

Jamaica

Country Focus Report

October 2025



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SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY



SUPPORTING
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A) An Introduction to the Enabling Environment

Country Focus Reports (CFRs) offer an evidence-based analysis of the enabling environment for civil society, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and actionable recommendations to bolster democratic participation. Civil society plays a critical role in promoting democratic values, advocating for human rights, and fostering accountability. An enabling environment ensures CSOs can operate freely, access resources, and engage with the state and public effectively.

The CFR for Jamaica is a pivotal resource for stakeholders committed to strengthening the democratic ecosystem, including civil society organisations (CSOs), government entities, international donors, and community advocates. By providing a comprehensive analysis of the enabling environment, the CFR aims to illuminate the structural, legal, and societal factors that facilitate or hinder CSOs' contributions to democratic governance. This includes their role in advancing human rights, promoting social justice, and holding public institutions accountable. The report's findings are particularly relevant, offering a roadmap for addressing emerging challenges and leveraging opportunities to enhance civic participation.

The report's six principles—covering fundamental freedoms, legal frameworks, resources, state responsiveness, public discourse, and digital access—provide a structured framework for evaluating Jamaica's enabling environment. Quantitative scores, derived from expert assessments, are paired with qualitative narratives to offer a nuanced understanding of enabling and disabling factors. For instance, while Jamaica's constitutional protections are robust, practical challenges like political rhetoric and bureaucratic hurdles limit CSOs' effectiveness.

The CFR's recommendations aim to bridge these gaps, advocating for reforms to streamline CSO operations, enhance government transparency, and foster inclusive public dialogue.



SIX ENABLING PRINCIPLES

- 1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms**
- 2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework**
- 3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources**
- 4. Open and Responsive State**
- 5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society**
- 6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment**

In this Country Focus Report, each enabling principle is assessed with a quantitative score and complemented by an analysis and recommendations written by our Network Members. Rather than offering a singular index to rank countries, the report aims to measure the enabling environment for civil society across the six principles, discerning dimensions of strength and those requiring attention.

The findings presented in this report are grounded in the insights and diverse perspectives of civil society actors who came together in a dedicated panel with representatives from civil society to discuss and evaluate the state of the Enabling Environment. Their collective input enriches the report with a grounded, participatory assessment. This primary input is further supported by secondary sources of information, which provide additional context and strengthen the analysis.

Brief Overview of the Country Context

Jamaica's democratic framework provides a solid foundation for civil society, yet systemic challenges undermine its potential to fully enable CSO operations. The [2011 Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms](#) establishes clear protections for civic freedoms, but their practical application is inconsistent, particularly for organisations addressing contentious issues like police reform, anti-corruption, and environmental justice. The baseline snapshot notes that public officials' hostile rhetoric, such as labelling CSOs as "criminal enablers" or "political", has intensified, creating a chilling effect on advocacy.

The constitutional review process by the Joint Select Committee represented a critical opportunity to strengthen democratic institutions, but the lack of effective inclusion of CSO input signalled a lack of genuine collaboration. In 2024/25, CSOs submitted detailed recommendations on

constitutional amendments, yet [none were invited to present in person](#), and there is no evidence of their contributions shaping the process.

Meaningful civil society input is compounded by legislative barriers, such as the misuse of the Data Protection Act to deny information requests, which limits CSOs' ability to monitor government actions. Economic pressures also challenge the enabling environment. The reduction in international funding due to global priorities shifting toward conflict zones like Ukraine and Gaza has [strained CSO operations](#), particularly for smaller organisations serving marginalised communities. Rural CSOs face additional hurdles due to limited resources and digital access, exacerbating urban-rural disparities.

There is a need for inclusive dialogue, legal reforms, and public education to counter these challenges. Strengthening state-CSO partnerships, enhancing transparency through the Access to Information Act, and addressing divisive rhetoric are critical to fostering a supportive environment for civil society as Jamaica navigates this pivotal electoral period.

B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

PRINCIPLE SCORE

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

Score: 4.4/5 ¹



The [2011 Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms](#) provides robust legal protections for expression, assembly, and association, generally upheld in practice. However, there are inconsistencies in implementation, particularly for freedom of expression. The relatively high score reflects strong legal frameworks tempered by practical barriers, such as stigma, bureaucratic delays, and targeted harassment, aligning with the “enabling” vignette where most groups can exercise freedoms but face some hurdles.

1.1 | Freedom of Association

The 2011 Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms (Section 13(3)(b)) protects the right to form and join associations without undue restrictions on leadership or foreign funding. No formal bans exist, and individuals can establish informal groups without mandatory registration. However, citizens who wish to establish foundations or other charitable organisations must register with the [Companies Office of Jamaica](#) and the [Department of Friendly and Cooperative Societies](#) so that they can receive tax benefits as a ‘charitable’ entity. While the legal framework is relatively strong, challenges exist for grassroots groups in rural areas or smaller NGOs. For instance, a small non-profit organisation reported that in trying to register the organisation with

¹This is a rebased score derived from the [CIVICUS Monitor rating](#) published in December 2024.

the relevant authorities, it faced pressure to align with government priorities, delaying registration. While Jamaica has established LGBTQI+ groups, these groups face social stigma that discourages open organising, with [some members reporting](#) informal barriers like threats from communities.

1.2 | Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Freedom of assembly is generally seen as enabling, though experiences vary by organisation, advocacy issues and geographic location.

Permits for assemblies, for example permits for protests from the Jamaican Constabulary Force are accessible under the Charter (Section 13(3)(c)), with the [Public Order Act \(1960, Section 4\)](#) requiring notification rather than approval, typically processed within 7-14 days. Urban CSOs, such as those in Kingston, report approvals within this timeframe, but rural CSOs have indicated that they face delays averaging 20 days due to heightened scrutiny from local authorities. Excessive force is rare, with no reported incidents during 2024/25 protests - though an incident occurred in 2021 where protestors, including a [leader of a third political party was arrested](#) for breaching the Public Order Act when protesting without a permit against Covid vaccines.

