

February 2026  
R2602



# WHO GETS HEARD?

**CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND  
YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN  
URBAN GOVERNANCE**

*fondation*  
**BOTNAR**

A CAPRI Consortium Project



# **Who Gets Heard?**

## Citizen Engagement and Youth Participation in Urban Governance

**Caribbean Policy Research Institute (CAPRI)  
OneCity  
Kingston, Jamaica**

**This study is supported by the Botnar Foundation.**

The views and opinions in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Botnar Foundation, the Caribbean Policy Research Institute is solely responsible for all its contents.

**Researchers: Matthew McNaughton, Gavin Myers,  
Amillea Moore and Aleem Mahabir**

# Table of CONTENTS

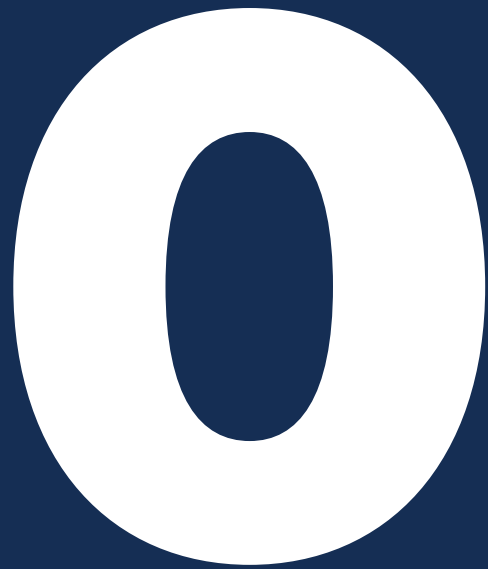
List of Tables & Figures

Executive Summary

1	<b>Introduction</b>	5
2	<b>Context and Literature Analysis</b>	9
3	<b>Jamaica's Public Participation Ecosystem</b>	17
4	<b>Understanding The Citizen's Perspective</b>	29
5	<b>Evaluating Jamaica's Public Participation Channels</b>	39
6	<b>Recommendations</b>	55

# Figures and Tables

Figure 1: IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation	11
Figure 2: Ecosystem Map of Public Participation Channels	21
Figure 3: Execution Structure of Public Participation Channels	22
Figure 4: Capital Ownership Status of Public Participation Channels	22
Figure 5: Institutionalization Status of Public Participation Channels	23
Figure 6: Permanence Status of Public Participation Channels	23
Figure 7: Classification of Public Participation Channels by the IAP2's Spectrum of Participation	24
Figure 8: OneCity Indicators	25
Figure 9: Categorization of Public Participation Channels by the OneCity Indicators	26
Table 1: Public Participation Ecosystem Scorecard	44
Table 2: Public Participation Ecosystem Scorecard (Find Component)	46
Table 3: Public Participation Ecosystem (Understand) Scorecard	48
Table 4: Public Participation Ecosystem (Participate) Scorecard	50
Table 5: Public Participation Ecosystem (System of Record)	52



# Executive Summary



If **cities** are to be inclusive, safe, and sustainable, policy must start with the places that have been left behind



This report explores how public participation functions within Jamaica's urban governance landscape. Jamaica's governance landscape features an impressive array of mechanisms for public participation, from community meetings and surveys to digital platforms and youth councils. Yet despite this abundance, citizens—especially young people—frequently report feeling unheard, with participation often occurring without clear pathways to implementation: citizens are invited to speak, but rarely see or experience if or how their input shapes decisions.

Building on the Right to the City (RTTC) framework utilised in *Who Gets What?*, *Who Gets Heard?* shifts the focus from access to services toward access to decision-making. It draws on ecosystem mapping, elite and institutional interviews, youth-led focus groups, stakeholder workshops, and service evaluations to provide a systems-level analysis of Jamaica's public participation architecture. It maps over 30 engagement channels across community, municipal, parish, and national levels, classifies them by execution structure, capital ownership, institutional permanence, and level of influence, and evaluates how well they meet citizen needs, particularly but not limited to those of young people.

The findings reveal a participatory ecosystem characterized by abundant channels for participation, but lacking the coordination or coherence need-

ed for them to function as a connected system. Instead, Jamaica's public participation system is defined by fragmentation resulting in consultation without impact, dialogue without feedback, and engagement without empowerment.

These structural issues result in a persistent paradox: Jamaica's participation ecosystem is extensive in form but limited in function, with the problem not the absence of participatory mechanisms but rather weak coordination, unclear ownership, limited capital alignment, and insufficient and inefficient institutional responsiveness. This leads to participation frequently operating as a procedural requirement rather than an effective channel for partnership between communities and the state.

The report challenges the common narrative of citizen "apathy." Instead, it positions citizen disengagement as a rational response to repeated experiences of consultation without visible outcomes, thereby reducing the willingness to participate in future processes. Public participation, therefore, operates more like a reputational system—each unacknowledged consultation diminishes trust, while visible follow-through strengthens it.

To improve the citizen experience, the report examines public participation as a service design challenge. Across interviews, channel evaluations, and co-design workshops with institutional convenors, citizens, and young people, a new Public Participation User-Needs

Framework was developed. It captures a set of core needs (standards) that shape citizens' experiences of public participation exercises.

1. FIND — Can citizens locate the opportunity to participate?
2. UNDERSTAND — Can citizens make sense of the process?
3. PARTICIPATE — Can citizens engage without undue friction?
4. SYSTEM OF RECORD — Can Citizens see how their input was used?

Public participation is defined as the meaningful exchange of ideas and opportunities for public input





# 1

## Introduction



Long before independence, communities **organised** themselves to claim space in the country's political and social life

Public participation is a cornerstone of democratic governance. When citizens can influence how their communities are governed, policies are better informed, more ambitious, and have greater legitimacy. Yet across Jamaica's cities and urban spaces, opportunities for meaningful participation remain uneven, fragmented, and more often than not procedural. The structures of engagement exist, but their practice rarely provides meaningful participation that meets citizen expectations.

This study focuses on the gap between form and function, between having an opportunity to speak and being genuinely heard, with a view to deepening the understanding of citizen participation in Jamaica's urban governance, especially youth involvement. The overarching goal is to develop mechanisms and strategies to support improved civic engagement and the collective assertion of citizens' "Right to the City."

A map of spatial inequalities in Jamaica's urban areas shows that access to services and opportunities is stratified by geography, class, and income. In many communities, inadequate waste

management, poor connectivity, and limited mobility intersect with weak governance and fragmented participation. These conditions reflect the trajectory and dynamics of urban development, where participation has historically been an afterthought rather than a key input.<sup>1</sup> With that premise, this study examines how the ability to participate in governance—who is consulted, who is ignored, and how decisions are made—shapes the lived experience of citizenship in Jamaican communities.

The Right to the City (RTTC) concept provides the analytical framework for this endeavour. It offers a lens for examining fragmented urban spaces and integrating populations of differing socio-economic backgrounds into a shared social fabric.<sup>2</sup> At its core is the principle that all people have the right "to inhabit, use, occupy, produce, transform, govern, and benefit from just, inclusive, safe, sustainable, and democratic cities".<sup>3</sup> Participation, by definition and implication, is therefore central to the Right to the City.

In Jamaica, the right to participate is codified in law, from the Social Development Commission established in

1965 to the 2016 Local Governance Act, which formally mandates citizen consultation in local decision-making. These statutory commitments, however, are generally more symbolic compliance than functioning channels of citizen input. Consultations, if they happen at all, typically end at information-sharing. Municipal councils, planning agencies, ministries, and community-based organisations might convene meetings and invite submissions; plans may even be "co-created". Beyond that, however, there is little evidence that citizen input influences outcomes, as actual action rarely follows; it is the form of participatory governance, but not the substance.

This disconnect reflects both weak incentives and limited capacity. Local authorities (municipal councils) are chronically under-resourced, which constrains their ability to deliver tangible development through projects or programmes. At the same time, there is often a lack of clarity around who is actually orchestrating the development efforts that these performative consultations purport to shape, raising the question of whether outcomes are predetermined regardless of citizens' views, whenever and however



expressed. Citizens, especially those in informal or low-income communities, thus experience engagement as an exercise in formality rather than a path to change. This in turn leads to consultation fatigue, mistrust, and reduced future participation, entrenching a self-perpetuating cycle in which tokenistic consultation becomes the norm.

Digital technology introduces new opportunities to interrupt that cycle. Jamaica, like the rest of the world, accelerated the adoption of digital tools across a wide range of use cases, including governance, during the pandemic. Ministries, local authorities, and civil society groups began using online platforms to communicate with citizens and manage public services. These innovations brought flexibility, but with unequal access to broadband, devices, and digital literacy, they have also deepened a digital divide that mirrors Jamaica's existing social and spatial inequalities.<sup>4 5</sup> Where connectivity determines civic presence, those without it are excluded from both services and dialogue.

## Objectives

This study examines the participatory dimensions of urban governance by analysing the channels, practices, and experiences through which citizens, especially youth, engage with the institutions that shape their communities. The advent and expansion of avenues for digital participation in governance processes is promising, but potentially exclusionary. Online and digital platforms can enhance engagement, especially among young people, and extend participation to marginalised communities, however they can also present yet another barrier to inclusion and participation. If not designed and implemented with equity in mind, they risk reproducing the extant inequities that define Jamaica's urban landscape.

Through a mixed-methods design-research approach that combines ethnographic, systems-based, and participatory action methods, the study

examines and addresses weaknesses in the practice of public participation in urban governance in Jamaica. Study activities are organised in two stages: Research and Design, which mapped the landscape of urban governance and identified barriers to inclusive participation; and Prototyping and Pilot, which will develop, test, and refine practical solutions.

The study:

- Reveals how and where participatory inequality manifests in Jamaica's urban governance landscape and its constituent groups;
- Examines the structural, institutional, and experiential factors that shape the quality and inclusiveness of citizen engagement; and
- Identifies exemplary practices, both local and global, that can inform the redesign of participation processes for greater equity and impact.
- Provide actionable recommendations for how digital and participatory design can strengthen engagement mechanisms, amplify youth voices, and contribute to a more inclusive and responsive urban governance landscape.

## Urbanisation in Jamaica was propelled by waves of economic precarity



Building on the empirical base of the OneCity Index, which mapped inequalities in access and rights to the city, "Who Gets Heard?" examines the processes and experiences that shape how access and rights can be improved, especially for those who have them least. The central proposition is that meaningful participation is necessary for effective urban governance to be more inclusive, resilient, and just.



