Trinidad and Tobago

Country Focus Report

2025

Credit: Jason Audain

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A) An Introduction to the Enabling Environment

What we understand by an Enabling Environment is the combination of laws, rules and social attitudes that support and promote the work of civil society. Within such an environment, civil society can engage in political and public life without fear of reprisals, openly express its views, and actively participate in shaping its context. This includes a supportive legal and regulatory framework for civil society, ensuring access to information and resources that are sustainable and flexible to pursue their goals unhindered, in safe physical and digital spaces. In an enabling environment, the state demonstrates openness and responsiveness in governance, promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making. Positive values, norms, attitudes, and practices towards civil society from state and non-state actors further underscore the supportive environment.

To capture the state of the Enabling Environment, we use the following six principles:

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

Trinidad and Tobago is a twin-island Caribbean state with a population of approximately 1.4 million people and a relatively high-income economy by regional standards. Since independence in 1962, the country has maintained a parliamentary democracy with regular elections, peaceful transfers of power, and a written Constitution that guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms. Political competition is dominated by two major parties, and public life is deeply shaped by ethnic, social and economic divisions that continue to influence governance, political mobilisation and state–society relations. This report covers the period of October 2024-October 2025.

Public discourse and policymaking in Trinidad and Tobago have long been influenced by concerns about crime and public safety. High levels of violent crime have periodically led to security-centred governance responses, including the expanded use of emergency powers and an increased role for law enforcement and security forces in public life. These dynamics form an important backdrop to civic engagement, as debates about public order, national security and rights frequently intersect in political and media narratives.

Socio-economically, Trinidad and Tobago combines relatively high per-capita income with persistent inequality and uneven development outcomes. While energy revenues have historically underpinned state capacity and public spending, economic diversification has been limited, and many communities experience unemployment, underemployment and rising living costs. Structural disparities between urban and rural areas, as well as between Trinidad and Tobago, continue to shape access to public services, infrastructure and opportunities for participation in national decision-making. Tobago, in particular, has a long history of debates over autonomy and perceived marginalisation within highly centralised governance arrangements.

Civil society in Trinidad and Tobago is diverse and longstanding, encompassing trade unions, professional associations, faith-based organisations, service-delivery NGOs, community-based groups and rights-focused organisations. Civil society has historically played visible roles in labour relations, social service provision, disaster response, environmental advocacy and public debate. At the same time, the sector operates within a political and institutional context characterised by limited domestic philanthropy, reliance on government subventions and external funding, and unevenly institutionalised channels for participation in policymaking.

The media and digital landscape is comparatively open and influential in shaping public opinion. Trinidad and Tobago has a strong tradition of investigative journalism, talk radio and

online commentary, and digital platforms have expanded opportunities for public expression and mobilisation. At the same time, political polarisation, misinformation and online harassment have become more prominent features of public discourse, affecting how individuals and organisations engage publicly and manage reputational and personal risk.

Taken together, these political, socio-economic and institutional features provide essential context for understanding how civic life functions in Trinidad and Tobago. They shape not only the formal rules governing civil society, but also the informal norms, power dynamics and lived realities that influence how different groups experience participation, accountability and fundamental freedoms.

B) Assessment of the Enabling Environment

PRINCIPLE SCORE

1. Respect and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

Score: [1]

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      2        3        4
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The [Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago](#) guarantees freedom of thought and expression, freedom of association and assembly, and freedom of the press, and protects these rights from ordinary legislative interference (sections 4 and 5). Trinidad and Tobago is rated "Open" by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), placing it among a small group of states worldwide where civic freedoms are broadly respected and civil society can operate without systemic legal or violent repression.

Between September 2024 and September 2025, these guarantees remained largely intact. Civil society organisations (CSOs), trade unions and professional associations continued to organise and advocate publicly. Two national States of Emergency were declared, a major court ruling reinstated criminal penalties for consensual same-sex intimacy, and civil society actors continued to face legal risks under sedition and defamation laws. Even when not enforced, these laws are sometimes referenced or threatened in ways that discourage criticism of public officials, contributing to a climate of caution, especially for groups working on human rights, gender, sexuality, or governance.

While secondary indicators such as the CIVICUS Monitor suggest a largely permissive environment for fundamental freedoms, many civil society actors describe subtler constraints in practice. These include polarised political rhetoric, informal harassment, selective engagement and online intimidation, which can create a chilling effect on advocacy, even in the absence of overt repression or restrictive laws. Such dynamics are not always captured

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[1]*This is a rebased score derived from the [CIVICUS Monitor rating](#) published in December 2025.*

by quantitative indices but nonetheless shape the confidence and operating space of CSOs, particularly those working on sensitive issues.

1.1 Freedom of Association

Freedom of association is expressly [protected](#) in the Constitution, which affirms the right to form and join associations and to organise collectively.

In practice, CSOs can form informally or register as companies or non-profit organisations without legal restrictions based on ideology, mission or source of funding. Most NGOs, faith-based organisations, professional bodies and community groups continue to operate openly across a wide range of thematic areas, including social services, environmental protection, governance, and rights-based work.

At the same time, recent developments have increased legal and social vulnerability for some communities. On 25 March 2025, the Court of Appeal allowed the Attorney General's appeal in *Jason Jones v. Attorney General*, [overturning](#) the 2018 High Court ruling that had decriminalised consensual same-sex intimacy between adults. Same-sex intimacy is again criminalised, with reduced but still significant penalties.

International human rights organisations and regional bodies [criticised](#) the ruling as a backward step for equality and privacy rights and warned that it reinforces stigma and legal risk for LGBTQI+ people and organisations. Although the judgment does not directly regulate whether LGBTQI+ organisations may register or exist, the existence of criminal offences around same-sex intimacy increases the perceived risk for those who associate around sexual orientation and gender identity, including the risk of harassment, blackmail, or selective enforcement.

Several observers have also noted that marginalised groups and organisations working on sensitive issues, such as gender or sexuality, often face exclusion from state support or indirect forms of suppression. Representatives of such organisations report being explicitly told, in some instances, that they "should not exist", and describe non-cooperation, exclusion from consultations and funding opportunities, and heightened social hostility. These experiences foster fear and discourage participation in formal coalitions and public processes, even though the legal framework itself recognises their right to associate.

Taken together, freedom of association remains strongly protected in law and broadly exercised in practice. However, the safety and social acceptance of associational activity is uneven. Mainstream service-delivery organisations face few direct obstacles, while groups representing stigmatised or politically sensitive constituencies face higher levels of risk and social pressure in exercising their rights.

1.2 Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

Freedom of peaceful assembly, which protects the right to gather and demonstrate, is also guaranteed in the Constitution.

Within the reporting period, Trinidad and Tobago experienced significant protest activity. Demonstrations addressed labour rights, wage levels, access to public services and dissatisfaction with governance, with large gatherings in late 2024 and early 2025. [Documentation](#) from civic-space monitors indicates that protests in this period were generally allowed to proceed, with no systematic resort to excessive force or mass arrests. These mobilisations coincided with increased security measures. On 30 December 2024, the government declared a nationwide [state of emergency](#) in response to a surge in gang-related violence, giving security forces expanded powers, including warrantless searches and extended detention. The state of emergency was [extended](#) into early 2025 as homicide levels reached record highs.