However, while state-driven excessive force is rare, pre- and post-event backlash creates a chilling effect, particularly for assemblies on sensitive topics like environmental justice or police reform. A case study illustrates this: In April 2025, Jamaicans for Justice (JFJ) organised a peaceful protest against police violence, approved by the police. Despite constitutional protections, the protest [faced backlash](#) when the police federation head labelled JFJ as a “terrorist” group and the prime minister wearing blue to demonstrate that he stood with the police, triggering threatening online responses from political party supporters. This incident underscores the gap between legal protections and practical implementation, particularly when CSOs criticise state actions.

1.3 | Freedom of Expression

While it could be contended that the environment is fully enabling due to clear legislative provisions, one may also contend that restrictive laws, such as [sections 76-79 of the Offences Against the Person Act](#), which impose criminal sanctions for certain expressions, are disabling for civil society leaders who identify as or provide support for members of the LGBTQI+ community. These specific provisions deter open advocacy on some matters such as sexual and reproductive health rights, force self-censorship, and limit CSO operations for open assembly of its members. Jamaica's ranking on the World Press Freedom Index [slipped from](#) 24th in 2024 to 26th in 2025, prompting calls to amend the [Access to Information Act](#) to address underlying issues. For example, media practitioners have increasingly faced accusations of being “political” by political parties, with their pictures circulated on social media to discredit their reporting. In 2024, a prominent political leader characterised the media as targeting the leader of one of the two main political parties, while the leader of the other main political party labelled a particular media house as politically aligned. The [Press Association of Jamaica](#) had to condemn the utterances.

CSOs, such as Jamaicans for Justice, National Integrity Action (NIA) and Jamaica Accountability Meter Portal (JAMP), faced online harassment and threatening comments when the organisations

PRINCIPLE SCORE

2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

spoke on matters of governance and corruption. Civil society actors are also [labelled as political](#) and aligned with one political party or another. Following an April 2025 protest against police violence, the head of the police federation [label JFJ](#) as a “terrorist” organisation without public sanction.

Score: 3.3/5



The [2011 Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms](#) and the [Charities Act](#) (2013, with 2022 regulations) provide a conducive framework for CSO registration and operation. However, CSO representatives described the registration process as onerous, unclear, and inconsistently applied, particularly for smaller and advocacy-focused organisations. The score aligns with the “partially enabling” vignette where some groups face scrutiny, registration is bureaucratic, and protections exist but are inconsistently enforced. CSOs noted that these barriers disproportionately affect rural and marginalised groups, necessitating reforms to streamline processes and enhance transparency.

2.1 | Registration

The [Companies Act](#) (2004, amended 2023) and [Cooperative and Friendly Societies](#) permit any person to establish a CSO, but marginalised groups face heightened scrutiny. For instance, LGBTQI+ organisations may encounter barriers due to the Offences Against the Person Act (1864, Sections 76-79), which criminalises certain expressions, [detering registration](#) for advocacy groups addressing gender identity. In other words, they have to ensure when registering that the language fits within the government’s predefined language of a [charitable purpose](#).

The Charities Act (2013, with 2022 regulations) imposes stringent membership and reporting requirements, straining smaller CSOs’ resources. While the registration fees (J\$5,000-J\$25,000)

are not unduly exorbitant, the unclear guidelines on “charitable purpose” (Charities Act, 2013) beyond the prescribed listing as outlined in schedule 1 of the Act create financial and procedural obstacles, particularly for rural and smaller CSOs with limited legal support. For example, a rural-based community organisation reported that it faced a six-month delay in obtaining a charity certificate in 2024 due to unclear documentation requirements, such as inconsistent demands for financial statements, forcing it to suspend operations. CSOs cited cases where registration experiences depended on individual officials, with one describing the process as “violent” due to forced changes to organisational objectives.

Non-profit organisations must also act in compliance with the [U.S. Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act \(FATCA\)](#), which [strains](#) smaller CSOs’ resources. CSOs made note of the 2023 amendments to the Companies Act (2004), which aim to strengthen Jamaica’s anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism efforts, aligning with international standards. However, they argued that the amendments further complicate an already administratively burdensome process by imposing reduced beneficial owners/membership thresholds that negatively impacts smaller CSO groups, particularly those focused on indigenous or environmental issues. These are accompanied by increased reporting requirements and regulatory thresholds that smaller groups have difficulties in adhering to or achieving in a timely manner.

It is noted that a strong regulatory framework is needed to ensure that individuals and companies do not abuse the provisions received once charitable status is given. Accordingly, the Charities Act’s clear guidelines, along with FATCA compliance, provide strong oversight mechanisms that align with global anti-money laundering standards and help safeguard Jamaica’s financial reputation. These measures enhance the legal framework by reducing the risk of misuse of CSO status. However, several CSOs countered that the resulting administrative burdens fall disproportionately on smaller organisations—particularly those working with marginalised communities or on environmental issues—potentially limiting their effectiveness and sustainability.

To address these challenges, there should be legislative reforms aimed at simplifying registration processes and reducing compliance burdens—particularly for grassroots civil society organisations (CSOs). It also emphasised the importance of training government officials to ensure consistent application of regulations, and called for the public disclosure of criteria for designating “Protected Charities.” These measures would enhance transparency and better align Jamaica’s regulatory framework with international standards. Such reforms are essential to fostering an enabling environment for civil society, especially in the context of increasing political scrutiny of CSOs.

Although a formal appeal mechanism exists under Section 37 of the Charities Act for denied registrations or other contested decisions, the process is reportedly slow and overly legalistic. This often necessitates costly legal representation, which is largely inaccessible to smaller organisations.

2.2 | Operational Environment

The [Charities Act](#) (2013, Section 15) mandates that CSOs align their objectives with a predefined list of charitable purposes outlined in the Act’s First Schedule. This legal constraint limits the

autonomy of advocacy-oriented CSOs, as they must obtain approval from the Department of Cooperatives and Friendly Societies (DCFS) to pursue goals outside this framework. As a result, the regulatory environment may inadvertently suppress independent civic advocacy.

Access to funding is similarly regulated. Section 10 of the Charities Act permits tax-deductible domestic donations but imposes stringent reporting obligations aligned with Financial Action Task Force (FATF) standards, including annual audits. These requirements, while aimed at financial transparency, disproportionately burden smaller CSOs that often lack the administrative capacity to comply. Consequently, their eligibility for international grants is curtailed, reinforcing structural inequalities within the sector.