# 2

## Context and Literature Analysis



Across the board, tools grounded in local realities are more **effective** than those copied and transplanted from other contexts



Public participation, defined as the meaningful exchange of ideas and opportunities for public input, is a cornerstone of legitimate governance.<sup>6</sup> When executed substantively, it does more than just fulfil a procedural duty; it builds vital social acceptance, provides valuable insights to address planning blind spots, and secures community approval.<sup>7</sup> The broad value of this practice has long been recognised by administrators and community leaders, who are ostensibly motivated to engage the public. These range from meeting legal requirements and embodying democratic ideals of inclusion to advancing challenging policy reforms and improving the quality of decisions.<sup>8</sup>

To translate this recognised value into effective practice, practitioners can rely on frameworks like the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation, which helps define the public’s role in any process.<sup>9</sup> IAP2’s Spectrum of Public Participation categorises the range of decision-making roles that the public might play, from being simply informed to the highest level of influence, where they are empowered with final deci-

sion-making authority. Understanding this spectrum matters because, while the ‘why’ of participation is well-established, the challenge often lies in the ‘how’. A well-designed process, tailored to an appropriate level on the spectrum, is better positioned to produce higher-quality policies and generate the public support necessary for their successful implementation.

No one level of influence (on the spectrum) is necessarily better than another. Public involvement should be scoped to the level appropriate to the context. Convenors of these processes may consider a range of factors: the decision’s nature and complexity (the level of technicality versus normative tradeoffs); who possesses relevant knowledge and expertise (institutions, communities, or both); who will be most affected by outcomes and how significantly; what time and resources can genuinely be committed to engagement; institutional authorization, capacity, and willingness to share power; existing community capacity and interest in sustained engagement; and what outcomes are sought beyond the immediate decision (relationship-building, capacity development, social capital).

A mismatch between a promised and actual level of participation can undermine trust and community buy-in more negatively than never engaging at all.<sup>10</sup>

### Participation in Context

Public participation in Jamaica has a complex genealogy, shaped by both anti-colonial resistance and grassroots citizens’ struggles to shape the institutional legacies of pre-existing governance structures. Long before independence, communities organised themselves to claim space in the country’s political and social life. These traditions of self-help and civic activism shaped the participatory ethos that post-independence governments later sought to formalise.<sup>11</sup> Yet while the framework for participation is well established, its effectiveness has remained constrained by political centralisation, limited fiscal autonomy, and uneven institutional capacity.

### Early Traditions of Civic Participation

Jamaica’s history of participation is rooted in local action and collective resistance, as exemplified by early twentieth-century movements such as Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement

## IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

Engagement channels can be classified based on the level of influence the public has in decision-making processes, ranging from being simply informed (left) to fully empowered (right)

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide

Association and the grassroots mobilisation surrounding the 1938 labour uprisings.<sup>12</sup> These efforts established participation as a vital form of defiance and created alternative spaces of governance—including church groups, mutual aid societies, and workers' associations—where ordinary citizens organised to address their needs outside colonial administrative control. The mass political action among the Afro-Jamaican working class in the 1920s laid the groundwork for both formal and informal labour protests, culminating in the 1938 uprisings. Participation was not granted by the colonial state; it was claimed from below.

These traditions fostered a civic culture rooted in self-organisation and solidarity.<sup>13</sup> Jamaica Welfare, founded in the 1930s, provided one of the first structured approaches to community development.<sup>14</sup> Established as a non-governmental organisation supported by donations from banana exports, Jamaica Welfare combined education, economic self-help, and social planning, linking civic engagement to national progress. This model would later influence post-independence approaches to local development and community governance.

### Post-Independence Institutionalisation

Following independence in 1962, successive governments sought to embed participation within the institutions of the new state. The Social Development Commission (SDC), established in 1965, formalised Jamaica Welfare's approach and remains the principal agency for community development.<sup>15</sup> Its mandate to mobilise citizens, strengthen local organisations, and integrate community priorities into national planning positioned participation as a core function of governance.<sup>16</sup>

Public sector reforms that expand participation exist throughout Jamaica's legislative and administrative history. The Education Act of 1980 decentralised aspects of school governance,

requiring boards to include parents, students, and community members. In 1995, the Government of Jamaica promulgated the first formal Consultation Code of Practice, establishing minimum standards for how public bodies were to engage citizens. In 2008, the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) introduced a mechanism for direct community input on local infrastructure and project funding in constituencies, with the aim of increasing Member of Parliament responsiveness and strengthening the link between public participation and tangible outcomes. The Local Governance Act of 2016 deepened the commitment to these principles by mandating public consultation on local plans and budgets, institutionalising the role of parish and community development committees<sup>17</sup>, and designating the SDC as the registrar of community organisations.

The Jamaican Parliament has also established a formal mechanism for incorporating public input into its legislative activities through Joint Select Committees. These Parliamentary Committees, while temporary, include participation from both houses of parliament, and can invite written and verbal contributions from the public, as an example, the 1995 JSC on Constitutional & Electoral Reform.<sup>18</sup>

At the diplomatic level, Jamaica is a party to multiple declarations, agreements, and coalitions that recognise the impor-

tance of participation. The Rio Declaration (1992) and the Escazú Agreement (2018) both affirm the right of citizens to participate in decisions affecting their environment. In 2016, Jamaica joined the Open Government Partnership, a multilateral initiative through which governments and civil society collaborate to promote transparent, participatory, inclusive, and accountable governance.

These frameworks, while only a sample of institutional and legislative efforts, taken together, suggest a strong political and administrative commitment to the principle of participatory governance. Yet the translation from design to practice is incomplete. Local authorities have little capacity to respond independently to community priorities as they depend heavily on central transfers for resources. While Members of Parliament are required to report on the use of the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) resources, systemic issues plague the entire consulting, reporting, and compliance lifecycle. A 2020 report by the Auditor General's Department documented recurring issues, including late submission of CDF reports, incomplete supporting documentation, delays in making information publicly accessible at the constituency level, and insufficient oversight capacity within the Constituency Development Fund Office in the Office of the Prime Minister.<sup>19</sup>

By limiting inclusion to formal economic and social actors, representational platforms expand consultation while maintaining existing distributions of power and influence



## National-Level Consultation and Dialogue

At the national level, Jamaica has experimented with mechanisms to broaden public participation in policy dialogue. Vision 2030 Jamaica, launched in 2009, was conceived as a participatory national development plan. Its formulation involved consultations across sectors and parishes to foster citizen ownership. However, critics argue that these exercises often functioned more as communication than collaboration. Feedback mechanisms were weak, and participation was dominated by organised interests rather than ordinary citizens.<sup>20</sup>

Other mechanisms, such as the Jamaican Social Partnership and the Economic Programme Oversight Committee (EPOC), created formal spaces for tripartite dialogue among government, private sector, and organised labour. EPOC would later be institutionalised in the Government of Jamaica's fiscal management framework as the Fiscal Advisory Committee to advise the commissioners of the newly operational Independent Fiscal Commission (IFC). These platforms supported the achievement of tangible policy outcomes in areas such as wage agreements, tax reform, and economic stabilisation measures, where multi-stakeholder consensus proved essential for successful implementation and negotiated burden-sharing.

Each of these mechanisms serve important symbolic functions by signal-

ing the government's commitment to consultation beyond unilateral decision-making and has ostensibly contributed to expanding social buy-in for difficult reforms. The visibility and regularity of these forums established a precedent for structured citizen participation in national policy conversations, demonstrating that such engagement could function as routine rather than exceptional.

While these platforms improved transparency and policy coordination, critics argued that their composition limited representation of grassroots or marginalised groups.<sup>21</sup> In practice, national consultations have tended to reproduce existing hierarchies of access and influence.

## Persistent Centralisation and Structural Constraints

Despite periodic reforms, Jamaica's system of governance remains highly centralised. Local councils have limited

fiscal autonomy and depend on allocations from the central government, including the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Local Government and Community Development. While there are competing ideas on the balance between central and local government, the current structural dependence constrains innovation and accountability at the local level.<sup>22</sup> Devolution of responsibility without resources often results in fragmented service delivery and erodes public confidence.

Community-based organisations and civil-society groups may attempt to fill this gap, but their capacity varies widely. Many operate with minimal funding, relying on volunteers or short-term grants. Others struggle with limited technical skills or meaningfully working with state agencies. The result is an uneven, often fragile landscape sustained by commitment rather than institutional strength.



## Case study: The Curious Case of the Social Development Commission

The Social Development Commission (SDC) is Jamaica's principal community development agency. It traces its origins to Jamaica Welfare (established 1937) and was formalised as a statutory body in 1965. Its mandate—to support social, cultural, economic, and community advancement—gives it one of the broadest community-engagement portfolios in the public sector.

SDC's value lies in the national infrastructure it has built over decades: parish offices, trained Community Development Officers, community profiles and research datasets, and relationships with community groups across more than 750 communities. Government agencies, NGOs, and development partners routinely rely on this infrastructure for community mobilisation, consultations, and public-participation exercises. Few institutions have

comparable reach or legitimacy, yet no formal mechanism exists for agencies or partners to contribute resources back to the shared community-engagement infrastructure they depend on.

This structural dependence, without a cost-sharing model, weakens the sustainability of Jamaica's participation ecosystem. SDC's own reporting highlights staffing pressures, limited outreach budgets, and high officer-to-community ratios. These constraints make it difficult to update community profiles, sustain parish-level committees, or maintain consistent engagement processes. Stakeholders across several parishes described uneven support to Community Development Committees (CDCs) and Parish Development Committees (PDCs), with some committees inactive or only minimally engaged. As these channels stall or become inactive, citizen disengagement is often misinterpreted as apathy rather than an inevitable response to institutional strain.

The need for stronger community-development coordination is a recurring theme in this research. Despite its constraints, SDC remains one of the few institutions with the national reach, community trust, and statutory mandate to play this orchestration role—setting engagement standards, supporting local organisations, and helping align participation efforts across ministries and agencies. Realising this potential, however, requires predictable funding, clearer alignment of mandates, and a rationalisation of overlapping planning exercises across the ecosystem.

This case illustrates a broader lesson from the ecosystem mapping conducted in this study: statutory authority alone is not enough. Participation infrastructure requires intentional investment, ongoing support, and institutional stewardship to function effectively.

## Insights on Public Participation from Across the Globe

Across the globe, governments and civil society are exploring new ways to leverage digital tools and the Internet to improve public services and the relationship between governments and citizens. Scholars and practitioners refer to this field as civic tech. While civic tech platforms hold undeniable promise for democratising governance and expanding participation, including in historically marginalised or low-trust environments, case studies examined throughout this research suggest that this promise is far from automatic. This is because digital participation is not simply a technical problem, but one shaped by long-standing inequalities rooted in political and institutional dynamics, governance cultures, and infrastructural limits.<sup>23</sup> These barriers tend to be even more pronounced in developing country contexts.<sup>24</sup>

Across the board, tools grounded in local realities are more effective than those copied and transplanted from other contexts. This reflects a broader insight from participatory governance literature: legitimacy is not gained through access alone, but through contextual relevance and responsiveness.<sup>25</sup> In the Caribbean, where civic disengagement often stems from institutional distrust and digital divides persist, this lesson is especially pertinent. Digital tools must be designed with infrastructural limitations, language barriers, and social norms in mind. Otherwise, they risk reinforcing exclusion rather than overcoming it.