In July 2025, authorities declared a [second state of emergency](#) after receiving intelligence about planned attacks by a prison-based criminal syndicate. The declaration again extended expanded powers to law enforcement, although no national curfew was imposed.

Despite the breadth of emergency powers, there were no blanket bans on protests, and demonstrations continued during the emergency periods. Critics have [cautioned](#) that Trinidad and Tobago's broad public order and national security powers, particularly when exercised through emergency regulations, allow for restrictions on assembly and expression that may be applied in ways that suppress dissent and disproportionately affect marginalised voices. The security-heavy context of armed patrols, expanded detention powers, and official messaging that prioritised public order appeared to narrow the space for more contentious assemblies. This became clearer in April 2025, when police [refused permission for a peaceful prison reform march](#), citing public safety and policing capacity concerns. The organisers sought to proceed and even offered adjustments, but the refusal effectively prevented the demonstration and reinforced perceptions that protests touching on security policy or state conduct may face closer restriction or scrutiny. Organisers of protests on sensitive topics, such as police accountability, migration or LGBTQI+ rights, also reported exposure to online harassment, hostile media commentary and reputational attacks following public events.

Overall, the legal framework and routine practice remain broadly enabling for peaceful assembly, but the interaction with recurring states of emergency, intense concern about violent crime and polarised discourse on security introduces uncertainty and perceived risk for certain types of protest and certain organisers.

1.3 Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are [core constitutional rights](#), and Trinidad and Tobago has long been regarded as having one of the most open media environments in the English-speaking Caribbean. According to [Reporters Without Borders](#), the country ranked 25th globally in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, and 19th in 2025, making it the highest-ranked Caribbean state. This reflects a diverse media sector, largely free from direct censorship, where journalists regularly report on governance issues, crime and corruption.

However, several legal and political trends during the period under review highlight practical constraints and risks that coexist with strong formal protections. In May 2024 sedition charges [were brought against a Canadian YouTuber](#), whose videos included interviews with alleged gang members criticising the government. The case was widely seen as an example of sedition charges being used in a way that could have a material effect on critical online content.

Concerns have also been [raised](#) about defamation rules in both civil and criminal law. International and domestic observers point to high defamation awards and the continued criminalisation of defamatory libel as factors that may encourage self-censorship by journalists and activists, who risk costly litigation or even criminal charges for criticism of public officials.

The March 2025 Court of Appeal decision reinstating criminal penalties for same-sex intimacy also affected the climate for expression. LGBTQI+ advocates [described](#) it as limiting their ability to live openly and "express who we love," reinforcing the sense that public visibility and advocacy carry greater personal and reputational risk even if prosecutions are uncommon.

In addition, civil society actors report that, although formal protections exist, some organisations incur reputational risk when they engage in public advocacy. This is especially the case for CSOs working on human rights, gender, sexuality or governance accountability. Examples include the strategic use or threat of defamation lawsuits targeting individual activists or organisations, which, regardless of ultimate outcome, can be costly and intimidating. Some CSOs also report being publicly discredited by political actors and, at times (especially during heightened security periods) feeling that their communications or activities may be monitored.

These dynamics encourage self-censorship. Some organisations choose to remain silent on sensitive topics, or to frame criticism in less direct ways, to avoid potential backlash or damage to funding relationships and public standing. The ability of CSOs to speak out without fear of political or public retaliation is therefore uneven and often linked to their perceived alignment with state priorities or mainstream social views.

In summary, freedom of expression in Trinidad and Tobago is strongly protected in law and generally robust in practice, supported by a vibrant media landscape and active public debate. However, as noted by expert panellists involved in this review, global civic space scores tend to prioritise formal legal protections and visible repression, and are less sensitive to how informal pressures, stigma and unequal power affect vulnerable groups. In this context, an overall "open" rating can coexist with significant challenges for marginalised communities and rights-based organisations, which may experience legal uncertainty, political hostility and the risk of retaliation when engaging in more sensitive or contentious forms of advocacy, particularly around issues such as sedition, defamation and the criminalisation of same-sex intimacy.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

2. Supportive Legal and Regulatory Framework

Score:

1 | | | 3.3 | | 5

2 3 4
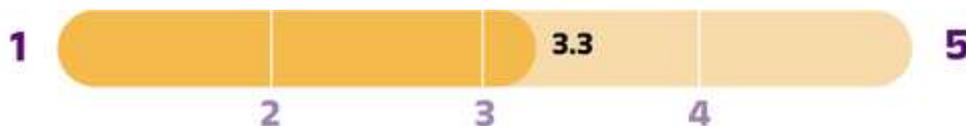
Between September 2024 and September 2025, Trinidad and Tobago continued to apply a relatively dense and complex legal framework for civil society organisations (CSOs). The Companies Act, the Non-Profit Organisations (NPO) Act 2019 and a set of recent FATF and "global forum" amendments define how CSOs obtain legal personality and how they are supervised. In law, this framework provides routes for registration, operation and redress. In practice, it is administratively demanding and unevenly experienced, particularly for smaller and marginalised organisations.

2.1 | Registration

Most CSOs obtain legal personality by incorporating under the Companies Act and coming within the ambit of the NPO Act (2019), which introduces a mandatory registration regime for any organisation that raises or spends money for a "non-profit purpose". It requires submission of corporate documents, beneficial ownership details and financial information, and obliges the Registrar General to maintain a public register and publish notice in the Gazette and a daily newspaper when registration is cancelled or surrendered. Guidance from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services sets out the steps for NPO registration, including prior incorporation as a company and the provision of prescribed forms and supporting documents.

On paper this is a clear, comprehensive pathway. In reality, the process is bureaucratic and difficult to navigate without legal or professional assistance. Grassroots, volunteer-led and rural organisations report particular difficulty in understanding technical requirements and responding to follow-up queries, leading some to choose remaining informal.

In 2024, Parliament adopted the Miscellaneous Provisions (Registrar General, Companies, Registration of Business Names, and Non-Profit Organisations) Act 2024, which introduced a new electronic filing system and gave the Registrar General authority to require its use and set conditions for user accounts. This reform aims to modernise registration and reduce reliance on in-person visits. Over the period under review, CSOs increasingly used online

forms and portals. However, they still report technical glitches, difficulties obtaining and managing login credentials, and inconsistent instructions. For organisations with limited internet access or digital literacy, mandatory electronic filing can itself be a barrier, especially when physical channels remain slow.

Accessibility also varies by organisational profile. Professionalised NGOs based in Port of Spain are better placed to engage physically with institutions like the Registrar General, which is still often needed. Smaller community groups and rural cooperatives find the threshold higher. Organisations whose names or objects explicitly reference LGBTQI+ rights or other sensitive themes describe additional questions or delays, even though there is no explicit statutory prohibition on such activities; administrative discretion at the registration stage can therefore function as a restrictive filter for some categories of CSO. Recently, an NGO faced significant delays of nearly a year in registering, simply because the word "Queer" appeared in its name. This is a clear example of how subjective interpretation at the registry can impact CSO access and rights.