The [Protected Disclosures Act](#) (2011) provides a legal basis for whistleblower protections, which are critical for accountability-focused CSOs working on governance and anti-corruption. However, the Act's limitations—particularly its exclusion of disclosures made to external parties—create legal ambiguity. This exposes whistleblowers and the CSOs that receive their information to potential risk. In a 2023 submission to the Joint Select Committee, a CSO highlighted the lack of clarity regarding protections for organisations that receive and act on whistleblower disclosures. During the 2024/25 period, at least two CSOs reportedly moderated their public advocacy to avoid endangering sources, underscoring the chilling effect of this legal uncertainty.

Therefore, while Jamaica's legal framework provides foundational support for civil society operations, key regulatory and legislative gaps—particularly around advocacy autonomy, financial compliance, and whistleblower protections—continue to constrain the sector's effectiveness and resilience.

2.3 | Protection from Interference

While the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms (2011, Section 13(3)(b)) explicitly prohibits the arbitrary dissolution of civil society organisations, this protection is undermined by provisions in the Charities Act (2013, Section 22). The Act permits the revocation of charitable status based on broadly defined “public interest” grounds—specifically, if a charity is deemed to be “conducting affairs in a manner that harms or jeopardizes public trust and confidence.” This vague language opens the door to subjective interpretation and potential misuse. Although affected organisations may appeal such decisions, the 28-day filing window and associated legal costs [present significant barriers](#), particularly for smaller or under-resourced CSOs.

Further concerns arise from the “Protected Charities” clause introduced in the [Charities Regulations \(2022\)](#). Stakeholders have flagged this provision as a potential mechanism for undue state interference, citing the absence of clear, transparent criteria for designation. This ambiguity raises questions about compliance with Article 11 of the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) (ECHR), which guarantees freedom of association. While the ECHR does not impose obligations on Jamaica, its jurisprudence serves as a valuable benchmark in a common-law tradition that values comparative human rights analysis.

Civil society actors acknowledge the state's legitimate interest in preventing misuse of charitable status—such as for money laundering—but argue that the current regulatory framework imposes disproportionate burdens. These include bureaucratic delays in obtaining charity certificates and

PRINCIPLE SCORE

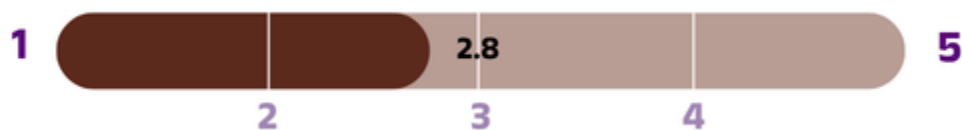
3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

compliance challenges linked to overlapping legislation, such as the FATCA and the [Tax Administration Act](#) (2013). Some CSOs have emphasised the risk of selective enforcement and the chilling effect such uncertainty can have on civic space.

Case Study

A CSO noted that it faced significant challenges during registration, including pressure to alter its organisational objectives and add unnecessary wording to its name, which later caused litigation issues. This experience highlights how bureaucratic inconsistencies hinder CSO formation, particularly for those advocating for marginalised groups.

Score: 2.8/5



It is noted that there is a fiscal environment that supports CSOs but it is hindered by bureaucratic barriers and inconsistent application, particularly for smaller and advocacy-focused organisations. The Charities Act (2013) provides tax exemptions and funding access, but unclear criteria and burdensome reporting limit access and affect sustainability, especially for CSOs serving marginalised communities. The score of 2.8/5 reflects a partially enabling to disenabling environment, where fiscal policies support CSOs but administrative hurdles disproportionately affect smaller groups. A simplified tax criteria and streamlined processes are recommended to enhance CSO sustainability.

3.1 | Accessibility

A precarious financial landscape limits Jamaican CSOs, with international funding constraints exacerbating sustainability challenges. Dependence on donors such as USAID and the European Union, combined with stringent requirements like PADOR registration and cash-matching obligations, poses substantial barriers for smaller CSOs—especially those advocating for broad human rights, marginalised groups, indigenous communities, and environmental rights. The 2024/25 shift in global aid priorities toward conflict zones like Ukraine and Gaza has reduced available funding, forcing some CSOs to downscale or shut down. For example, a Kingston-based NGO focused on gender-based violence prevention reported a 50% budget cut in 2024 due to reduced USAID support, limiting its outreach to vulnerable communities.

Competition for USAID/EU grants favours larger urban CSOs, while rural applicants face a 70% lower success rate due to PADOR complexities, deepening inequities for indigenous rights groups. However, the European Union has stipulated in its last grant cycle and its upcoming grant cycle for Jamaica that grants over a particular dollar value must have third party support to smaller NGOs. Further, while CSOs have access to information about grants as most international grants are widely advertised, smaller CSOs often fail to meet administrative requirements—such as audited financial reports—limiting their eligibility.

The Charities Act (2013, Section 10) grants tax exemptions to registered CSOs, but unclear and inconsistently applied criteria for “charitable purpose” create barriers, particularly for smaller CSOs and those in sensitive sectors. For instance, an LGBTQI+ advocacy and service provider group struggled to secure charitable status in 2024 due to restrictive interpretations of “charitable purpose” linked to the Offences Against the Person Act (1864, Sections 76-79), which criminalises certain expressions. Similarly, an environmental CSO faced delays in maintaining tax-exempt status due to complex compliance requirements.

Tax-deductible donations are permitted for registered CSOs. However, given the prolonged delays and administrative burden faced by some organisations, they are not registered with the Department of Friendly Societies to benefit from this provision, limiting their fundraising capacity. A 2024 case study illustrates this: a rural environmental CSO in St. Ann lost its tax-exempt status after failing to submit financial statements on time, halting its conservation programmes for six months. These challenges disproportionately affect smaller CSOs and those serving marginalised communities, which face additional scrutiny.

Banks and financial service providers impose onerous documentation requirements to comply with standards set by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)—the global intergovernmental body that establishes rules to combat money laundering and terrorist financing. As a result, CSOs face a high administrative burden. However, there are no reports of account freezes or misuse of sensitive banking data for surveillance or intimidation.