A second insight relates to the limits of digital tools in isolation. The more effective platforms are not standalone solutions, but rather components of broader hybrid civic ecosystems. In Brazil and Trinidad, offline engagement, such as assemblies, outreach events, and analogue pledge systems, have

played a role in expanding access and reinforcing trust. This supports the idea that the most durable forms of digital participation are those that embed themselves in community rhythms and institutional structures, rather than attempting to replace them.<sup>26</sup> For policymakers and practitioners in the Caribbean, this implies that investing in digital participation must be done in tandem with strengthening offline civic infrastructure.

## Case Study - Consul, Mexico City

When Mexico City adopted the open-source Consul platform in 2017, it positioned the tool as a central pillar of its participatory governance agenda. The platform became especially prominent during the city's constitutional reform process, where more than 400,000 residents submitted proposals online. Mexico City residents were able to submit ideas, monitor proposals, and fol-

low the full decision-making trail from submission to implementation. This level of transparency helped strengthen public trust and gave people a clearer sense of how their input shaped policy. However, early use of the platform revealed a clear imbalance in who was taking part. Participation leaned heavily toward the demographics of educated, urban men with reliable internet access. To avoid the project merely replicating existing divisions, the City Council and civic groups implemented a set of hy-

brid outreach strategies. Civil society partners ran digital literacy workshops, neighbourhood assemblies were organized across the city, and radio stations were used to reach households that were offline. These efforts widened the circle of participation and made the platform more representative of the city it was meant to serve.<sup>28</sup>

Looking at both international cases and our local research, the analysis also reinforces concerns around participation without influence. While platforms such as Virtual Congress and Consul succeeded in generating citizen input, their ability to translate that input into policy or institutional change remained limited. This echoes critiques of “invited spaces” where participation is encouraged but not empowered.<sup>27</sup> It is not enough to count users or proposals; what matters is whether citizen inputs are able to lead to and shape outcomes. In contexts like Jamaica, emerging evidence from the OneCity Study 2 work has highlighted critiques of public consultations as performative or symbolic, digital participation should be evaluated not just for inclusiveness or usability, but also for institutional uptake and feedback mechanisms.

The core issue, therefore, moves from a technological one to an institutional

one. Without a clearly defined mandate, political buy-in, and administrative mechanisms for acting on citizen input, there is a risk that digital tools become participatory façades. Platforms may be effective at aggregating ideas or surfacing grievances, but if these insights are not embedded within formal decision-making pathways, the result is likely to be frustration, cynicism, or withdrawal. For example, when inputs from participatory budgeting or online drafting platforms are acknowledged without clear routes to implementation, the process becomes demobilising rather than empowering. In this case, participation without influence not only fails to strengthen democracy, but it may actively erode public trust.

This dynamic is especially pertinent in Jamaica, where citizen engagement is often filtered through deeply bureau-

cratic or politicized channels. Ministries and agencies may solicit input through consultations or digital platforms, but lack the capacity or commitment to act on the data they receive. As such, any digital participation strategy must be accompanied by governance reforms, including institutional mandates for uptake, budgetary alignment, and performance monitoring. Platforms should not operate as detached experiments; instead, they should be situated within ecosystems of accountability. Otherwise, digital participation risks amplifying “voice” without strengthening the capacity to “listen” or “respond” through actionable changes to institutions and policies.

At stake here is the distinction between participation as representation and participation as transformation. Representational participation creates space at the table for already-organized in-



terests; transformational participation challenges who gets to set the table, what's on the menu, and whether the table itself is the right venue for democratic decision-making. By limiting inclusion to formal economic and social actors, representational platforms expand consultation while largely maintaining existing distributions of power and influence. In this way, participation may appear broader, yet it is not necessarily deeper, as additional elite voices are incorporated without fundamentally shifting whose interests shape outcomes or whose knowledge is prioritised in policy formation. The case studies examined in the research show that, for digital civic tools to deepen democracy meaningfully, they must move beyond tokenism toward structured responsiveness. This goes beyond simply designing better user interface mechanisms of follow-through, ownership, and accountability at every stage of the participatory process.

### Case Study: Illustrative Example of Institutional Breakdown - Kenya's Community Voices Network

The Community Voice Network (CVN) in Kenya began as a promising model for inclusive digital participation. Piloted in 2021, it enabled rural and peri-urban residents to record voice notes on challenges in public service delivery, particularly in healthcare, using basic mobile phones. These audio submissions were transcribed and later analysed using AI, with the aim of helping decision-makers identify recurring issues. The system was praised for breaking literacy barriers, using local languages, and offering anonymity that built trust and buy-in among low-income participants it targeted.

However, despite the technological sophistication and strong citizen engagement, CVN struggled with institutional uptake. While local authorities initially acted on findings, such as extending clinic hours in Kisumu County to suit the needs of patients who commuted to work, the absence of formal protocols for integrating citizen input into county- or national-level planning meant most feedback went unactioned. Health Officials cited the lack of budgetary authority and coordination across hospitals as key bottlenecks. Over time, this weakened the credibility and uptake of the platform among participants. Failure to embed participatory data into administrative and political systems can blunt the potential platforms for digital innovation. Since then CVN has involved all levels of the media community to address this.



# 3

## The Public Participation Ecosystem



Community engagement refers to activities that **inform** or involve residents in awareness, education, or service delivery, often without affecting final decisions



Jamaica's urban governance landscape includes numerous mechanisms for public participation, including community meetings, surveys, digital platforms, youth councils, statutory committees, and more. Yet despite this range of entry points, citizens, particularly young people, frequently describe participation as unresponsive or inconsequential.<sup>29</sup> Multiple channels coexist with limited influence. This pattern reflects deeper structural weaknesses: fragmented communication, weak feedback loops, uneven institutional capacity, and unclear ownership of participatory processes.

This chapter presents a systems-level snapshot of Jamaica's public participation ecosystem. It maps the institutional channels through which citizens are invited to contribute to urban governance and analyses how those channels function in practice. The objective is not only to catalogue mechanisms but to highlight the range of institutional arrangements, mandates, geographic scopes, and impacted community assets that contribute to the prevailing dynamics between participants and convenors.

## A Systems View

Yet despite this range of entry points, citizens, particularly young people, frequently describe participation as unresponsive or inconsequential.<sup>30</sup> Multiple channels coexist with limited influence. However, engagement mechanisms operate within interconnected networks rather than in isolation. A systems view enables analysis not just of what channels exist, but also reveals underlying system dynamics, patterns of practice, and relationships across the ecosystem.

The ecosystem mapping therefore moves beyond counting consultation exercises toward understanding their quality, usability, and impact, including from the citizen's perspective. The mapping aimed to:

- Visualise how different participatory mechanisms—con-

tations, digital platforms, youth councils—interact and overlap.

- Identify gaps in feedback loops, transparency, and accessibility that limit effective participation.
- Highlight disparities in who benefits from current systems and who remains excluded.

This approach moves beyond counting consultation exercises toward understanding their quality, usability, and impact from the citizen's perspective.

## Methodology and Data Collection Scope

The ecosystem mapping exercise combined desktop research, institutional interviews, and participatory workshops to catalogue and evaluate Jamaica's participation mechanisms. Each identified channel was profiled using three clusters of attributes:

- **Overview:** Purpose, scope, frequency, geographic coverage, and target community assets.
- **Governance:** Oversight bodies, implementing agencies, and institutional responsibilities.
- **Implementation and Stakeholder Experience:** Accessibility, procedural requirements, and feedback mechanisms, using a service evaluation framework.

These categories provide a standardised view of how participation mechanisms function across levels of governance. This chapter focuses on findings from the first two categories. Detailed tables appear in the Appendix. The research process also revealed practical barriers that shape citizen experiences before engagement even begins. Many official portals designed to facilitate participation were difficult to locate or navigate. Links were outdated, information was incomplete, and some sites lacked basic accessibility features. These operational issues help explain why engagement often feels procedural rather than substantive.



## Clarifying Scope: Participation vs. Engagement

A key challenge was distinguishing between “community engagement” and “public participation in decision making”.

- Community engagement refers to activities that inform or involve residents in awareness, education, or service delivery, often without affecting final decisions.
- Public participation, by contrast, involves citizens directly in shaping outcomes—such as budgets, plans, or projects.

## Urban Governance Public Participation Landscape

The ecosystem map is a key output emerging from the landscaping analysis of official participation channels across Jamaica’s urban governance framework. Twenty of more than thirty public participation channels analyzed are included in this study.

The following section presents the ecosystem map through multiple categorizations that highlight different patterns and characteristics of the urban governance landscape.

- Geographic Boundaries
- Execution Structure
- Capital Ownership
- Institutionalization & Permanence
- Levels Public Participation
- OneCity Index

## Geographic Boundaries

Four distinct geographic levels of operation were identified: Community, Municipality/Parish, National, and Other (including Constituencies). The data reveal a significant concentration of channels at the Community level, with comparatively fewer mechanisms operating at the National level.