Enforcement mechanisms reinforce these disparities. It is an offence under the NPO Act to operate a non-profit organisation without registration, and registered entities must keep proper records and file updates; failure can result in cancellation of registration and public notice of that cancellation. Organisations with limited administrative capacity may struggle to meet these standards consistently and risk being struck off without strong remedial support.

Overall, the legal framework makes registration possible and reasonably predictable for CSOs with resources and expertise. For smaller, rural or marginalised organisations, the combination of administrative complexity, digital barriers and discretionary scrutiny means that registration is only partially enabling in practice.

2.2 Operational Environment

Once registered, CSOs are, in legal terms, free to define their objectives and activities as long as these are lawful. The NPO Act requires applicants to state their "purposes and activities" in prescribed forms, but there have been no reported cases where lawful objectives were rejected on thematic grounds, and there are no legal restrictions on access to domestic or foreign funding.

The regulatory context has been in flux. For several years non-profits were treated as "listed businesses" under the Proceeds of Crime Act, a designation criticised as disproportionate. In response to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) recommendations, Trinidad and Tobago adopted a more risk-based approach through the Miscellaneous Provisions (FATF Compliance) Bill 2024 and related measures, which removed the category of 'NPO' from the list of listed businesses and empowered the Financial Intelligence Unit of Trinidad and Tobago (FIUTT) to focus enhanced supervision on non-profits assessed as vulnerable to terrorist-financing abuse. This is generally seen as an improvement because it shifts from blanket treatment of NPOs as high-risk entities to a risk-based model that targets enhanced supervision only at NPOs assessed as vulnerable, reducing unnecessary compliance burden for most organisations.

FIUTT's 2024 Annual Report stresses that Anti-Money Laundering/Combatting Financial Terrorism (AML/CFT) measures should not unduly disrupt legitimate charitable or humanitarian activity, and new guidance for NPOs issued in late 2025 reiterates a proportionate, risk-based approach. While these reforms have eased some earlier burdens, many CSOs still experience supervision as fragmented. Oversight remains spread across the Registrar General, FIUTT, tax authorities and line ministries, each with different rules and timelines. Smaller organisations struggle to know which obligations apply and where to obtain authoritative advice; there is no single, coordinated support mechanism.

Financially, many established NGOs rely on government subventions or contracts. Access to certain fiscal benefits and donor incentives requires recognition as a "charitable organisation"

by the Ministry of Finance and the Board of Inland Revenue. Only a small proportion of non-profits has obtained this status, and the process has been described in sector analyses as slow and unclear. This narrows access to tax advantages and constrains stable funding. Where CSOs depend heavily on public funds, panellists note a tendency towards self-censorship or cautious advocacy to avoid jeopardising subventions.

The operational environment is particularly fragile for organisations serving marginalised communities or working on politically sensitive themes. Trinidad and Tobago has no comprehensive anti-discrimination law protecting LGBTQI+ persons, and the Court of Appeal's 2025 reinstatement of criminal penalties for consensual same-sex intimacy has reinforced stigma and legal risk.

For migrant and refugee-focused organisations, conditions changed with the closure of the UNHCR office in Port of Spain on 31 August 2025 due to global funding constraints, shifting responsibility to a regional office in Panama. In the absence of a national asylum law, local CSOs were already central to supporting asylum-seekers and refugees; the policy gap affects CSOs' operational freedom by forcing them to work without a clear, consistent state framework for referrals and protection, leaving service delivery more unpredictable and more exposed to shifting administrative practice.

In summary, registered CSOs are generally free in law to pursue stated objectives and access funding. There are no formal legal limits on lawful objectives and no explicit restrictions on foreign funding. However, fragmented oversight, expanded inspection powers and the particular vulnerabilities of some sectors mean the operational environment is best described as partially enabling.

2.3 Protection from Interference

Protection from interference is unevenly experienced across the sector. Organisations working with LGBTQI+ communities, in particular, report greater exposure to hostility and reduced confidence that state institutions will respond consistently to threats, harassment, or discriminatory treatment, which in practice weakens their sense of protection even where formal safeguards exist.

The constitutional and statutory framework does not authorise the state to dissolve CSOs on political or ideological grounds. There are no provisions allowing authorities to ban organisations because of their advocacy, and CSOs retain access to judicial review and constitutional proceedings under the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago where fundamental rights are engaged (sections 14–17 of the Constitution).

At the same time, the Non-Profit Organisations Act 2019 contains strong sanctions tied to non-compliance. If registration is cancelled, the Registrar General must update the register and publish notice (sections 14–16). Operating while unregistered is an offence (section 18). The Attorney General may apply to the High Court for forfeiture of the organisation's property following cancellation (section 21(2A)).

This is a mechanism which, if misapplied, could have far-reaching consequences, but it is subject to several procedural steps and to judicial oversight through the High Court under the same Non-Profit Organisations Act 2019 and the general supervisory jurisdiction of the Supreme Court. During the reporting period, there were no public reports of this forfeiture power being used against CSOs because of their thematic focus or advocacy; sanctions that did occur appear linked instead to filing or governance failures, such as being struck off the companies register under the Companies Act (Cap. 81:01) for non-filing of returns, or facing suspension of state subventions pending remediation, as reported in national media and sector practice.

The 2024 expansion of the Registrar General's inspection powers under section 9B of the Registrar General Act, introduced by the Miscellaneous Provisions (Registrar General,

[Companies, Registration of Business Names, and Non-Profit Organisations) Act 2024](#), complements these tools by permitting inspection of registers, books and accounts of non-profits and other entities for compliance and transparency purposes. By September 2025 this provision had not been substantively tested in court; its impact will depend on its future application and whether it is exercised proportionately and without discrimination.

A [2025 legal review of the NPO Act](#) found that its interaction with other amended laws has resulted in overlapping compliance obligations and increased administrative complexity, with smaller organisations disproportionately affected. NGOs typically register under both the Companies Act, and as Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) under the Non-Profit Organisations Act 2019. The NPO Act, which aims to strengthen financial transparency and prevent misuse of funds, mandates annual reporting and registration with the Registrar General. The Registrar General can refuse or cancel registration, but only for specific compliance breaches (e.g. failure to file returns). The NPO Act does not allow deregistration based on national interest or political grounds.

The "[global forum" amendments](#) expanded the Registrar General's inspection powers. A new section 9B of the Registrar General Act, introduced through these amendments in 2024, allows the Registrar General to inspect registers, books, accounts and documents of "relevant persons", including companies, trusts and non-profits, in support of transparency on beneficial ownership and tax information-exchange. This new power had not been extensively tested in the courts by September 2025. For CSOs it adds another potential layer of scrutiny, without a corresponding increase in institutional support for record-keeping and compliance.