3.2 | Effectiveness

The government imposes no restrictions on how CSOs use funds and resources. However, donors impose strict conditions, such as quarterly reporting and 10% overhead caps. International donors have further reduced allocations for administrative costs, such as staffing, leaving CSOs unable to meet operational demands and, in some cases, at risk of breaching labour laws due to tax implications distinguishing employees from contractors.

Local funding avenues—like community fundraisers and faith-based partnerships—remain underdeveloped and insufficient to sustain CSO operations. Private-sector partnerships, while

promising, are often misaligned with CSO objectives, favouring corporate branding over community-driven goals. A 2024 attempt by one of the CSOs to establish a corporate funding pool faltered due to lack of sustained commitment from businesses, highlighting the need for structured domestic funding mechanisms. CSOs emphasise that funding misalignments force CSOs to prioritise donor-driven agendas, such as HIV programmes, over pressing local issues like police reform or environmental protection. This disconnect undermines the ability of CSOs to address emerging needs, particularly in rural areas where community priorities differ from urban-centric donor frameworks. For instance, environmental CSOs in St. Ann struggled to secure funding for anti-mining advocacy in the Cockpit Country, as donors prioritised global climate initiatives over local conservation efforts.

Some international donors do consult with a wide range of civil society groups to inform proposal calls, for example, the EU, and USAID before its defunct status. However, most do not. Further, even when the thematic areas are aligned with CSOs, the challenge is that the funding modality and support to administrative expenses is misaligned.

Donors also fail to address security risks, leaving CSOs exposed when tackling sensitive issues like police reform or anti-corruption. In 2024/25, at least three CSOs received threats and hostile messages, prompting one to hire armed security for community-level interventions—without donor assistance.

3.3 | Sustainability

Diversification remains low, with 80% of CSOs reliant on one or two donors, heightening closure risks amid global shifts. The lack of diverse funding sources threatens the sustainability of physical infrastructure. This poses a significant challenge for most Jamaican CSOs, as only larger organisations own buildings and assets like motor vehicles or buses, with some benefiting from extended annual renewal leases from the government or private sector. In contrast, the majority of CSOs, particularly smaller and rural ones, rely on renting office spaces, facing high costs and unstable tenures that threaten operational continuity. For instance, a Kingston-based CSO reported in 2024 that rising rental costs and reduced funding forced it to close its doors, disrupting community outreach programmes. These disparities exacerbate inequalities within the civil society sector, limiting smaller CSOs' ability to maintain a stable presence and serve marginalised communities effectively.

CSOs face funding gaps from short-term, project-based grants (one to three years) with rigid cycles causing delays, programme pauses, and staff layoffs. This projectisation creates high administrative burdens, precarious employment, and disrupted services, undermining continuity and long-term sustainability. The resource environment, dominated by restricted funding (<10% core), forces reactive operations over strategic planning, limiting impact on social justice, education, and climate goals. Donors' aversion to overheads stifles capacity building. Multi-year core funding and CSO-government partnerships are needed for resilience and autonomy.

Government funding through [subventions](#) offers a potential but limited avenue for CSO support in Jamaica, constrained by low funding levels and risks of political interference. While some CSOs, particularly those aligned with government priorities like health or education, receive small subventions, the amounts are often insufficient to sustain operations, forcing reliance on international donors. CSOs must exercise caution to avoid real or perceived political interference,

as accepting government funds can lead to accusations of bias, especially for organisations critical of state policies. Discussions on social contracting, supported by USAID and Global Fund research from 2016–2021, have not progressed due to government reluctance, CSOs' limited capacity to cost their services accurately, and the state's unwillingness to fund adversarial CSOs, such as those focused on anti-corruption or human rights, further limiting sustainable domestic funding options.

While CSOs do engage volunteers, this approach is unsustainable without dedicated staff to manage them. Some CSOs employ paid interns, which better supports operations by offering incentives. Although a few CSOs generate income through research consultancies or small-scale projects, these efforts are not sustainable and divert time from staff, who often lack the expertise to run business-oriented initiatives.

To improve resource accessibility and long-term viability, it is recommended to develop domestic funding frameworks, including enhanced tax incentives for private-sector donations to CSOs. Donors should provide flexible, long-term grants tailored to Jamaica's context, with simplified application processes for smaller organisations. Capacity-building programmes focused on grant-writing and financial management would enable CSOs to compete more effectively for international funding. These measures are critical to reducing reliance on unpredictable external aid and fostering a resilient civil society sector.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

4. Open and Responsive State

Score 3.2/5



Jamaica's state provides a legal framework for transparency and participation through the Access to Information Act (2002), but tokenistic consultations and inconsistent implementation hinder meaningful CSO engagement. Bureaucratic delays in information requests, limited proactive disclosure, and weak accountability mechanisms, such as low response rates to oversight petitions, restrict CSOs' ability to influence governance. Rural and marginalised groups face exclusion from policy dialogues, exacerbating disparities. These challenges, coupled with occasional government resistance to CSO input result in a partially enabling environment, reflecting a system with potential but significant practical barriers.

4.1 | Transparency

Jamaica's legal framework recognises the right of individuals and organisations to access information held by public institutions through the [Access to Information Act \(2002\)](#), which applies nationally and covers private entities performing public functions. However, proactive publication remains inconsistent: while the Ministry of Finance uploads budgets, and draft laws (Bills) are uploaded on the Houses of Parliament website, most government bodies rarely upload annual reports or other organisational materials, and local parish councils seldom maintain digital repositories, limiting timely online access. There are constitutional bodies and commissions of parliament, such as the Auditor General, Independent Commission of Investigation and the Integrity Commission of Jamaica that proactively publish data and reports, likely due to the investigative accountability nature of their operations. Others such as the Office of the Public Defender rarely publish annual or special reports.

Public institutions are not legally mandated to publish comprehensive decision-making information proactively, except in limited statutory requirements for certain bodies such as the Integrity Commission. The [Access to Information Act \(2002\)](#) requires disclosure only upon request, with no obligation for routine release of policy papers, or procurement contracts. It is

important to note that each ministry or government body may upload contracts issued, but there is no centralised portal for same.