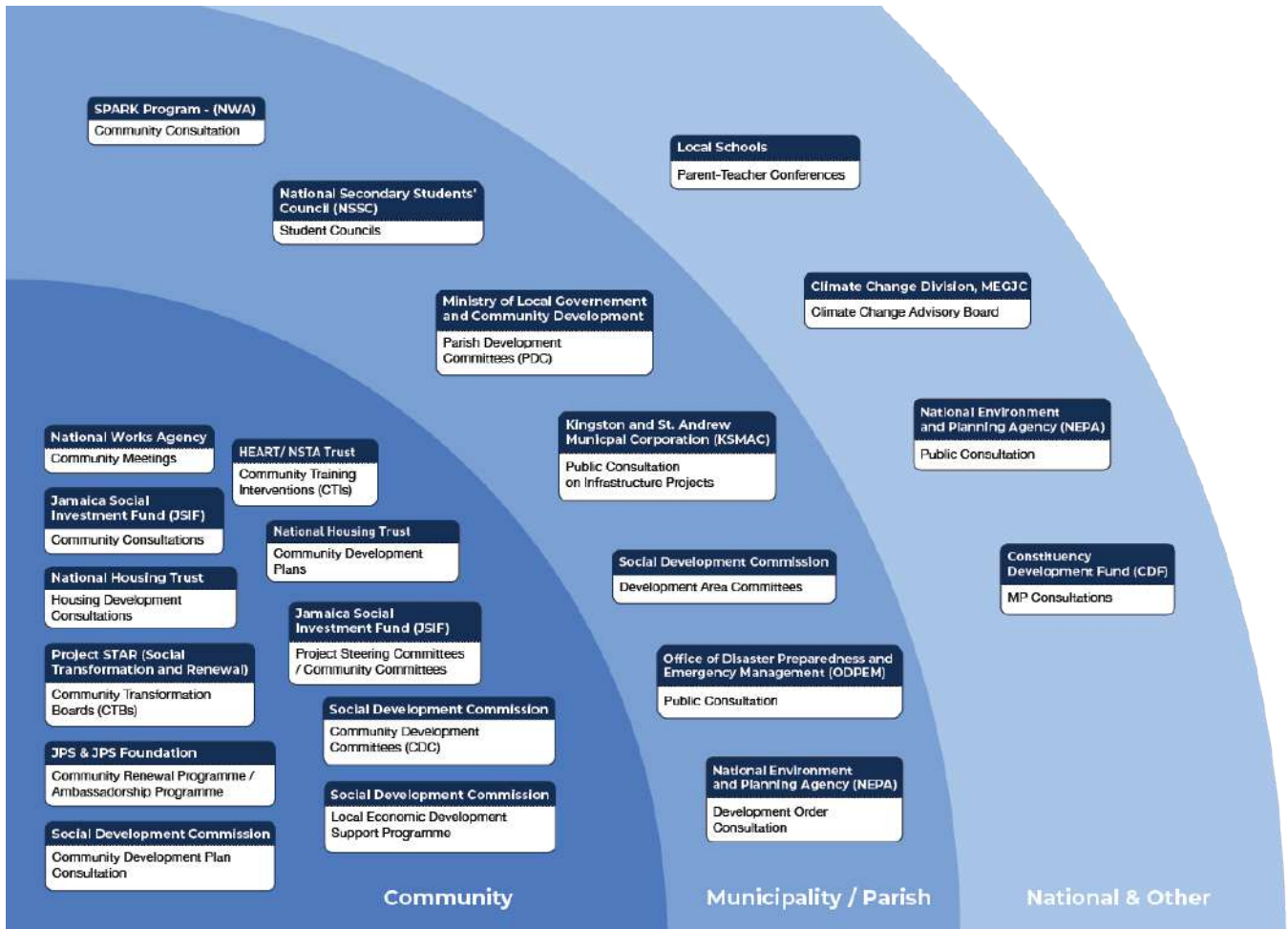
The geographic level generally indicates the area affected by the decisions under consideration. In some cases, this

is also synonymous with the stakeholders targeted for participation, but not necessarily. For example, while NEPA’s Development Orders Consultation impacts a specific parish/local authority, the consultation process is open to anyone to participate. Included in the list below are the commonly produced output from each participation channel.



## 2 Ecosystem Map of Public Participation Channels

Categorizes public participation channels by the geographic scope of their operations, that is, whether they are based at the community, municipal/parish, or national level



### Execution Structure

How public participation channels are organised and delivered varies across institutions. Three distinct execution models were identified: centralised structures, where a single agency manages both planning and execution across the country through a unified framework; decentralised structures, where planning and execution authority is devolved to different agencies, local offices, or units of the state; and hybrid models, which combine central planning or support with local autonomy in execution. In hybrid arrangements, core functions such as guidance-setting, resource allocation, or quality assurance may be retained cen-

trally, while implementation is adapted to local contexts.

Public participation channels can be executed by a central entity, through a delegated authority, the local municipal authority, or as a hybrid. For hybrid institutional arrangements, some functions of the consultation process are retained by the central body.

Three execution models for administering public participation channels were identified during the ecosystem mapping. In fact, the selected execution model was among the most consequential factors in the quality of experience provided by a public participation channel owner.

### Capital Ownership

Channels were also grouped based on whether the convening institution had control over the resources required to implement decisions: -

- Capital Owners (40%) – entities with budgetary control and authority to act.
- Planners (60%) – entities responsible for consultation but without implementation power.

This distinction reveals a structural gap: citizens often provide input through channels operated by entities with no authority or resources to act on it, contributing to limited follow-through and mistrust.

### Institutionalisation and Permanence

Institutionalisation and permanence help determine whether participatory practices can accumulate trust and institutional memory over time. Trust and institutional memory can be credited to the individual leading the execution (e.g., CDC Officer, Member of Parliament), to the programme (e.g., SPARK Programme), or to the institu-

tion (e.g NHT). Institutional trust and/or social capital can be critical for motivating and mobilising community participation.

### Levels of Participation

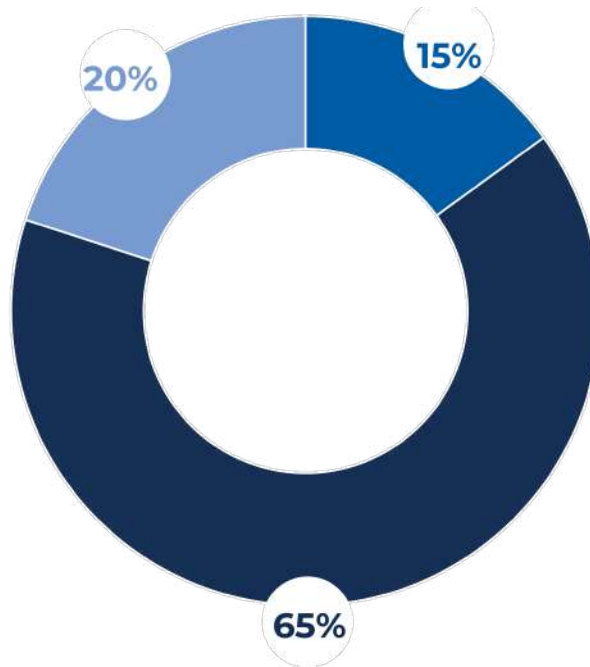
Using the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation, each Public Participation channel was classified by the level of influence participants had over de-

cision-making. The spectrum provides a standardised tool for understanding, designing, and evaluating engagement processes by explicitly articulating the promise being made to citizens at each participation level.

The framework recognises that different contexts and decisions appropriately warrant different levels of public influence, that not all participation

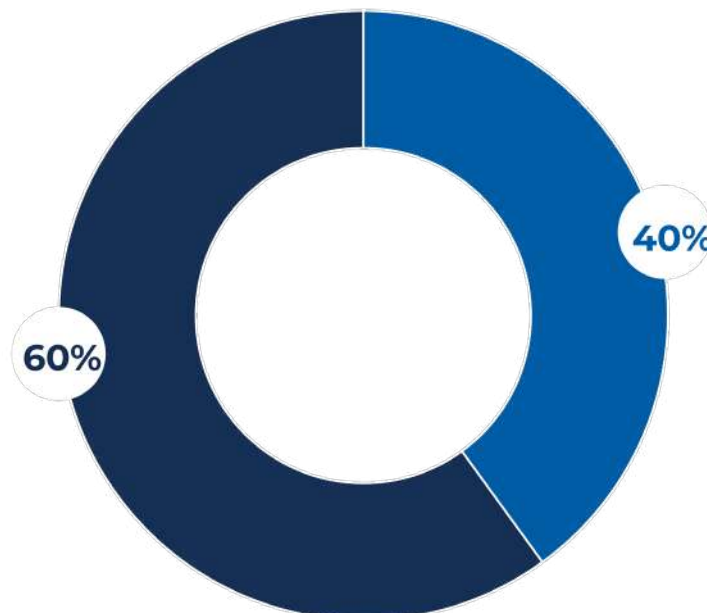
### 3 Execution Structure of Public Participation Channels

Proportion of participation channels that adhere to a centralised versus decentralized mode of execution, and those that are hybrid in nature



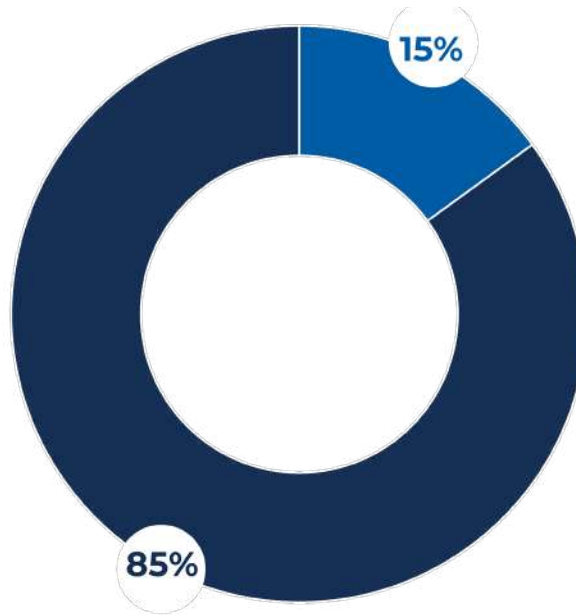
### 4 Capital Ownership Status of Public Participation Channels

Proportion of public participation channels convened by institutions which have control over budgeting and can act autonomously (owners) versus those who lack these powers (planners)



### 5 Institutionalisation Status of Public Participation Channels

Proportion of public participation channels that are operating under a legal mandate or institutional policy versus those that are not

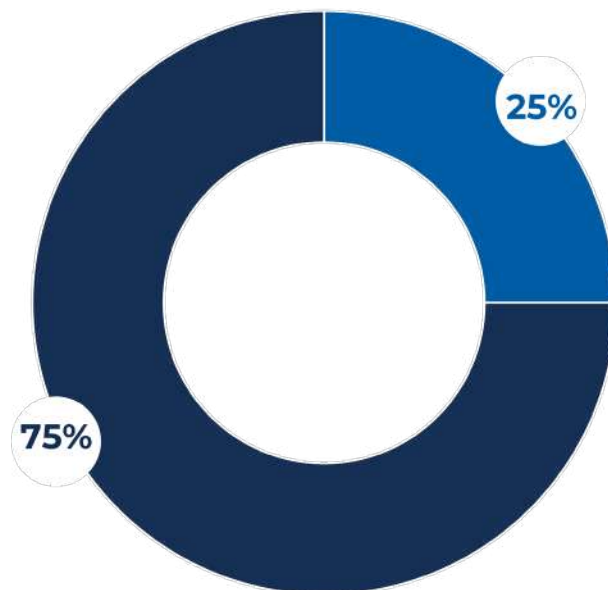


needs to be at the highest level, but clarity about what level is being offered prevents the expectation mismatches that erode trust. A key part of the spectrum’s value lies in making visible what is often obscured: the actual amount of power-sharing occurring in processes that all use the generic label “participation” despite functioning very differently.