Overall, Trinidad and Tobago's legal framework does not authorise political dissolution of CSOs and maintains judicial avenues for redress through the Constitution and ordinary courts, but it couples these safeguards with strong administrative and financial sanctions in an environment where compliance capacity is uneven. Protection from interference is therefore formally robust yet practically uneven, supporting an assessment of Principle 2 as partially enabling.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

3. Accessible and Sustainable Resources

Score:

1 | 2.0 | 5
2 3 4
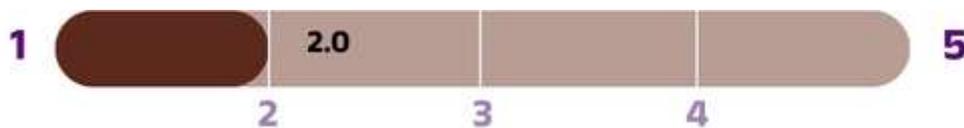
Trinidad and Tobago's civil society faces a chronically fragile financial resources landscape. Organisations must navigate limited domestic funding avenues, dwindling international support and onerous compliance barriers in order to survive. While formal mechanisms exist (government subventions, charitable tax exemptions, and sporadic corporate sponsorships), these have not coalesced into a reliable support system. Instead, resources are distributed unevenly and often come with restrictive conditions, leaving most NGOs, especially those serving marginalised communities, perpetually under-resourced and struggling to sustain their work. Overall, Principle 3 scored 2.0, reflecting a disabling environment in which funding exists but remains fragmented, short-term and inaccessible to many CSOs.

3.1 | Accessibility of Resources

The government provides subventions and grants to certain non-profit organisations, but access is limited and largely non-transparent. According to the NGO Unit of the Ministry of Social Development, the 2025 Social Sector Investment Programme allocated TT$185 million (ca. 23 million Euros) to NGOs (up from approx.TT$152 million, ca. 19 million Euros in 2024), yet this increase has not translated into broader accessibility or perceived fairness. Funding decisions tend to rely on historic relationships and ministerial priorities rather than open calls for proposals. For example, one ministry prioritises "service delivery" NGOs aligned with its mandate. The diaspora has begun supporting NGOs through crowdfunding, and the government's new Women, Peace and Security Action Plan includes grants for women-led groups.

In August 2025, the Prime Minister outlined a prospective development partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), including a proposed US $20 million Social High Impact Fund (SHIFTT) to support NGOs, CSOs and SMEs, alongside youth-focused initiatives. Later that month, national media reported that Trinidad and Tobago is likely to be removed from the European Union's tax blacklist by early 2026, following legal reforms and a "largely compliant" rating from the OECD Global Forum; while primarily a financial milestone, delisting could ease banking scrutiny and barriers to foreign funding, with potential positive implications for civil society resource access, subject to implementation.

Organisations who are seen as politically aligned or higher-profile are perceived to benefit from easier access to secure government support, whereas others are sidelined. Compliance requirements further constrain access, with some groups seeing funding cut due to lapses in decade-old reporting obligations, as the state began strictly enforcing financial rules post-pandemic. The process to obtain public funds is frequently described by civil society observers as burdensome and "lacking in objectivity", leading a number of NGOs to avoid government funding altogether after negative experiences.

Trinidad and Tobago lacks a robust culture of domestic philanthropy for civil society. In practice, corporate funding tends to occur through short-term CSR initiatives tied to company branding or environmental, social, and governance (ESG) metrics, for instance, the annual "Day of Caring" where businesses offer volunteer labour and micro-grants to community groups. Such contributions, while welcome, are episodic and often earmarked for narrow projects. Long-term institutional support from the private sector remains rare. Moreover, the framework for tax-deductible giving is archaic: individuals or companies must execute a formal deed of covenant to donate to an organisation with charitable status and a very limited number of other types of similar organisations-- even then they can only write off up to 15% of income.

Obtaining charitable status itself is a convoluted, opaque process that only a small fraction of NGOs has managed to navigate. This means most organisations cannot offer tax incentives to donors, significantly limiting local fundraising. Overall, the current legal and fiscal setup provides little encouragement for broad-based philanthropy, constraining NGOs' access to domestic resources.

Accessing funding from abroad has become increasingly difficult. Banks in Trinidad and Tobago, like others in the Caribbean, have tightened due diligence and anti-money laundering controls to the point of over-compliance. Local NGOs frequently encounter onerous paperwork to receive grants from foreign donors, and smaller charities without dedicated finance staff are especially disadvantaged. One CSO representative on the CFR expert panel described the banking system for NGOs as a "horrible mess", with even state mechanisms acknowledging the problem, where excessive caution by banks has not translated into easier access for legitimate civil society transactions. International grants do exist (often from the EU, UN agencies or foreign embassies), but they are highly competitive and laden with prerequisites. Applicants must tackle complex online portals, detailed logframes and co-funding requirements (e.g. the EU's PADOR system), which many grassroots groups struggle to meet.

In 2025, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) closed its Trinidad office amid global funding cuts, abruptly ending support that local NGOs relied on. Refugee assistance centres like La Casita warn that UNHCR's departure has created a "vacuum," increasing demand for their services without the resources to respond.

Funding criteria can also reflect political and social preferences: rights-based and advocacy NGOs report that both local and foreign funding sometimes hinges on being "acceptable" to authorities or donors. Indeed, organisations serving refugees, LGBTQI+ people or other marginalised groups face the greatest barriers, as they receive little government funding due to political sensitivities, and as external donors shift focus, these groups are often left with serious gaps. This underscores how those working with vulnerable populations have the least access to funding when they need it most.

3.2 Effectiveness of Resources

Even when civil society organisations manage to obtain funds, the nature of those resources often undermines their effectiveness. The vast majority of funding available, whether from government, companies or abroad, is project-based, short-term and tightly earmarked. Donors typically impose strict conditions on how money is used, leaving organisations little flexibility to pursue their own strategic priorities. Common requirements include quarterly activity reports and low overhead caps (often around 10%), which force NGOs to under-budget essential administration and staff costs.

Many Trinidad and Tobago CSOs find themselves tailoring proposals to fit donor interests in areas like HIV or entrepreneurship at the expense of emerging local issues. As a result, groups sometimes feel pressured to "chase" funding by shifting focus, even if it means compromising core missions. For instance, an NGO might pivot to environmental projects emphasised by corporate sponsors, while pressing needs in governance or community justice go unfunded. This dynamic is compounded by the siloed nature of grants: organisations juggle multiple small grants with divergent formats and timelines, consuming countless hours in application and compliance paperwork. A review of the UN-EU Spotlight Initiative in Trinidad and Tobago similarly found that smaller CSOs "struggled to surmount cumbersome requirements" and were often "left behind," underscoring how complex grant processes can exclude grassroots groups. Senior staff often act as perpetual grant managers rather than programme leaders, reducing the overall impact of their work.

International partnerships often position local NGOs in subcontractor roles, where they implement pre-designed projects with limited involvement in the initial design of the intervention. Funding rarely supports capacity-building or core costs like staff, training, or systems, leaving many CSOs under-resourced and overstretched. While some donors, such as the EU, now encourage larger grantees to share funds with smaller partners, these efforts remain limited. Overall, funding to Trinidad and Tobago's CSOs is narrowly earmarked and misaligned with their actual needs, with successes occurring despite the funding environment, not because of it.