Procedures for filing Access to Information requests exist under the Act. Requests must be addressed to the specific public authorities with possible reproduction fees being applied, though waivers are available. Yet, response times frequently exceed the statutory 30 days—sometimes stretching to months—due to bureaucratic bottlenecks and overuse of exemptions.

The Access to Information Act is undermined by frequent denials citing national security and delays in responses, exacerbated by the [Data Protection Act](#) being used [to circumvent transparency](#). Jamaica's colonial [Official Secrets Act](#) is a contradictory force, fostering a culture of secrecy that hinders accountability. For example, a 2024 request by one CSO for procurement data was denied on national security grounds, despite compliance with the [Procurement Laws \(2015\)](#), illustrating systemic barriers to transparency.

Legal protections against unjustified denial of access to information are inadequate. Although appeal mechanisms exist through the independent Access to Information Appeal Tribunal, enforcement is undermined by structural weaknesses: the body lacks ability to summons witnesses, for example. Critically, in 2024, the [Tribunal remained unconstituted](#) for at least seven months, paralysing appeals until public pressure from civil society prompted appointments.

It is noted that Jamaica's commitment to review the Access to Information Act (2002) under the [Open Government Partnership \(OGP\)](#) since 2011 remains unfulfilled, with no amendments implemented despite recommendations from the 2011 Joint Select Committee (JSC) report to strengthen the ATI Unit and extend the public interest test. The ATI Unit's effectiveness is also raised, noting its shift from the Office of the Prime Minister to the Ministry of Education and Youth, which may compromise its authority. In contrast, other jurisdictions have independent statutory agencies or integrate such functions within the Office of the Information Commissioner, ensuring greater autonomy and enforcement power. This lack of reform and institutional independence limits CSOs' access to timely, reliable government data, undermining accountability efforts.

4.2 | Participation

CSO actors in Jamaica are consulted by policymakers to a limited extent through formal structures like the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Multi-Stakeholder Forum (MSF), which plays a critical role in advancing transparency and accountability. The MSF, established under Jamaica's OGP commitments, facilitates dialogue between CSOs and the government, enabling organisations to advocate for policy reforms. This engagement has led to incremental progress, such as the [2024 draft guidelines for public consultations](#), though implementation remains inconsistent.

The MSF's role underscores the potential for structured collaboration to enhance government responsiveness, provided commitments are fully actioned. However, CSOs' ability to influence decision-making meaningfully is severely constrained. Government responsiveness varies significantly across ministries, undermining consistent CSO engagement. Some ministers actively involve CSOs in working groups, respond promptly to requests, and initiate or accept courtesy calls, fostering constructive dialogue. Others are dismissive and CSO emails often go unanswered or receive delayed responses unless media pressure is applied, highlighting the need for adherence to standardised engagement protocols. CSO submissions to legislative

processes, such as 2024 job descriptions for parliamentarians, [are often ignored](#), with no recommendations adopted. The [Final Environmental Impact Assessment](#) (EIA) for Special Mining Lease 173 (SML 173) disregarded CSO input on mining in the Cockpit Country, further illustrating tokenistic engagement.

Jamaica's parliamentary process often subjects significant laws to Joint Select Committees (JSCs), but these are poorly advertised with short submission timeframes, limiting broader citizen input. For instance, the Constitutional Reform Republic Bill to transition Jamaica to a republic initially [lacked clarity](#) on whether it would be reviewed by a JSC, requiring civil society advocacy to secure this process. When placed before a JSC in 2024, civil society was given only [a two-week window](#) from invitation to submission, despite government claims that the JSC's convening was widely known, and public consultation on this supreme law was [deemed insufficient](#) by CSOs.

Participation is generally free from overt discrimination. However, civil society organisations perceived as government-aligned or non-confrontational tend to receive preferential treatment—such as timely responses and proactive engagement—while those viewed as critical or advocacy-driven often encounter delayed replies, ignored communications, or exclusion from processes unless their concerns gain media traction. Crucially, there is no formal policy guaranteeing equitable treatment across different types of actors or political orientations. Moreover, CSOs are seldom engaged at the initial stages of decision-making. Their input is typically solicited only after internal drafts have been finalised, with consultation periods ranging from just 7 to 14 days. These short windows are inadequate for thorough analysis or meaningful feedback from constituencies, reducing participation to a procedural formality rather than a substantive deliberative process.

Participation opportunities are both in-person and online. In-person events are concentrated in Kingston, creating accessibility barriers for rural or resource-constrained CSOs.

4.3 | Accountability

The Jamaican government provides limited and non-systematic feedback to civil society organisations regarding the use of their input in decision-making processes. There is no public documentation or formal reporting mechanism to explain how CSO submissions—such as those related to the SML 173 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for Cockpit Country or the 2024 parliamentary job descriptions—were assessed, incorporated, or dismissed. This lack of transparency leaves CSOs uncertain about the extent of their influence on policy outcomes.

To clarify, while parliamentary submissions to Joint Select Committees may occasionally indicate whether a CSO recommendation was accepted or rejected—along with justifications in the committee's report—this practice is inconsistent and largely absent in broader, non-parliamentary consultations.

There are no formal mechanisms through which CSOs can challenge the disregard of their input or hold public officials accountable for ignoring evidence-based recommendations. The government does not provide dedicated follow-up platforms for CSOs to monitor how their contributions are reflected in policy implementation. Although the Multi-Stakeholder Forum (MSF) facilitates dialogue, it lacks structured processes for systematic review or public reporting on the fulfilment of government commitments, thereby weakening accountability for both state pledges and civil society input.

CSOs that attempt to hold the government accountable often face backlash, including being labelled as “terrorists” or “political”, which creates a chilling effect on participation. Moreover, while some engagement has led to incremental progress, the absence of robust accountability mechanisms and inconsistent implementation continue to undermine the effectiveness of civil society advocacy.

Formal avenues like [petitions](#) to the Office of the Prime Minister exist, but response rates are low, with a high threshold that is difficult to meet, specifically gathering 15,000 signatures within 40 days, limiting CSO oversight. Further sanctions for non-responsiveness are rare.

