences are underrepresented in oversight literature. Future research should explore how CSOs can integrate gender-responsive and intersectional approaches into inspectorate collaborations.

Longitudinal Studies on Sustainability

There is little longitudinal evidence on the long-term sustainability of CSO-inspectorate partnerships. Research tracking partnerships over time could illuminate factors that enable the durability, adaptation, and resilience of collaborative governance.

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