3.3 Sustainability of Resources

Financial sustainability remains the weakest link for civil society in Trinidad and Tobago. Most NGOs rely on short-term, project-based grants and lack reserves or multi-year support, forcing constant cycles of fundraising and staff uncertainty. When funding ends, programmes often pause or collapse entirely. Many Caribbean CSOs remain heavily donor-dependent, with limited evidence of diversified or stable funding streams. As global aid shifts toward crises like Ukraine and Gaza, funding for Trinidad and Tobago's CSOs has stagnated, heightening their risk of closure.

Human resources and organisational continuity suffer greatly under these conditions. Chronic underfunding means skilled staff often depart for more secure, better-paying jobs in the private sector or with international agencies. Local NGOs struggle to match the salaries or career growth offered elsewhere, leading to high turnover and loss of institutional knowledge. Few can afford to invest in leadership development or succession planning. The organisations working on sensitive or rights-based issues, such as gender rights, refugee welfare or LGBTQI+ advocacy, are among the least financially secure, since they rely heavily on shrinking foreign grants and receive scant government support. Some critical services (like trauma counselling for migrant women) may simply disappear if new funding is not found.

A few small-scale strategies are emerging to improve sustainability. Some NGOs are experimenting with social enterprises, but these efforts cannot offset the decline in traditional funding. Most charities struggle to monetise services, and rising inflation has eroded already limited resources. Operational costs continue to climb while grants remain stagnant, leaving organisations expending as much effort on survival as on impact. Without multi-year funding, local giving incentives, or safety nets for small CSOs, the sector will remain fragile. Despite Trinidad and Tobago's "high-income" status, most NGOs, especially those serving vulnerable groups, still face severe resource insecurity.

4. Open and Responsive State

Score:
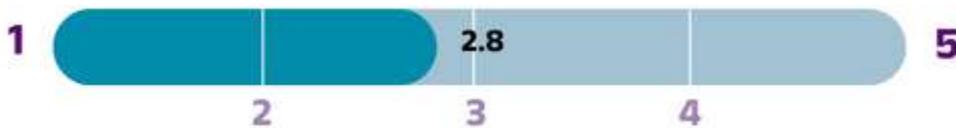
Trinidad and Tobago's governance framework demonstrates a formal commitment to openness, participation and accountability, but implementation remains uneven. Freedom of Information laws, public consultation exercises and institutional mechanisms for oversight exist in principle, yet in practice they function inconsistently across ministries and sectors. Civil society actors regularly encounter long delays, selective engagement and limited follow-up after consultations. Overall, Principle 4 scored 2.8, reflecting a partially enabling environment where legal guarantees and isolated good practices coexist with chronic gaps in transparency, inclusion and feedback.

4.1 Transparency

Trinidad and Tobago has formal transparency laws, but these are unevenly implemented in practice. The [Freedom of Information Act (1999)](#) guarantees a right to request government records and mandates responses within 30 days, yet in reality agencies often fail to meet these deadlines. Observers have noted that "in practice, the turnaround time for FOIA requests was often longer than the prescribed period," and some bodies simply refuse to release information, citing confidentiality. For example, a [recent court case revealed](#) that a request to the Ministry of Works was acknowledged in writing but then ignored, as the Ministry never provided a substantive reply within the statutory 30-day limit. Courts have also [found](#) that prolonged inaction on FOIA requests can amount to an unlawful breach of statutory duty, and have issued orders compelling authorities to make access decisions where delays were deemed unreasonable.

Proactive disclosure is also limited. Although the government has taken some [steps](#) to improve transparency, including the enactment of the [Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act](#) (2023) and the annual publication of high-level fiscal documents such as the Budget Statement by the Ministry of Finance, much official data, including detailed budget breakdowns, programme-level expenditure, and draft policy texts, is [not routinely published](#). CSOs note that citizens normally must resort to FOIA requests even for information that should be public by default. Emerging open data initiatives are small in scope, one government portal hosts narrowly focused datasets (for example, farmers' market prices for a given month), and

comprehensive data remains scarce. In short, state information is disclosed only on demand, and smaller or rural civil society groups, which lack specialist staff or local contacts in Port of Spain, are often at a disadvantage when navigating these formal channels.

Some improvements have occurred in pockets. International monitors acknowledge that press freedom and general access to governance data is high overall. These are exceptions, as transparency varies widely by agency and often depends on leadership rather than standardised practice. For instance, the Finance Ministry streams budget statements, but detailed line item data is not easily obtained except via FOIA. Thus, while the legal framework for transparency exists, citizens and CSOs report chronic delays, routine redactions and often outright non-compliance with response deadlines, leaving fundamental public data still out of reach for most stakeholders.

4.2 Participation

Formal avenues for civil society participation in policymaking are few and inconsistently applied. Public consultations tend to occur in an ad hoc or informal way: rather than structured nationwide engagement, government officials more often invite select NGOs or business groups to meet one-on-one. As Bertelsmann's Transformation Index notes, "government ministers frequently receive delegations from civil society groups to discuss policy," but this practice is irregular. Such closed-door sessions can be useful for established organisations, but they mean that the broader public rarely sees early drafts or has a chance to influence agendas. In many cases the government develops policies internally and only later "seeks input" from stakeholders. Many observers say that by the time civil society is asked to weigh in, decisions have effectively been made.

Participation also depends heavily on connections. Well known NGOs, unions or business associations, especially those linked to the ruling party, tend to be included, whereas grassroots and dissenting groups are often left out. The process is thus seen as more accessible to CSOs whose priorities align with government agendas. Public consultations on high-profile issues do occur, but turnout is mixed. In 2024 the government held a nationwide constitutional reform roadshow, yet only 816 submissions were received in total – 32 from CSOs. That low figure (in a country of over a million) suggests poor awareness and outreach, especially outside Port of Spain. A local commentator observed that the exercise "has not fully captured the public imagination." This reinforces the view that engagement is occasional, rather than a systematic part of governance.

Inclusion of marginalised communities is particularly weak. Participation events tend to be held in urban or capital venues, inadvertently excluding rural communities (for instance, Tobago and remote interior regions). A project spearheaded by the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute noted that even where environmental policies "enshrine" public participation, vulnerable groups have very little practical role – the mechanisms exist on paper but few know how to use them. Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and residents of distant areas often report they have no real access to decision making platforms. One result is that consultations can be dominated by representatives of major professional bodies (e.g. labour unions or more formalised NGOs) rather than by local or grassroots voices. In a positive sign, some ministries like Gender and Social Development have convened issue-specific roundtables (for example on domestic violence or disability rights), but even here civil society feedback has not always translated into policy changes. As one women's advocate noted after a domestic violence roundtable, "numerous papers and reports…have been submitted to the State over the years…the real challenge lies in applying the necessary […] resources to implement those recommendations". In other words, CSO participation is sometimes sought to generate ideas, but the internal momentum for change often stalls.