The majority of tested channels operate at the lowest rungs of the IAP2 spectrum: Inform (Level 1) and Consult (Level 2). This pattern directly correlates

with persistent citizen complaints that they felt less than involved, even in the face of opportunities to engage. Channels that operate at the lower end of the spectrum typically prioritize hosting events and capturing inputs as measures of success, rather than ongoing engagement. Limited public participation is a structural consequence of low-spectrum design: when channels are designed only to inform or to minimally consult, agencies often neglect functional infrastructure, process clarity, or impact documentation.

However, higher IAPC classifications are not necessarily indicative of better citizen engagement. Channels classified at the same level can provide significantly different citizen engagement experiences. For example, while the SPARK Programme and JSIF’s Project Consultation are both classified as “Level Two: Consult”, they had among the best scores for meeting citizen needs in the Service Evaluation.



### 6 Permanence Status of Public Participation Channels

Proportion of public participation channels that are permanent in nature versus those that are temporary and/or project-based

## 7 Classification of Public Participation Channels by the IAP2's Spectrum of Participation

Classifies public participation channels using the IAP2's Spectrum of Participation, illustrating the degree of influence each channel affords the public within decision-making processes.

### LEVEL 1

**KSAMC**  
Public Consultation on Infrastructure Projects

**SPARK Program - (NWA)**  
Community Consultations

### LEVEL 2

**National Works Agency**  
Community Meetings

**National Environment and Planning Agency (NEPA)**  
Public Consultation

**Constituency Development Fund (CDF)**  
MP Consultations

**Local Schools**  
Parent-Teacher Conferences

**HEART/ NSTA Trust**  
Community Training Interventions (CTIs)

**Jamaica Social Investment Fund (JSIF)**  
Project Steering Committees / Community Committees

**Climate Change Division, MEGJC**  
Climate Change Advisory Board

**JPS & JPS Foundation**  
Community Renewal Programme / Ambassadorship Programme

### LEVEL 3

**National Secondary Students Council (NSSC)**  
Student Councils

**Ministry of Local Government and Community Development**  
Parish Development Committees (PDC)

**Social Development Commissions**  
Development Area Committees

**ODPEM**  
Parish Disaster Committee

**Jamaica Social Investments Fund (JSIF)**  
Community Consultations

**National Environment and Planning Agency (NEPA)**  
Development Order Consultation

### LEVEL 4

**Social Development Commission**  
Community Development Plan Consultation

**Social Development Commission**  
Community Development Plan Committees (CDC)

**Social Development Commission**  
Local Economic Development Support Programme

**National Housing Trust**  
Community Development Plans

**National Housing Trust**  
Housing Development Consultations

### LEVEL 5

**Project STAR**  
Community Transformation Boards (CTBs)

## The OneCity Index

The OneCity Index was used to classify participation channels by the type of community assets they target—such as education, mobility, safety, water and sanitation, and employment. This approach reveals where participatory opportunities are concentrated and where gaps exist.

The analysis showed substantial overlap among channels: multiple agencies often operate in the same asset areas without coordination, generating duplication and community fatigue. Conversely, some assets with significant governance implications—such as Housing & Land Tenure or environmental hazards—had fewer mechanisms for participation.

### Patterns & Observations

The institutional classifications used to present the public participation channels in this chapter were among the earliest patterns identified by the

research team. They appear to play a significant role in shaping institutional behaviour, incentives, and the ability of consultation convenors to deliver on their engagement with communities. This initial scaffold warrants further exploration in subsequent research. Execution Structure and Capital Ownership were particularly consequential in the service evaluation.

Whether a channel was executed centrally, decentralised, or in a “hybrid” manner was the most consequential characteristic in the service evaluation of the quality of experience provided by a public participation channel owner. While centralized mechanisms typically offer a clear point of discovery, they may struggle to provide accessible engagement points at the community level, as they often rely on central points in population centers or online for mobilization. Decentralized structures, in theory, provide proximity to local communities. But this mode of execution brought other challenges.



## OneCity Indicators

The full set of indicators used in Who Gets What, outlining the dimensions through which urban integration and access to services were measured and assessed

	1. Land Tenure Security		6. Access to Education		10. Street Structure
	2. Access to Improved Water and Sanitation		7. Access to Basic Information Services		12. Employment
	3. Access to Solid Waste Services		8. Financial Inclusion		13. Access to Healthcare
	4. Access to Basic Mobility		9. Perceptions of Safety		14. Civic Engagement
	5. Formal Connection to the Electricity Grid		11. Environmental Hazards	<b>THE ONECITY EXPLORER</b>	

## 9 Categorisation of Public Participation Channels by the OneCity Indicators

Maps the public participation channels against the OneCity Indicators, illustrating which dimensions of urban integration and governance are engaged by each channel



 **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

- CONSTITUENCY DEVELOPMENT FUND**  
MP Consultations
- JAMAICA SOCIAL INVESTMENT FUND**  
Community Consultation  
Project Steering Committees/  
Community Committees
- JPS AND JPS FOUNDATION**  
Community Renewal  
Programme/ Ambassadorship  
Programme
- KINGSTON AND ST. ANDREW MUNICIPAL CORPORATION (KSMAC)**  
Public Consultation on  
Infrastructure Projects
- NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING AGENCY**  
Public Consultation
- MINISTRY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**  
Parish Development Committees
- NATIONAL SECONDARY STUDENTS'**  
Student Councils
- OFFICE OF DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**  
Public Consultation
- PROJECT STAR**  
Community Transformation Boards
- SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION**  
Community Development  
Committees  
Development Area Committees  
Local Economic Development  
Support Programme

 **ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS**

- JAMAICA SOCIAL INVESTMENT FUND**  
Community Consultation
- JPS AND JPS FOUNDATION**  
Community Renewal  
Programme/ Ambassadorship  
Programme
- KINGSTON AND ST. ANDREW MUNICIPAL CORPORATION (KSMAC)**  
Public Consultation on  
Infrastructure Projects
- MINISTRY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**  
Parish Development Committees
- NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING AGENCY**  
Public Consultation
- OFFICE OF DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**  
Public Consultation
- SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION**  
Development Area Committees  
Community Development Plan  
Consultation  
Local Economic Development  
Support Programme

 **PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY**

- OFFICE OF DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**  
Public Consultation
- SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION**  
Community Development  
Plan Consultation
- SPARK PROGRAM (NWA)**  
Community Consultation
- PROJECT STAR**  
Community Transformation Boards

 **STREET STRUCTURE**

- CONSTITUENCY DEVELOPMENT FUND**  
MP Consultations
- KINGSTON AND ST. ANDREW MUNICIPAL CORPORATION (KSMAC)**  
Public Consultation on  
Infrastructure Projects
- NATIONAL WORKS AGENCY**  
Community Meetings
- MINISTRY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**  
Parish Development Committees
- SPARK PROGRAM (NWA)**  
Community Consultation

Decentralised entities were more likely to prioritize community networks and communications channels. While reasonable as a programmatic decision, this often coincided with a deprioritisation of communications activities, making them less visible outside the community or to those who may not be as connected.

The quality of public participation service delivery varied significantly in decentralised structures. They were commonly among the lowest-scoring channels for discoverability. This

prompts questions about the role of oversight or coordinating bodies. What coordination, support, or shared assets should be provided? As it relates to shared assets, oversight or coordinating bodies infrequently provide shared infrastructure for community engagement, leaving local structures to make siloed, duplicative investments in communications architecture. Unfortunately, many of them struggled to do so.

Hybrid execution structures offer a promising model, combining centralised coordination with local proximity

in ways that can mitigate the visibility, infrastructure, and oversight gaps that weakened decentralized structures.

The attributes identified by the research play a significant role in shaping institutional behavior and the ability of consultation convenors to deliver on their engagement with communities.

## Institutionalization and Permanence

New or unfamiliar invitations to participate in decision-making face an additional hurdle: establishing credibility with targeted stakeholders. This might be overcome through effective communication of future benefits, “borrowing” social capital from other institutions or individuals, or embedding the ask in another established channel of engagement.

### Plans, Plans, and More Plans

Planning processes and plan creation are prevalent across the ecosystem. Institutional investments appear to be skewed towards the planning process as an output, rather than the execution and consistent communication of executed outcomes. Across most of the evaluated channels, there was little evidence of a connection between tangible outcomes and community consultations, though this has been identified as a priority citizen need.

Despite the frequency of planning exercises across the ecosystem, the visibility and sharing of these plans is not commonplace. Many of the plans, or even documented outputs of consultation activities, are published infrequently. Even the SDC, an organization with a mandate to support Community Development Committees (CDCs) in creating development plans, does not maintain a public, searchable registry of these plans. Interested parties must contact the SDC (or the relevant CDC) directly to receive access.

In one extreme scenario, when a research team member requested a copy of a co-created community plan, a representative from ProjectStar responded that the plan was “only available to individuals in the community”.

The lack of institutional transparency around planning documents is suboptimal. It creates unnecessary friction for stakeholders who might be interested in contributing to a shared vision, or

There are four distinct geographic levels of operation: Community, Municipality/Parish, National, and Other

leads to wasted resources through recurrent, duplicative, and overlapping consultations. Lastly, it undermines community confidence by breaking the connection between consultation and impact.

### Conclusion

Jamaica’s public participation ecosystem is extensive in form but uneven in function. Many mechanisms exist, but few reliably provide meaningful influence. Structural gaps in ownership, coordination, feedback, and implementation weaken trust and limit the system’s democratic potential.

These findings lay the foundation for the next chapter, which examines how these structural dynamics shape citizen expectations and identifies opportunities to better align institutional practice with citizen needs.



# 4

## Understanding The Citizen's Perspective



Public participation involves citizens directly in **shaping** outcomes, such as budgets, plans, or projects



This chapter examines public participation in Jamaica from the perspective of citizens who are asked to engage. Rather than assessing participation through institutional mandates, formal processes, or stated intentions, it focuses on how participation is experienced in practice—how opportunities are encountered, interpreted, and navigated across different contexts.

The analysis draws on participatory workshops, interviews, and qualitative engagements that surface illustrative experiences of participation. These accounts are not intended to represent all citizens or to provide a statistically generalisable view. Instead, they highlight recurring patterns, frictions, and priorities expressed by participants, offering insight into how participation functions on the ground and how it is understood by those invited to take part.

The chapter concludes by synthesising these illustrative experiences into the Public Participation User-Needs Framework. This framework distils citizen perspectives into a set of core needs that inform the evaluation of participation channels in the following chapter and the recommendations that conclude the report.