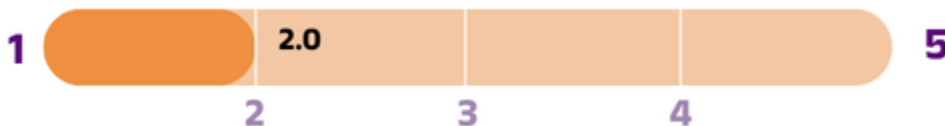
Case Study

In 2024, CSOs submitted recommendations on parliamentary job descriptions, but none were incorporated into the final document, as reported by [Radio Jamaica News](#) (2024). This tokenistic consultation process illustrates the government’s lack of responsiveness, undermining CSO contributions to policymaking.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society

Score: 2.0/5



Jamaica's public culture is marked by polarised discourse, with CSOs facing hostile political rhetoric often labelling them as “criminal enablers”, creating a chilling effect on advocacy. Though media reporting is generally balanced, opinion-based journalism sometimes reflects bias, with partisan narratives which limit public trust and engagement. Marginalised groups, including groups of persons with disabilities and low-income communities, encounter stigma and economic barriers, reducing inclusion. This complex environment, characterised by nominal government recognition of civil society but significant societal resistance, contributes to a structurally disabling context for CSOs in Jamaica.

5.1 | Public Discourse and Constructive Dialogue on Civil Society

Public discourse surrounding CSOs in Jamaica is increasingly polarised, driven by hostile political rhetoric and a lack of widespread civic education. While Jamaica's free press—strengthened by the 2013 decriminalisation of defamation—has helped amplify CSO voices, political leaders have frequently undermined their legitimacy. Parliamentarians [have publicly labelled](#) CSOs as “criminal enablers” or “[political](#)” when they critique government actions, leading to online harassment and threats against CSO leaders.

This perception is further reinforced by instances of biased media coverage. For example, in 2025, Jamaica's for Justice (JFJ) [accused the Jamaica Observer](#) of sensationalised reporting that misrepresented its work, including an article that wrongly accused JFJ of “pouring cold water” on crime reduction efforts and echoed Police Commissioner Dr. Kevin Blake's call to avoid “vilification” of the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF). A February 2025 piece similarly dismissed

JFJ's advocacy by suggesting it lacked a “just cause”, distorting its mission on governance and accountability. Such narratives deepen partisan divides and obstruct constructive dialogue.

Despite these challenges, CSOs continue to leverage digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) to promote campaigns on issues like gender-based violence and environmental protection. However, political responses—such as the Prime Minister [wearing blue in April 2025](#) to counter JFJ's black-clad protest against police violence—have further heightened tensions and polarised public discourse. While media support exists, it is often undermined by divisive rhetoric and gaps in civic education.

CSOs have a critical role to play in fostering constructive public discourse by educating citizens about their contributions to social justice and democratic governance. Campaigns addressing issues such as gender-based violence have engaged hundreds of citizens, raising awareness of CSO advocacy. Balanced media reporting on CSO-led educational initiatives has helped clarify their democratic value. Nonetheless, CSOs must expand public engagement through workshops, media partnerships, and civic education initiatives to counter divisive narratives and promote informed participation. One notable example is a weekly radio programme hosted by a CSO on a popular station, which regularly features other CSOs and state actors, contributing to public dialogue and cross-sector collaboration.

5.2 | Perception of Civil Society and Civic Engagement

Public perception of CSOs in Jamaica remains ambivalent, particularly toward those engaged in governance and accountability work. While service-oriented CSOs—such as those supporting children or addressing widely accepted social issues—generally operate without resistance, organisations that critique government policies often face public suspicion. Many citizens perceive these CSOs as politically motivated or anti-government, a view shaped by hostile political rhetoric and limited civic education. Media distortions further reinforce this narrative, as illustrated by [the 2025 incident](#) in which Jamaicans for Justice (JFJ) accused a media outlet of misrepresenting its governance advocacy.

Although citizens acknowledge CSOs' contributions to social justice, accountability, and community development, those involved in governance or police reform are frequently associated with opposition agendas. This scepticism is compounded by a broader sense of political disempowerment. Citizens generally do not believe they can influence political decisions or meaningfully participate in political processes. Voter turnout has declined—reaching 60.7% in 2020—and civic engagement outside of election cycles remains low.

Community-level initiatives, such as environmental clean-ups and youth mentoring programmes, do exist but tend to be sporadic and concentrated in urban areas. Many citizens express disillusionment with formal political channels, citing unresponsive representatives and bureaucratic obstacles. There is limited evidence of sustained involvement in civic organisations or policy advocacy.

Civic education in Jamaica is both inaccessible and inadequate. While a civic curriculum is formally included in the national education system, teacher feedback and curriculum reviews suggest it is superficial—focusing primarily on basic governance structures without adequately addressing political rights, citizen agency, democratic participation, or the role of civil society. Community-based civic education programmes are rare, underfunded, and lack standardisation.

The absence of comprehensive, ongoing civic education in schools and communities contributes to persistent gaps in public understanding of democratic engagement and undermines the legitimacy of CSOs working on governance issues.

5.3 | Civic Equality and Inclusion

Jamaica's legal framework offers limited protection for equal civic participation. While the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms (2011, Section 13) guarantees basic civic rights, it does not explicitly prohibit discrimination based on gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, or health status. Moreover, the absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation leaves significant gaps in legal safeguards for marginalised groups.

Social and economic systems further entrench inequality. Individuals from low-income, rural, ethnic minority, and LGBTQI+ communities face systemic exclusion due to poverty, stigma, and inaccessible public venues. Women and persons with disabilities encounter physical and logistical barriers to participating in public consultations, including non-compliant infrastructure and lack of support services. These barriers are not incidental—they are structural and persistent, with no targeted state interventions to ensure equitable access.

Access to civic participation is shaped by class and geography. Urban, middle-class citizens dominate formal engagement processes, while rural and low-income communities often lack transportation, internet access, or awareness of opportunities to participate. LGBTQI+ individuals face threats and social ostracism that deter engagement. Ethnic minorities, such as Maroons and Rastafarians, report cultural marginalisation, and persons with disabilities struggle with inaccessible venues and materials. Women face compounded challenges, including caregiving responsibilities and safety concerns, which further limit their participation.