4.3 | Accountability

Civil society in Trinidad and Tobago generally receives little feedback or accountability from the state on its engagement. After consultations, government agencies rarely publish reports

or even summaries explaining how public input was used. There is no standardised mechanism to inform NGOs how their submissions influenced policy. The stalled constitutional reform process illustrates this gap: hundreds of citizens sent comments in early 2025, but the project has since frozen with no government statement about what happens next. CSOs find themselves in the dark about whether their views were considered or set aside.

When accountability does happen, it varies by issue. Labour policy offers a rare example of follow up: after labour unions pushed for wage increases in 2025, the incoming administration scrapped a planned restructuring of the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) and subsequently concluded negotiations, resulting in a ten per cent wage increase for public servants, an outcome union leaders publicly welcomed following prolonged engagement with government. In that instance, union leaders were able to hold the government to earlier commitments. But for most civil society agendas, NGOs report that promises of follow-through are never fulfilled. There is no common appeals process if official authorities ignore evidence-based recommendations. The Ombudsman can investigate some administrative grievances, but there are no specific tribunals or ombudsmen for civil society complaints. In practice, CSOs may only lodge FOIA appeals in court (which has occasionally been done successfully) or hope to secure the attention of sympathetic officials. Even where feedback channels exist, ministries often simply do not engage. For example, following a 2024 public consultation on gender equality, no summary of responses or government position was released; instead, stakeholders had to rely on media reports and personal contacts for any indication of outcomes.

In short, accountability is ad hoc. Without formal follow-up channels, NGOs cannot determine whether, and in what ways, their input has shaped policy. The result is a deficit of trust: civil society feels compelled to "chase" decisions rather than meaningfully co-create them. Until transparency and feedback mechanisms are built into the system, accountability for civil society engagement will remain limited and unpredictable.

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PRINCIPLE SCORE

5. Supportive Public Culture and Discourses on Civil Society

Score:
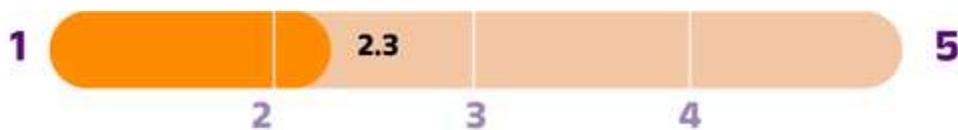
Civil society organisations remain active and outspoken, yet their engagement often unfolds in a politically charged environment marked by mistrust, stigma and uneven inclusion. While digital platforms have expanded opportunities for advocacy and dialogue, they have also amplified polarisation and harassment where marginalised communities, particularly LGBTQIA+ persons, women's groups and rural populations, continue to face social and structural barriers that limit equal participation in civic life. Overall, Principle 5 scored 2.33, indicating a disabling environment: one where civic engagement is tempered by public hostility, fear of reprisal and limited understanding of civil society's role.

5.1 Public Discourse and Constructive Dialogue on Civil Society

Discourse by the state about civil society in Trinidad and Tobago is often tense and distrustful, reflecting deep political polarisation. Civil society organisations that criticise the government frequently find themselves portrayed as partisan or disruptive. A particularly stark example occurred in mid-2025, when the Prime Minister publicly attacked the Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago (a major civic institution) for questioning government policy. She accused the Association of hypocrisy and of "subverting democracy," and the ruling party leadership echoed these attacks by calling the Association "anti-democratic" and out of touch. Panellists warned that this incident marked a deterioration in civic discourse and an unwelcome precedent in which dissenting voices are delegitimised rather than debated. In effect, outspoken civil society groups (especially those in the public eye) have at times been labelled as enemies of the state when they raise concerns about governance or rights.

At the same time, the public generally lacks a clear understanding of what civil society is or does. Many citizens perceive CSOs as politically aligned or representing narrow interests, a view often reinforced by media coverage that frames civil society engagement in polarised or adversarial terms, rather than reflecting the full range of roles CSOs play in democratic life, from protest and critique to policy advocacy and service delivery. Critics of civil society groups are not just limited to officials: religious leaders and social commentators likewise play a role in public perception. For example, LGBTQIA+ activists note that religious commentators routinely describe their rights agenda as morally dangerous, with one local pastor infamously

likening same-sex marriage to "a cancer on society" which helps sustain a sceptical attitude toward those civil society voices.

Social media has compounded polarisation as activists and community leaders now use platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to bypass traditional media and speak directly to the public, which has amplified the reach of civil society messaging. At the same time, these channels are rife with trolling, smear campaigns and spreading of misinformation by partisan users. NGOs report being targeted by online abuse simply for advocating unpopular causes, which chills public debate. A columnist for Newsday warned that an atmosphere of personal attacks "breeds fear and discourages citizens, journalists, bloggers and civil society from speaking out". In practice, this means independent or critical voices often keep a low profile. Even media outlets aligned with progressive views self-censor on some topics, fearing backlash. Altogether, the tone of civic discourse is more adversarial than collaborative, and opportunities for respectful dialogue between government, media and civil society remain limited.

5.2 Perception of Civil Society and Civic Engagement

Public perception of civil society organisations and civic action is mixed and often negative. Many citizens are wary of taking part in civic initiatives due to distrust of institutions and fear of repercussions. Marginalised rights groups in particular report a climate of intimidation. The LGBTQI+ community exemplifies this: even before the 2025 court reversal that recriminalised same-sex relations, advocates warned that criminalisation effectively forces many to stay hidden for safety. Since that reversal, activists note a rise in fear: the reinstated law hastens to "force many - particularly outside the capital - back into hiding" and "severely limits LGBTQI+ people's access to fundamental rights". The threat is not only physical: online harassment is common, and some reports suggest that even state-linked actors monitor dissenting social media accounts.

At the same time, social media and the internet offer new spaces for engagement. Groups use Facebook pages, Twitter and Instagram to organise and advocate (for example, mobilising around economic grievances or petitioning on environmental issues). This has expanded civil society's reach, especially among youth. However, these digital platforms can also spread malicious rumours or misinformation about NGOs, deterring casual supporters. Moreover, lack of basic civic education means many citizens do not fully understand the role of civil society. Surveys consistently show low trust in institutions: in fact, Trinidad and Tobago ranks near the bottom globally on "institutional trust". When people do not trust government or feel that their input will change anything, they are less likely to volunteer or join public dialogues. Instead, many remain disengaged or only mobilise for immediate personal concerns (for instance, neighbourhood issues or religious festivals).

A related problem is that many citizens do not know how to engage even if they wanted to. Schools include little on civic rights and responsibilities, and media literacy is low. As a result, NGOs spend substantial effort just explaining what a public consultation or a budget review is. Some outreach efforts have been attempted. For example, civil society coalitions and UN projects have organised community caravans to educate rural areas and youth about civic participation. But overall, the picture is that ordinary people have a fragile grasp of civil society's purpose, and political cynicism (fuelled by corruption scandals and security concerns) breeds apathy. In sum, fear of retaliation and general disillusionment with political processes suppress civic engagement: many would-be activists stay on the sidelines, concerned either for personal safety or sceptical that change is possible without systemic reform.