### How Citizens Encounter Public Participation

This section draws on participatory workshops and qualitative engagement with citizens and institutional actors to examine how public participation is experienced in practice. Participants reflected both on their own first-person experiences of engaging in participation processes and on what

they had observed while organising, facilitating, or supporting engagement activities across different contexts. Rather than separating success factors from barriers, the analysis presents a set of interacting dynamics that shape how participation is encountered—sometimes enabling engagement, and at other times undermining it.

### Entry, Access, and Mobilisation

Participants described entry into public participation as uneven and highly dependent on how information circulated and who was connected to existing mobilisation networks. Participation opportunities were more visible to some groups than others, not necessarily because of formal exclusion, but because access relied on informal pathways, personal networks, or prior involvement in community activities.

Several participants reflected on their own experiences of learning about participation opportunities through word of mouth, WhatsApp groups, or community intermediaries rather than through official channels. Participants who had organised or supported engagement activities noted that these informal pathways were often the most effective way to mobilise attendance, but they also observed that reliance on them tended to reproduce existing patterns of participation. Individuals who were already connected to community groups or local leaders were more likely to be informed and engaged, while others learned of opportunities only after they had passed or not at all.

This dynamic shaped how participation was interpreted. Where mobilisation felt inclusive and information was

Jamaica's public participation ecosystem is extensive in form but uneven in function



## Structural gaps in ownership, coordination, feedback, and implementation and limit the system's democratic potential

shared early and widely, participation was experienced as more open and accessible. Where access depended on prior relationships or proximity to organisers, participation was perceived as uneven, reinforcing the sense that engagement was easier for some citizens than for others. From the participant perspective, entry into participation was not just about awareness, but about whether pathways into the process felt predictable and fair.

### Information Asymmetry and Understanding the Process

Beyond initial access, participants frequently described participation processes as difficult to navigate because of uneven access to information and limited clarity about how decisions were made. This challenge was evident both in participants' own engagement experiences and in what they observed while organising or supporting participation activities. Understanding the process—what stage it was at, what input was expected, and who held decision-making authority—was often experienced as burdensome rather than intuitive.

Several participants reflected on situations where key information about participation processes was fragmented across multiple platforms or communicated inconsistently. Instructions were sometimes incomplete, changed over time, or conveyed informally rather than through official channels. Participants who had supported engagement processes observed that this information gap placed a disproportionate burden on citizens, who were expected to interpret procedural details without access to the same contextual knowl-

edge held by institutions.

This asymmetry shaped participation behaviour. Where participants felt unable to fully understand the process, engagement was approached cautiously or avoided altogether, with uncertainty about whether contributions were relevant or timely. From the participant perspective, participation was undermined not by the complexity of issues themselves, but by the difficulty of accessing clear, stable information about how to engage effectively.

### Trust, Legitimacy, and Expectation-Setting

Participants consistently described trust as shaped less by formal mandates and more by whether engagement processes aligned with expectations set at the outset. Participation was more likely to be experienced as legitimate when institutions were clear about the scope of influence and when the process unfolded in ways that matched how it had been presented.

Participants recounted engagement processes where expectations were clearly managed, including explicit communication about what participation could realistically influence. In these cases, even limited outcomes were viewed as credible. By contrast, participants described experiences in which engagement was framed broadly or aspirationally, but later appeared constrained by decisions already made. This mismatch contributed to scepticism, particularly when expectations were clarified only after participation had occurred.

Participants who had observed multi-

ple engagement processes noted that trust accumulated over time. Repeated experiences of misaligned expectations shaped how individuals interpreted future participation opportunities, influencing whether they engaged at all or moderated their level of effort. Trust, in this sense, functioned as a practical judgement informed by experience rather than a general attitude toward institutions.

### Implementation, Follow-Through, and Perceived Impact

Participants consistently linked the value of participation to what happened after engagement concluded. Follow-through—whether in the form of updates, implementation progress, or visible action—was interpreted as a signal of whether participation mattered. This view was shared by participants reflecting on their own involvement and by those who had supported or observed participation processes over time.

Several participants described engagement exercises where substantial input was gathered, but no subsequent communication or action was visible. In these cases, participants inferred that participation had a limited impact, regardless of the quality of the engagement itself. Participants who had organised similar processes observed that even modest implementation steps or explanations of delays helped sustain confidence, whereas silence often undermined it.

Participants also noted that limits on follow-through were often shaped by factors beyond the participation process itself, influencing how engagement translated—or failed to translate—into action.

### Funding, Capital Access, and the Limits of Participation

Participants consistently raised the relationship between participation, planning, and funding as a defining factor in how engagement was experienced.



From both first-person participation and observation of engagement processes, participants noted that many planning and consultation exercises were not meaningfully connected to capital resources or implementation pathways. This disconnection shaped expectations about what participation could realistically achieve.

Several participants reflected on planning processes in which communities invested significant time in consultations, only to see the plans remain unfunded or stall indefinitely. Participants who had organised or supported such processes observed that the absence of identified funding sources often became apparent only after engagement had concluded. Over time, this pattern contributed to a perception that participation generated plans and priorities without a credible pathway to action.

From the participant perspective, the issue was not simply the absence of funding, but the lack of transparency about whether resources existed or might be mobilised. Where participation was not linked to capital considerations, engagement was experienced as aspirational rather than actionable, shaping how communities approached future participation opportunities.

### Fragmentation, Duplication, and Coordination Across Institutions

Participants described these challenges as occurring within a broader institutional landscape characterised by fragmentation and limited coordination. From their perspective, engagement processes were often disconnected from one another, even when they addressed related issues or involved the same communities. This fragmentation was evident both in participants' direct experiences and in observations from those supporting multiple engagement initiatives.

Several participants noted being invited to engage repeatedly on similar topics across different forums, without

clarity on how these processes related or whether input was cumulative. Participants who had organised or observed engagement activities described duplication of effort, with limited coordination across institutions or administrative levels. This repetition contributed to participation fatigue and uncertainty about where engagement was most likely to have influence.

As a result, participation was often experienced as episodic rather than systemic. Without visible connections between engagement exercises, participants struggled to see how individual contributions fit into a broader decision-making process. From the participant perspective, fragmentation did not necessarily signal exclusion, but it did undermine confidence that participation efforts were coherent or additive over time.

### The Youth Experience

This section draws on participatory workshops and qualitative engagement with youth to surface illustrative experiences of public participation. The insights presented here are not intended to be representative of all Jamaican youth, but to highlight recurring patterns, tensions, and priorities expressed by participants, many of whom reside in urban poor communities. These examples inform the development of the Citizen Public Participation User-Needs Framework and were iteratively tested and refined through participatory workshops and user feedback.

### Relationship to Their Communities

For many youth participants, “community” was not experienced as a stable or inviting civic space. Participants described their neighbourhoods as unsafe, socially fragmented, or characterised by dynamics that were not progressive. It was a place to escape, not actively contribute to.

Parental guidance frequently reinforced this distance. Some youth de-



scribed being advised to “tan a yuh yard and focus pon yuh book,” with community involvement viewed as a potential source of risk or distraction. Limited engagement was not described as indifference, but as a response shaped by safety concerns and family constraints.

As a result, public participation was not perceived as a natural extension of community belonging. It was more common for participants to share feelings of isolation and limited activity—“nobody comes out, everyone stays inside.” Participants in communities with more regular programming appeared to have a more positive community outlook, with others describing them as lucky.

### How Youth Understand Public Participation

Youth understanding of public participation was limited in most cases. Several participants struggled to describe what public participation meant in practical terms or to identify where participation opportunities existed. It was commonly equated with charitable giving and outreach (e.g., sports days and community treats) rather than civic engagement or decision-making. Engagement processes were often seen as adult-oriented spaces that assumed prior knowledge of governance structures and procedures.

Where participation opportunities were visible, they frequently felt misaligned with youth priorities or interests. Some participants expressed uncertainty about whether these spaces were intended for them or how their involvement would fit within the process.

### Credibility, Representation, and Motivation

When youth did express interest in engaging, credibility emerged as a key factor shaping motivation. Participants consistently differentiated between organisations that had demonstrated follow-through in the past and those that had not. Trust was built through visible action and sustained presence, rather than through formal mandates or one-



off engagements.

Representation also mattered. Youth were more likely to engage when they saw peers involved in leadership, facilitation, or organisational roles. Conversely, spaces dominated by older adults or authority figures were often perceived as intimidating or unrelatable, even when youth participation was formally encouraged.

Motivation to participate was therefore closely linked to whether engagement spaces felt authentic, relevant, and oriented toward youth perspectives.

### Social Media as an Unstable Participation Channel

Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok featured prominently. Young people accessed news and information through Instagram, non-traditional outlets, and user-generated content. Several participants indicated that information about meetings or programmes was often shared informally through social media or personal messages rather than through official channels.

However, participants also shared increasing cynicism about performative activism and community outreach—“everything is for the likes.” Across the sessions, participants

shared examples of individuals performing charitable acts that appeared more motivated by a desire to accrue social value to themselves than by helping the recipient. Skepticism about the authenticity of outreach negatively impacted the willingness to engage.

### Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organisations (CBOs), churches, and youth-focused programmes emerged as critical enablers of youth engagement. These spaces were consistently described as safe, familiar, and credible, in contrast to more formal institutional settings.

They provided many benefits that young people particularly valued. These included:

- Safe spaces to engage with others outside of the home and outside of the community
- Short-term sustenance (e.g., meals, treats)
- Entertainment
- Educational needs (e.g., lessons, scholarships, mentorship)
- Information and opportunity sharing

Providing a safe space in an unsafe context is probably the most important benefit highlighted by participants. As their parents generally discouraged their presence in the community, CBOs provide accessible avenues for them to get out of the home. The organization most commonly referenced for this benefit was the church. It was one of the few spaces in the community where they could participate freely. This was especially important for female participants, who felt that there were even stricter rules for them than for their male counterparts.

When asked about places where they volunteered or were willing to participate in activities, participants most commonly identified CBOs and community centers. It was also common for CBOs that provided specific opportunities (e.g., scholarships or mentorship programmes) to require beneficiaries to contribute to subsequent cohorts. Many participants shared that these requirements were the initial reason for their introduction to volunteering, but had stayed on beyond their mandatory service windows.

### Design-Relevant Insights from Youth Experience

Taken together, these illustrative experiences suggest that youth disen-

agement from public participation is shaped by contextual factors such as safety, trust, representation, and relevance. Participation was more likely where engagement occurred in trusted spaces, through credible intermedi-

aries, and in ways that resonated with youth priorities and lived realities.

These insights highlight conditions that influence whether youth are able and willing to engage in public participation.

They inform the user needs articulated in the following section, which synthesizes citizen experiences across groups into a structured framework for evaluating participation design.