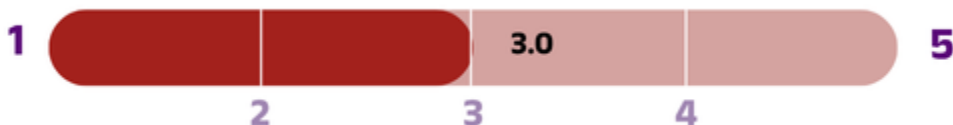
Social tolerance and respect for diversity remain low among dominant groups. Homophobia, though declining, is still widespread, with political and religious leaders frequently endorsing anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric. Stigma around disability and mental health persists, and ethnic and religious minorities are often subject to stereotyping. Public discourse tends to frame dissent—especially from marginalised voices—as disruptive rather than legitimate, undermining inclusive civic engagement.

While there are pockets of progressive advocacy, the prevailing environment is one of exclusion rather than mutual respect. Civic spaces lack the inclusivity needed to reflect Jamaica's diverse population, and without comprehensive civic education and legal reform, equal participation remains aspirational rather than realised.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Score: 3.0/5



Jamaica's digital environment remains relatively open and free from state-imposed restrictions. In 2024–2025, there were no reported internet shutdowns or instances of government censorship. However, enforcement gaps in the Data Protection Act (2020) and limitations in the Cybercrimes Act (2022) pose risks to CSOs, particularly in terms of digital security and privacy. Rural communities continue to face significant barriers, with relatively low internet penetration and low levels of digital literacy, which constrain their ability to engage in online advocacy and civic participation. CSOs are also vulnerable to non-state online harassment, and the high evidentiary thresholds required for enforcement under the Cybercrimes Act limit their access to legal remedies. Despite these challenges, initiatives such as the National Broadband Initiative have expanded digital access and infrastructure, contributing to a more enabling environment. Taken together, these factors yield an enabling score of 3, reflecting a digital ecosystem that is broadly supportive but still marked by critical gaps in protection, equity, and enforcement.

6.1 | Digital Rights and Freedoms

Jamaica's digital environment remains relatively open, with [no reported](#) internet shutdowns or instances of state-sponsored censorship in 2024–2025. This openness supports civil society engagement online, but significant legal and enforcement gaps continue to undermine digital rights and freedoms.

The [Data Protection Act](#) (2020) provides a regulatory framework for data handling, yet concerns persist regarding data breaches and weak compliance within the private sector. As of July 2025,

key provisions of the Act remain unenforced, leaving civil society organisations (CSOs) vulnerable to privacy violations and limiting the law’s protective capacity.

In 2024, the government [signalled legislative intent](#) to address misinformation, raising concerns about potential overreach and restrictions on dissenting voices, particularly those of CSOs. At the same time, the absence of a regulatory framework for artificial intelligence (AI) and deepfake technologies presents urgent risks. These tools can be weaponised to spread misinformation and fabricate content targeting CSOs. A balanced and rights-respecting framework is needed to address these emerging threats while safeguarding civic space.

The [Cybercrimes Act](#) (2015) outlines mechanisms for addressing digital offences, but enforcement remains inconsistent and inadequate. CSO leaders frequently face online harassment and threats, especially on platforms like X and YouTube. The Act’s high evidentiary thresholds for criminal charges discourage police intervention. In one 2024 case, a CSO leader was targeted in a two-hour YouTube video featuring her image alongside threatening comments, false allegations, and incitement to violence. Despite legal advice confirming that the threshold for criminal charges was met, police declined to act, recommending a civil suit instead. Such enforcement failures, coupled with limited police capacity to address cybercrime, exacerbate digital vulnerabilities for civil society actors.

While initiatives like the National Broadband Initiative have expanded digital access, especially in underserved areas, structural gaps in legal protection, enforcement, and digital literacy continue to undermine the safety and effectiveness of CSO engagement in the digital space.

6.2 | Digital Security and Privacy

There is currently no evidence of cyberattacks, spyware, malware, or digital surveillance conducted by government agencies or state-linked actors targeting CSOs in Jamaica. Platforms such as email and WhatsApp remain free from state-sponsored infiltration. However, non-state actors frequently engage in online harassment, particularly targeting human rights defenders. These incidents, while harmful, are typically unsophisticated and do not compromise systems or data integrity.

The Data Protection Act (2020) imposes important compliance obligations on all entities, including CSOs. These include the appointment of a Data Protection Officer (DPO) to oversee data governance. CSOs that manage sensitive personal data—such as client records—face significant financial and administrative burdens related to training, audits, and cybersecurity infrastructure. These costs are especially challenging for smaller, grassroots organisations. A proposed solution involves shared DPO arrangements among CSOs to build collective capacity, though this has yet to be implemented due to resource constraints. While the Act represents a positive step toward strengthening digital security, its compliance demands risk impacting smaller CSOs disproportionately, potentially limiting their operational effectiveness.

A Supreme Court ruling on Section 7(2) of the [Integrity Commission Act](#) expanded the Commission’s authority to request personal data, including information on minors, under the principle of “implied consent.” This development raises serious privacy concerns and the potential for state overreach into CSO-held records. Although no misuse has been documented to date, the ruling is recent and its implications remain uncertain. Redress mechanisms, such as filing

complaints with the Information Commissioner, exist but are underutilised due to low awareness and limited capacity among CSOs.

There is no evidence of coordinated disinformation campaigns or bot-driven manipulation of online discourse by government-linked actors. However, individual political figures and their supporters occasionally amplify negative narratives—labelling CSOs as “political” or “anti-development”—which contributes to organic online intimidation. These actions are ad hoc and lack the scale or automation typical of state-orchestrated campaigns. In response, CSOs often resort to self-censorship and platform monitoring to manage reputational risks.

6.3 | Digital Accessibility

Internet accessibility in Jamaica is moderately available but uneven, with an [83.4% penetration rate](#) as of January 2025, with rural areas having a 10% gap compared to urban areas. Government initiatives like the National Broadband Initiative and public Wi-Fi hotspots have driven connectivity, alongside efforts to expand rural access. Affordability is improving, due to competition with mobile broadband costs, with 108% cellular penetration enabling widespread mobile use—but fixed broadband remains pricier and slower to deploy in remote areas. [Quality varies](#): median fixed speeds reached 82 Mbps in early 2025 (up 35% YoY), while mobile averages 30 Mbps, hampered by coverage gaps in hilly terrains.