5.3 Civic Equality and Inclusion

Legal and structural barriers hinder full civic equality and inclusion in Trinidad and Tobago. On paper, the constitution guarantees equal rights and freedoms for all, but in practice protections are uneven. Notably, the Equal Opportunity Act of 1995, which outlaws discrimination in many

areas, still omits any mention of sexual orientation or gender identity. This means LGBTQIA+ individuals have no statutory recourse against bias in employment, housing or public services. The state maintains morality-based exemptions that disproportionately affect certain groups.

Progress toward civic inclusion has been uneven. A [Persons with Disabilities Bill](#), aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), was finalised with civil society input. Yet advocates stress that implementation, especially outside urban centres, remains limited. Disabled persons report being newly invited into policymaking spaces, but not yet meaningfully included. Broader gaps persist for rural, Indigenous and youth communities. In the environmental sphere, [policy frameworks](#) recognise public participation, but official assessments note that consultation requirements are not always specific and vary widely by sector, leaving participation uneven in practice. [CANARI's National Outlook project on Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK)](#) similarly reflects ongoing efforts to strengthen how Indigenous and local communities are engaged in biodiversity decision-making. Participation is largely consultative in nature and varies by sector, with no formal FPIC framework or guaranteed representation requirements for marginalised groups embedded in national law. In Tobago, [repeated debates](#) over autonomy, including recent attempts to reform Tobago's governance arrangements, illustrate persistent perceptions that national decision-making remains highly centralised in Port of Spain, limiting Tobago's influence over policies affecting the island. Representation in public discourse is also unequal. Following the 2024 killing of a gay activist, one newspaper's use of the term "[self-proclaimed homosexual](#)" was widely condemned as discriminatory. Civil society groups criticised the language as evidence of ingrained stigma that continues to marginalise LGBTQI+ citizens in both policy and media. Likewise, few women's or indigenous organisations hold leadership roles in official advisory bodies, despite contributing significantly to grassroots advocacy. As noted by the panellists, without extending anti-discrimination protections, improving rural outreach and institutionalising minority consultation, civic inclusion will remain fragmented and many communities sidelined.

PRINCIPLE SCORE

6. Access to a Secure Digital Environment

Score:

1 | 2 | 3 | 3.3 | 4 | 5
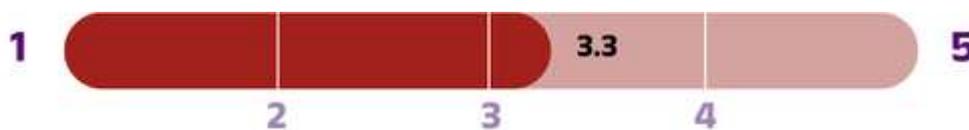
Trinidad and Tobago's digital landscape offers an overall open and connected environment for civic participation, but it remains constrained by structural and security gaps. Citizens and CSOs can freely express opinions online, access information and use digital tools for advocacy without fear of censorship. However, weaknesses in data protection, cybersecurity, and equitable access continue to limit the full realisation of digital rights. Marginalised communities, in particular, face barriers of cost, connectivity and digital literacy. Overall, Principle 6 scored 3.33, reflecting a partially enabling environment, one that upholds core freedoms in law and practice but falls short of ensuring equal, secure and inclusive participation for all.

6.1 Digital Rights and Freedoms

Trinidad and Tobago's online environment remains broadly permissive and open. Internet access is widespread, and no government-ordered shutdowns or platform bans have been reported during 2024–2025. Civil society groups, journalists and activists regularly use social media and other digital tools to organise, disseminate information and hold discussions on public issues. In practice, citizens generally feel free to express political and social views online: Freedom House notes that individuals "are free to express their opinions in private conversations," including online and digital exchanges, and that the government has "refrained from monitoring online communications" for political purposes. Indeed, features of the legal framework, such as Trinidad's Electronic Transactions Act (2011), provide safe-harbour protections for intermediaries (service providers) and do not mandate proactive filtering of user content.

At the same time, some subtler pressures on expression have emerged. Trinidad's Cyber and Social Media Unit (run by the police) officially limits itself to tracking criminal activity (for example human trafficking and child exploitation) on public platforms, and so far no abuses have been reported. Nevertheless, civil society remains vigilant about possible overreach into legitimate dissent. In online discussions, observers note instances of partisan harassment or trolling linked to party-affiliated actors; such behaviour can encourage self-censorship among activists even when no legal sanction is involved. Concerns have also been raised about prospective regulation: a 2024 policy framework issued by the Telecommunications Authority

of Trinidad and Tobago outlines possible future approaches to regulating over-the-top services and online misinformation. While the framework is consultative and non-binding, stakeholders caution that its implementation through future regulations could, if not carefully circumscribed, affect online expression; however, no new laws or enforcement measures have yet been introduced.

Separately, global platforms like Meta and Twitter enforce their own content policies (often removing "misinformation" by algorithm or moderation), and false or misleading information circulates online. These platform-based actions are occurring worldwide and are distinct from domestic censorship.

In sum, Trinidad and Tobago's digital space remains "largely open". There are no formal restrictions on blogs, news sites or social media, and activists routinely livestream protests and comment on public affairs. However, concerns about online intimidation and surveillance, whether by state-linked actors or crowds, mean that some sensitive voices exercise caution. The net effect is an enabling environment for digital civic engagement, tempered by a climate of caution around politically charged topics.

6.2 Digital Security and Privacy

The legal and institutional framework for data protection and cybersecurity in Trinidad and Tobago is underdeveloped. Although a Data Protection Act was passed in 2011, no clear timetable exists to enact the remaining provisions. In practice, safeguards remain limited because the Data Protection Act has only been partially brought into force and the oversight authority (the Office of the Information Commissioner) has not been fully operationalised, weakening enforcement. The Act applies generally and does not include CSO-specific provisions or exemptions. As one expert noted, this means CSOs operate in a legal grey area regarding personal and sensitive data. In comparison to other countries in the region, Trinidad and Tobago offers fewer protections for individuals' privacy.

Meanwhile, cyber threats are growing in frequency and sophistication. Ransomware and phishing dominate the threat landscape. Recent cyberattacks on public institutions, including the State-owned Telecommunications Services of Trinidad & Tobago (TSTT) and the National Insurance Board (NIB), even the national postal service (TTPOST), illustrate systemic digital vulnerabilities that also affect civil society organisations, which rely heavily on the same online infrastructure but often lack comparable cybersecurity protections. Smaller CSOs have also fallen victim to digital breaches, often in the form of email outages, malware or data leaks; due to limited IT resources, such organisations typically lack inhouse cybersecurity expertise and means to recover.