# 5

## Evaluating the Public Participation Channels



## Public participation **channels**

can be executed by a central entity, through a delegated authority, the local municipal authority, or as a hybrid



**T**his chapter evaluates how well Jamaica's public participation ecosystem works by examining how select public participation channels perform in practice. It applies the Citizen User-Needs Framework proposed in Chapter 4 (Understanding The Citizen's Perspective) to assess whether existing mechanisms provide the clarity, access, responsiveness, and follow-through that citizens require for participation to feel meaningful.

The evaluation uses a service-design lens that focuses on the participant's experience rather than the convening institution's intention. It highlights where participation channels align with citizen needs, where they fall short, and what these patterns reveal about how the system functions as a whole. The insights here help explain why, despite the number of avenues for participation, many Jamaicans continue to feel unheard or disconnected from public decision-making.

### **Evaluation Approach**

The evaluation of Jamaica's participation channels was grounded in a service-design methodology that assesses public processes from the perspective of the people who attempt to use them. This approach recognises that a participation mechanism is only as effective as the experience it provides, and that gaps in clarity, accessibility, or responsiveness can undermine even well-intentioned initiatives.

### **Channel Selection and Scope**

Twenty channels were selected based on criteria prioritising relevance, consistency, and public visibility. Channels were included if they were formally implemented by a public institution, accessible to the research team during the study period, and structured around a defined participation process. The sample included statutory committees, policy consultations, environmental and planning processes, parish-level structures, and programme-based engagement mechanisms.



The goal was not to create a census of all participation channels in Jamaica, but to examine a sufficiently diverse set to identify patterns in how participation functions across sectors and governance levels.

## Evaluation Activities

The evaluation involved multiple types of evidence-gathering:

- Document and digital review: examining websites, published notices, consultation reports, and official guidance.
- Participation walkthroughs: attempting to navigate each channel's participation process from the perspective of a citizen seeking to engage.
- Testing communication channels: calling listed phone numbers, sending emails, and submitting forms to determine whether contact pathways were functional.
- Observation: attending public meetings or briefings where possible.
- Stakeholder interviews: speaking with institutional representatives to clarify procedures and capacity constraints.
- Citizen engagement: facilitating focus groups and lived experience workshops to understand how citizens interpret and experience participation.

These activities enabled evaluators to test each channel's design, reliability, and user-facing execution. Together, they formed the evidence base that informs the cross-cutting findings presented at the end of the chapter.

## The Evaluation Rubric

The rubric used in this study operationalises the Citizen User-Needs Framework presented in Chapter 4. Each channel was assessed on whether it:

- Provides clear information on purpose and process;
- Offers stable, accessible entry points;
- Allows participation early

enough to influence decisions;

- Makes decision-making processes visible;
- Responds to and acknowledges input
- Provides a record of how feedback shaped outcomes.

Channels were scored as *consistently meeting* (1 point), *inconsistently meeting* (½ point), *not meeting* (zero points), or *not applicable* for each user's needs. The quality of access measure used a different scoring schema, outlined in the table below. Evaluations were conducted independently and then calibrated to ensure interpretive consistency.

## Interpreting and Moderating Findings

The analysis involved collective review of evidence across cases and methods, with team members contributing specialised insights and resolving discrepancies through iterative discussion. Particular attention was paid to ambiguous evidence—missing documentation, non-functional digital infrastructure, or contradictory instructions—which evaluators addressed by triangulating between citizen accounts, institutional interviews, and direct observations to build consensus on final scores.

## Limitations

Several constraints shaped the evaluation. Documentation was uneven across institutions, and some processes lacked reliable archives of past activity. The executed methodology biases toward well-functioning digital presences and archives—which are not necessarily indicative of effective offline mobilisation. This digital-first approach may systematically underrepresent groups that rely on in-person networks or other non-digital channels. Social media-reliant digital channel use is unstable over time, with limited permanence, as announcements and guidance frequently change or disappear. Capacity limitations within institutions also affected the responsiveness of communication channels. This meant that citizens' experiences could vary depending on timing and the channel's prioritisation. Finally, not all channels could be observed directly during live engagements.

Within these constraints, the evaluation generated substantial empirical evidence documenting how participation mechanisms operate in practice and identified systematic patterns that recur across the institutional ecosystem.

Participants frequently described participation processes as difficult to navigate because of uneven access to information and limited clarity about how decisions were made



## How Well Do Participation Channels Meet Citizen Needs?

Although the channels differed in purpose, scale, and institutional home, citizens encountered a consistent set of challenges across them. These patterns help explain why participation often feels unpredictable or burdensome, even when multiple engagement pathways exist.

One of the most common issues was timing. Many channels engaged citizens only after substantive decisions had already been made. In several cases, draft plans or near-final policy positions were presented for comment, leaving little room for citizen input to shape outcomes. Participants described these processes as opportunities to react rather than to influence, which diminished the perceived value of participation.

A second recurring pattern involved clarity of purpose and process. Researchers and citizen participants frequently reported uncertainty about why they were being consulted, what authority the process carried, and how their contributions would be used. Instructions were often high-level or incomplete, and different parts of an institution sometimes offered conflicting information. This lack of clarity makes it difficult for citizens to understand their role or to predict what will happen after they participate.

Persistent accessibility challenges also shaped the participation experience. Digital entry points were widely used but not reliably maintained. Links were broken, notices were outdated, and websites were not optimised for mobile use—an important barrier given how many Jamaicans access the internet primarily through smartphones. In-person participation, meanwhile, was often constrained by meeting times and locations that excluded working people, rural residents, or those without easy access to transportation.

Across nearly all channels, feedback loops were weak or entirely absent. Citizens rarely received updates explaining how their input influenced outcomes or whether it was considered at all. When responses did occur, they were usually generic acknowledgements rather than substantive explanations. This reinforced a broader perception that participation was symbolic—something institutions were required to do, rather than a meaningful avenue for shaping decisions.

A further insight relates to institutional capacity. Higher-capacity entities—typically those with dedicated staff, stable funding, and strong internal processes—delivered more consistent participation experiences. In contrast, under-resourced bodies struggled to maintain even basic communication channels. These disparities meant that the quality of participation varied depending on which institution led the process, rather than the importance or statutory status of the issue at hand.

Finally, the evaluation highlighted fragmentation across the ecosystem. With no coordinating body or shared standards for participation, ministries and agencies designed and executed processes independently. This resulted in duplication, inconsistent expectations, and a lack of system-wide learning. Citizens were required to navigate each process anew, often with entirely different rules, formats, and requirements.

Together, these cross-cutting findings suggest that Jamaica's participation ecosystem functions less as a coordinated system and more as a collection of individual channels. While each may serve a legitimate purpose, their cumulative effect is one of inconsistency, unpredictability, and limited impact on decision-making.





## Public Participation Ecosystem Scorecard

Evaluates public participation channels based on the Citizen Public Participation User Needs Framework

CHANNEL (MAX SCORE: 20)	FIND	UNDERSTAND	PARTICIPATE	SYSTEM OF RECORD	SCORE
Project STAR: Community Transformation Boards (CTBs)					13.5
NWA: SPARK Community Consultations					11.5
Constituency Development Fund (CDF): MP Meetings					6.5
HEART/NSTA: Community Training Interventions (CTIs)					7.5
JSIF: Community Consultations					12
JSIF: Project Steering and Community Committees					12
KSAMC: Public Consultations Public Infrastructure					6.5
MEGJC: Climate Change Advisory Board					4.5
MLGCD: Parish Development Committees					4
NEPA: Public Consultations					8.5
NHT: Social Housing Programme					2.5
NHT: Capacity Building Programme					15
NHT: Infrastructure Upgrade Programme					14.5
National Secondary Students' Council (NSSC)					4
NWA: Community Meetings					5.5
SDC: Community Development Plan Consultation					9
SDC: Local Economic Development Support Programme					9

## Findings by User-Need Category

Each subsection below presents the key insights for one user-need category, supported by examples and a synthesis of the evaluation results.

### FIND — How Easily Can Citizens Locate the Process?

Across the research, it was found that the first step of participating—simply finding where to begin—was one of the most challenging aspects of engagement. Across the channels assessed, information about how to participate was dispersed, inconsistently updated, or unintentionally obscured. (See Table 2). This pattern appeared across several mechanisms, including the Parish Development Committees (PDCs), Community Development Committees (CDCs), the National Works Agency (NWA) community consultation channels, and even formal statutory bodies such as the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management (ODPEM) Parish Disaster Committees. In many cases, the primary access point was a digital one, yet websites and online pages were not maintained in step with ongoing processes. Citizens encountered outdated notices, expired forms, or conflicting instructions across different parts of the same institutional website.

Because of these inconsistencies, participation often began with guesswork. Researchers and citizens described searching across multiple platforms, calling offices repeatedly without an answer, or consulting personal contacts to verify basic details such as meeting times, submission requirements, and institutional responsibilities. People without established community networks or relationships inside institutions frequently learned of opportunities only after deadlines had passed. For example, in the case of parish-level consultations facilitated by a Municipal Corporation, several participants reported learning about sessions only through WhatsApp groups long after official notices had

circulated. For many, participation felt dependent on prior knowledge of where to look.

Several recurring access challenges were found. Although they appeared in different forms across ministries and agencies, they produced a similar effect: citizens struggled to locate a consistent, dependable entry point into the process.

**Digital information became difficult to relocate.** Information posted through social media channels quickly became difficult to relocate, as older notices were buried in feeds and lacked persistent archiving. Citizens attempting to revisit information later—such as posts for the ministry-led public information sessions documented in the evaluation or NEPA permit consultations—often could not find them due to feed-based decay.

**Project-linked channels lacked permanence.** Channels associated with short-term programmes remained active only during the intervention period. Once the programme ended, the associated digital presence stopped being updated, often leaving no clear successor mechanism in place.

**Public posting practices were irregular.** Announcements were shared inconsistently across platforms, sometimes circulated informally within WhatsApp groups or posted too close to the event for broad awareness. This was observed across multiple municipal engagements, including Kingston & St. Andrew Municipal Corporation (KSAMC) notices.

Together, these patterns show that finding participation opportunities requires persistence, prior knowledge, and significant time. Without stable and predictable entry points, access becomes uneven.

### Illustrative Examples of Good Practice

SDC's Community Development Plan

consultation stood out from other participation channels for its accessibility and citizen-centred design. The consultations were easy to find, benefiting from SDC's established presence in communities and the visible role of Community Development Officers, who served as trusted points of contact and created a network of local information sources. Information about upcoming consultations was communicated well in advance using channels embedded in community life: posters in local gathering spaces, WhatsApp groups and digital messaging, and word-of-mouth through neighbourhood contacts. The use of multiple channels and early notice provided interested persons with the opportunity to plan their participation.