Civil society actors can generally access and share content online via platforms like X and email, though rural or under-resourced CSOs face intermittent disruptions, limiting real-time advocacy. Basic ICT skills and digital literacy among the general population are inadequate, with [adult literacy at 88% but digital-specific competencies low](#)—only ~40–50% proficient in online navigation, data interpretation, or cybersecurity basics, per education [ministry assessments](#). The workforce, including CSOs, fares similarly: while urban CSOs leverage tools for campaigns, grassroots groups lack training and have insufficient skills for effective digital operations. The [Ministry's](#) digital toolkit expansions and HEART/NSTA programmes aim to bridge this, not necessarily for CSOs but the wider citizenry, but coverage remains urban-biased, hindering CSOs' ability to effectively participate. Civil society leaders have indicated the [importance of digital literacy](#) in countering misinformation and for improved citizen participation.

Emerging technologies like AI are nascent in shaping accessibility, with government forming a [National AI Task Force](#) in 2025 to boost adoption in sectors like education and BPO. Initiatives like the Amber HEART/NSTA Coding Academy [integrate AI literacy](#) from September 2025, targeting Grades 3-9. However, the population and CS actors are poorly equipped, with low baseline skills. Without scaled-up training, these technologies risk widening inequities rather than enhancing inclusion.

Case Study

The proposed misinformation law announced in June 2024 sparked concerns among CSOs about vague definitions, potentially targeting critical voices. This development, reported by the Jamaica Gleaner (24 June 2024), highlights risks to digital freedoms despite an otherwise open digital environment.

C) Recommendations

Based on the gaps identified in the report, the following recommendations are proposed:

To the Government of Jamaica

Department of Co-operatives and Friendly Societies

- Streamline CSO registration processes by clarifying documentation requirements, reducing processing times, and minimising bureaucratic barriers—especially for community-based and grassroots organisations.
- Review and revise the “Protected Charities” clause to ensure transparency, prevent misuse, and align with international standards on nonprofit governance.

Ministry of Education, Youth and Information

- Establish a Joint Select Committee to review and modernise the Access to Information Act, ensuring it reflects digital realities and promotes transparency.
- Integrate civic education into the national curriculum, focusing on democratic participation, citizen rights, and the role of civil society in governance. This should include teacher training and curriculum development.

Office of the Information Commissioner

- Fully enforce the Data Protection Act (2020) by activating all provisions, conducting compliance audits, and providing guidance to both public and private entities.
- Ensure that anti-misinformation initiatives are developed in consultation with civil society and include safeguards for freedom of expression, avoiding unintended restrictions on advocacy or dissent.

Ministry of Finance and the Public Service

- Through the Open Government Partnership, review and enforce the Public Consultation Protocol, ensuring early, inclusive, and transparent engagement with CSOs in policy development.

Integrity Commission

- Apply investigative powers proportionately, ensuring that data collection respects privacy rights and is guided by clear legal standards.
- Engage independent legal experts to clarify ambiguous statutory provisions—such as Section 7(2) of the Integrity Commission Act—to prevent overreach and protect civil liberties.

To the Donor Community

- Develop flexible funding mechanisms with longer grant cycles, simplified application processes, and objectives tailored to local contexts and CSO capacities.
- Invest in capacity-building programmes for small and emerging CSOs, including support for compliance, digital security, and strategic communications.

To Civil Society Organisations

- Strengthen advocacy and policy engagement skills, including training on legislative processes, strategic communications, and digital campaigning using platforms like X.
- Collaborate to establish domestic funding networks, including partnerships with the private sector and philanthropic actors, to reduce dependency on international aid.

To the International Community

- Advocate for sustained and predictable funding for Jamaican CSOs, particularly in light of shifting global priorities and reduced aid flows.
- Provide technical assistance to support co-creation of policies between government and civil society, including expertise in civic education, digital rights, and inclusive governance.

D) Research Process

Each principle encompasses various dimensions which are assessed and aggregated to provide quantitative scores per principle. These scores reflect the degree to which the environment within the country enables or disables the work of civil society. Scores are on a five-category scale defined as: fully disabling (1), disabling (2), partially enabling (3), enabling (4), and fully enabling (5). To complement the scores, this report provides a narrative analysis of the enabling or disabling environment for civil society, identifying strengths and weaknesses as well as offering recommendations. The process of drafting the analysis is led by Network Members; the consortium provides quality control and editorial oversight before publication.

For Principle 1 - which evaluates respect for and protection of freedom of association and peaceful assembly - the score integrates data from the [CIVICUS Monitor](#). However, for Principles 2–6, the availability of yearly updated external quantitative indicators for the 86 countries part of the EUSEE programme are either limited or non-existent. To address this, Network Members convene a panel of representatives of civil society and experts once a year. This panel uses a set of guiding questions to assess the status of each principle and its dimensions within the country. The discussions are supported by secondary sources, such as [V-Dem](#), the [Bertelsmann Stiftung Governance Index](#), the [RTI Rating from the Centre for Law and Democracy](#), and other trusted resources. These sources provide benchmarks for measuring similar dimensions and are complemented by primary data collection and other secondary sources of information available for the country. Guided by these deliberations, the panel assigns scores for each dimension, which the Network Members submit to the Consortium, accompanied by detailed justifications that reflect the country's specific context. To determine a single score per principle, the scores assigned to each dimension are aggregated using a weighted average, reflecting the relative importance of each dimension within the principle. This approach balances diverse perspectives while maintaining a structured and objective evaluation framework.

The CFR was developed through a robust research cycle, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. A panel of 14 experts convened on 8 August 2025, including CSO representatives, academics, government officials, and donor partners. The panel assessed the six principles using a scoring framework, supplemented by EWM data collected throughout 2024/25, external sources (e.g., media reports, legal documents). Discussions provided nuanced insights into enabling and disabling factors, with case studies illustrating key challenges. The draft was reviewed by the main researcher to ensure accuracy, following which, supporting documents were sourced and hyperlinked. Referenced statutes and regulations were also reviewed to ensure accuracy of information.

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