National cybersecurity drills and planning exercises have largely involved government agencies and businesses, with little visible participation from CSOs. This suggests civil society is not fully integrated into preparedness efforts. In practice, CSOs must rely on ad hoc training or expensive consultancy to secure their data, a gap noted by local organisations. In sum, while the state has begun modernising its cyber strategy, the current situation is only partially enabling for CSOs' digital security. The outdated and incomplete legal framework, together with uneven enforcement and limited technical support, means that privacy risks and cyberthreats remain significant. Panellists noted that Trinidad and Tobago's approach to data protection and cybersecurity provides fewer guarantees than are available in some neighbouring jurisdictions. This creates a climate of uncertainty where NGOs and other civic actors must often fend for themselves against evolving threats.

6.3 Digital Accessibility

Indicators suggest widespread connectivity in Trinidad and Tobago, but meaningful digital access is uneven. As of early 2025, roughly 1.28 million people – about 84.7% of the population – were internet users. Mobile penetration is even higher, at over 135% of the population (reflecting multiple subscriptions per person). Despite these figures, about 15% of

residents remain offline, and many of those who are "connected" face intermittent or inadequate service. Affordability is a major barrier. Broadband plans and devices are relatively expensive, especially for low-income families. In practice this means large rural tracts and poorer urban areas still have patchy access. Additionally, one survey found that just 57.3% of people with disabilities owned any mobile phone, and only 1% of that group used digital government services.

Infrastructure gaps reinforce this divide. Some remote communities lack electricity or reliable power, making internet equipment fragile or unusable. Trinidad's geography – with densely populated towns and isolated interior areas – compounds the challenge. Recent weather events have shown the weakness of backup power in rural sites: storms often knock out lines and leave villages offline for days. On the positive side, the government and telecom sector have taken steps to bridge these gaps. The Universal Service Fund (USF) is now funding broadband projects in underserved areas. For instance, in mid-2024 Trinidad and Tobago's regulator (TATT) launched a project to bring 1 Gbps fibre Internet to 265 homes in rural Tobago. These initiatives improve availability, but their necessity underscores how many households were previously excluded.

Even when infrastructure exists, digital literacy limits usage. Many people (and even NGO staff) lack the skills to leverage online resources fully. Standard ICT training is often costly and oriented toward business users; little tailored instruction is available for grassroots activists or local non-profits. CSOs report that when training does occur, it rarely covers practical security or data management in ways aligned with their needs. As a result, an underlying divide persists between those who can engage online comfortably and those who cannot.

Emerging technologies add a new dimension. The government has begun to invest in an "academy for coders" and other ICT education, signalling intent to support future tech skills. However, there has been virtually no inclusive public debate on issues like artificial intelligence, algorithmic bias or the digital impact of automation. Civil society has not been invited to shape these discussions, raising concerns that newer technologies may entrench rather than alleviate existing inequities.

In summary, Trinidad and Tobago offers a mixture of connectedness and exclusion. Mobile and internet services reach most citizens, but cost and capacity barriers limit meaningful access, particularly for rural communities, people with disabilities and low-income households. This in turn undermines CSOs' ability to reach and engage these constituencies. Where online connectivity could amplify participation, the digital divide still frustrates inclusive civic life.

Overall, digital rights in Trinidad and Tobago are generally upheld: people can browse and speak freely online, and laws do not impose broad censorship. In practice, however, significant challenges remain on the security and accessibility fronts. Outdated data protection laws, rising cyber threats and patchy infrastructure mean that civil society operates in an uneven digital environment. Unless these gaps are addressed, they risk hampering CSO effectiveness and public engagement, even as the technical environment at large stays formally open.

C) Recommendations

The CFR recommendations below are categorised as sectoral priorities.

1. The State (Executive, Legislature, Regulatory Bodies)

Protection of Civic Space and Legal Safeguards

- Introduce procedural protections to prevent the misuse of the legal system to silence public-interest actors, including anti-SLAPP measures or cost-shifting provisions that require plaintiffs to bear defendants' legal costs where litigation is deemed abusive or punitive.
- Issue judicial guidance or amend civil procedure rules to enable early dismissal of vexatious claims targeting public participation.

Registration, Regulation, and Oversight of CSOs

- Simplify registration and compliance requirements under the NPO Act, particularly for grassroots, rural, and volunteer-led organisations, including streamlined documentation, reduced discretionary delays, and clear service standards.
- Establish a centralised, CSO-centred compliance oversight mechanism to help organisations navigate fragmented oversight from the Registrar General, FIUTT, and other bodies, with a focus on proportionality in AML/CFT enforcement.

Fiscal and Policy Reform for Philanthropy

- Modernise the deed of covenant system by integrating tax-deductible donation mechanisms with NPO registration status and expanding eligibility for charitable approval to a wider range of CSOs.
- Introduce transparent, accessible processes for approving charitable status to stimulate domestic philanthropy and reduce administrative bottlenecks.

Participation, Consultation, and Democratic Governance

- Enshrine public consultation as a constitutional obligation for major public decisions, particularly those affecting rights, communities, and the environment, supported by clear minimum standards for transparency, timeliness, and inclusivity.
- Institutionalise early-stage consultation in policy development processes, moving beyond post-hoc engagement.

Equality and Non-Discrimination

- Amend the Equal Opportunity Act to include explicit protections on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

- Strengthen enforcement mechanisms and public accountability for discrimination affecting marginalised communities.

2. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs and Networks)

Building internal capacity

- Collaborate across the sector to develop shared compliance support systems, peer-learning mechanisms, and collective advisory services on governance, AML/CFT obligations, and risk management.
- Invest in internal governance strengthening to reduce vulnerability to regulatory or political pressure.

Digital and Information Literacy

- Prioritise digital literacy, cybersecurity awareness, and information integrity across the sector to mitigate exposure to misinformation, surveillance, and digital harassment.
- Increase adoption of digital tools for collaboration, advocacy, service delivery, and impact measurement, particularly among smaller and community-based organisations.

Public Engagement

- Proactively communicate the role and value of civil society in democratic life through accessible, non-partisan public education initiatives.
- Build alliances across issue areas to counter polarisation and reduce the isolation of organisations working with stigmatised or politically sensitive communities.

3. Donors, Philanthropic Actors, and International Partners

Funding Practices

- Shift away from short-term, tightly earmarked project funding toward multi-year core and flexible funding models that support organisational sustainability.
- Explicitly fund administrative costs, staff development, digital security, and governance strengthening, particularly for organisations serving marginalised communities such as refugees and LGBTQI+ groups.

Ecosystem Support

- Align funding requirements with proportional compliance expectations, recognising the differing capacities of small versus large CSOs.
- Support sector-wide infrastructure (legal aid, digital safety, compliance hubs) rather than only individual organisations.

4. Media, Education Institutions, and Public Information Actors

Civic Education and Public Awareness (Shared with Civil Society and the State)

- Collaborate with civil society, relevant ministries, and multilateral partners to implement nationwide civic education initiatives through schools, universities, and public media.
- Promote understanding of civil society's role in democracy, social cohesion, and accountability, countering misconceptions and political scapegoating.

Responsible Media Practices

- Develop and promote voluntary media guidelines to prevent stigmatising language and harmful framing of civil society actors and marginalised groups.
- Create and protect safe spaces for diverse voices in public discourse, particularly those historically excluded from mainstream platforms.

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 panel for this CFR was convened in October 2025. 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.