The observed engagements included several citizen-centred design considerations—meetings were scheduled at convenient times, held in accessible locations, and followed a transparent format that participants could understand and navigate. They did, however, require physical location to participate or observe which limited their accessibility.

This combination of institutional familiarity, proactive communication, and thoughtful planning created a participation process that communities could readily locate and engage with, and provides strong references in the "Find" category.





## Public Participation Ecosystem Scorecard (Find Component)

Evaluates public participation channels based the Find Component of the Citizen Public Participation User Needs Framework

CHANNEL	FIND (MAX SCORE: 5)				TOTAL
	1. BE EASY TO FIND	2. MAKE IT EASY TO GET HUMAN ASSISTANCE	3. BE USABLE BY EVERYONE, EQUALLY	4. QUALITY OF ACCESS	
Constituency Development Fund (CDF): MP Meetings					2
HEART/NSTA: Community Training Interventions (CTIs)					3
JSIF: Community Consultations					3
JSIF: Project Steering and Community Committees					3
KSAMC: Public Consultations Public Infrastructure					3
MEGJC: Climate Change Advisory Board					1.5
MLGCD: Parish Development Committees					0.5
NEPA: Public Consultations					2.5
NHT: Social Housing Programme					2.5
NHT: Capacity Building Programme					4.5
NHT: Infrastructure Upgrade Programme					4
National Secondary Students' Council (NSSC)					1.5
NWA: Community Meetings					1
NWA: SPARK Community Consultations					1.5
Project STAR: Community Transformation Boards (CTBs)					2.5
SDC: Community Development Plan Consultation					3.5
SDC: Local Economic Development Support Programme					3.5

## UNDERSTAND — Can Citizens Make Sense of the Process?

Even when citizens successfully located the entry point, many struggled to understand what would happen next. Across a wide range of participation channels, including the HEART Community Training Initiative consultations, KSAMC's consultations, and community-level structures like CDCs and PDCs, the steps involved in participation were often unclear or incompletely documented. Some institutions offered high-level descriptions of participation, but few provided straightforward guidance on what citizens were being asked to do, who would make decisions, or how their input would be considered. Citizens described arriving at consultations or submitting feedback without knowing the scope of their influence. This was particularly evident in the parish and national consultations, where participants assumed their input would significantly shape the draft, only to be disappointed by institutional resistance to incorporating widely held stakeholder positions. Others described submitting written feedback without any indication of how their submissions would be reviewed, or whether they would receive acknowledgment. The evaluation found recurring challenges, and although these varied by institution, they created similar barriers to understanding:

- **Information gaps** - Steps in the process, such as how submissions would be handled or whether decisions were still open, were often not documented. This was evident in channels like the housing-related public processes and several ministry-led policy reviews.
- **Variable practices** - Channels operating under the same mandate functioned differently across parishes or agencies. For example, the roles and operations of PDCs varied widely across parishes, leading to

inability to compare them and confusion among other stakeholders about how community input would flow through the governance structures.

- **Hidden criteria** - Citizens were often unaware of the decision-making factors institutions used, such as the weighting of inputs or how written comments on draft policies would be assessed.

For example, an attempt to follow published instructions for submitting input processes was curtailed by the non-existence of an online form referenced in the instructions. The institution then redirected the input to be done using an entirely different submission method that had never been published. When participation mechanisms lack clarity, potential participants cannot assess whether the process is fair, legitimate, or worth their time. As a result, there is meagre, likely low-quality participation, or, more often, complete disengagement.

### Illustrative Examples of Good Practice

Project STAR's Community Transformation Boards and the SPARK Programme

provided strong examples of convening institutions that demonstrated process clarity. Both participation processes employed a systematic approach to breaking down engagement into clearly defined steps, building up citizen understanding of what would happen, and when and how their involvement would unfold. There was evidence of strong cross-institutional collaboration—including through SDC Community Development Officers who served as key facilitators and community liaisons for multiple programmes. Citizens received guidance on how their inputs would be gathered. Crucially, this clarity was reinforced by the availability of support staff and volunteers who engaged citizens and provided assistance throughout the participation process.

Both channels generated high levels of community interest, sustained in part by strong communication about what citizen input would be used to do. Stakeholder communications at the community level and through national platforms were strong components of both engagements. This combination of structured processes, communication about purpose and use, collaborative institutional support, and accessible guidance contributed to building understanding.





### Public Participation Ecosystem (Understand) Scorecard

Evaluates public participation channels based on the Understand Component of the Citizen Public Participation User Needs Framework

CHANNEL	UNDERSTAND (MAX SCORE: 5)				TOTAL
	5. CLEARLY EXPLAIN WHY A DECISION HAS BEEN MADE	6. SET THE EXPECTATIONS A USER HAS OF IT	7. BE AGNOSTIC OF ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES	8. QUALITY OF ACCESS	
Constituency Development Fund (CDF): MP Meetings					2
HEART/NSTA: Community Training Interventions (CTIs)					1
JSIF: Community Consultations					3
JSIF: Project Steering and Community Committees					3
KSAMC: Public Consultations Public Infrastructure					1
MEGJC: Climate Change Advisory Board					1
MLGCD: Parish Development Committees					0.5
NEPA: Public Consultations					2.5
NHT: Social Housing Programme					0
NHT: Capacity Building Programme					4
NHT: Infrastructure Upgrade Programme					4
National Secondary Students' Council (NSSC)					1
NWA: Community Meetings					1.5
NWA: SPARK Community Consultations					3
Project STAR: Community Transformation Boards (CTBs)					3.5
SDC: Community Development Plan Consultation					1.5
SDC: Local Economic Development Support Programme					1.5

## PARTICIPATE — Once Inside the Process, Can Citizens Actually Engage?

Locating and understanding the process are only the first steps. Even when citizens reached the point of interaction, many channels did not function reliably enough to support meaningful engagement. Across several mechanisms—including Municipal Corporation channels, NEPA-related submission pathways, and SDC-supported community structures—citizens encountered communication and procedural breakdowns (See Table 4). Phone numbers rang unanswered or were out of service, emails bounced, and online forms referenced in guidance documents were non-existent. These failures signalled that participation pathways were not consistently maintained or monitored.

In some cases, participation required documents, steps, or approvals that were not publicly disclosed. Citizens attempting to engage discovered additional requirements mid-process, often after investing significant time. These hidden steps created the impression that the process was not designed with the user in mind. Often, internal procedures had changed, but public-facing instructions had not been updated to reflect those changes.

Participation was also shaped by local gatekeepers, particularly within parish and community structures. Several PDC- and CDC-related processes relied on community leaders or established networks to share information or facilitate engagement. While these intermediaries strengthened participation for those within their networks, they can inadvertently exclude those without comparable access. As a result, opportunities were unevenly distributed, with a heavy reliance on personal relationships and community-level connectivity.

Several recurring challenges were seen across channels:

Operational failures that prevented citizens from completing the process, including inactive email accounts, non-functional phone lines, and unavailable submission mechanisms.

Non-disclosure of required steps, where citizens only learned of additional requirements—such as supporting documents or procedural steps—after attempting to participate.

Dependence on intermediaries can create inequities in who can participate effectively, privileging those with existing networks.

The user experience was thus unstable: steps shifted, links failed, and requirements appeared unexpectedly mid-process. Even motivated participants sometimes abandoned the process due to repeated obstacles or a lack of acknowledgement. Engagement, therefore, was not only difficult to initiate; it was almost impossible to sustain.

### Illustrative Examples of Good Practice

Project STAR's Community Transformation Boards and JSIF's Community Consultations and Project/Community Committees employed practices that

support effective participation (See Table 4). Citizens from target communities and representatives from community organizations were engaged in project design and planning phases, with formal roles on project-related committees that provide ongoing input throughout implementation phases. They communicated the role of the mechanisms and how they would be executed, including the provisional activities, decision points, and input opportunities.

While the participation channels were not consistent in publishing the minutes or records of decisions made by these groups, regular community meetings created ongoing touchpoints for information sharing and accountability. They also published more detailed project reports on the organization website and social media platforms that outlined progress, challenges, and outcomes.

There were also positive examples of digital mobilisation to broaden reach, share information, and facilitate coordination. Organisers supported participants in navigating video-conferencing platforms and digital messaging tools, ensuring technology enhanced rather than hindered inclusive engagement.





### Public Participation Ecosystem (Participate) Scorecard

Evaluates public participation channels based on the Participate component of the Citizen Public Participation User Needs Framework

CHANNEL	PARTICIPATE (MAX SCORE: 5)				TOTAL
	9. ENABLE EACH USER TO COMPLETE THE OUTCOME THEY SET OUT TO DO	10. WORK IN A WAY THAT IS FAMILIAR	11. HAVE NO DEAD ENDS	12. QUALITY OF ACCESS	
Constituency Development Fund (CDF): MP Meetings	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 10%;"></div>	0.5
HEART/NSTA: Community Training Interventions (CTIs)	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 50%;"></div>	<div style="width: 50%;"></div>	2.5
JSIF: Community Consultations	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 50%;"></div>	<div style="width: 50%;"></div>	2.5
JSIF: Project Steering and Community Committees	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 50%;"></div>	<div style="width: 50%;"></div>	2.5
KSAMC: Public Consultations Public Infrastructure	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 25%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 50%;"></div>	1.5
MEGJC: Climate Change Advisory Board	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 10%;"></div>	1.5
MLGCD: Parish Development Committees	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 50%;"></div>	3
NEPA: Public Consultations	<div style="width: 25%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 10%;"></div>	3
NHT: Social Housing Programme	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	0
NHT: Capacity Building Programme	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 10%;"></div>	3.5
NHT: Infrastructure Upgrade Programme	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 10%;"></div>	3.5
National Secondary Students' Council (NSSC)	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 25%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 50%;"></div>	1.5
NWA: Community Meetings	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 25%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 10%;"></div>	1
NWA: SPARK Community Consultations	<div style="width: 25%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 50%;"></div>	2.5
Project STAR: Community Transformation Boards (CTBs)	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	<div style="width: 100%;"></div>	5
SDC: Community Development Plan Consultation	<div style="width: 25%;"></div>	<div style="width: 25%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 10%;"></div>	1.5
SDC: Local Economic Development Support Programme	<div style="width: 25%;"></div>	<div style="width: 25%;"></div>	<div style="width: 0%;"></div>	<div style="width: 10%;"></div>	1.5

## SYSTEM OF RECORD — Can Citizens See How Their Input Was Used?

Across nearly all channels evaluated, the greatest weakness was the absence of a reliable system of record, that is, an institutional memory that documents decisions, shows how input was considered, and provides citizens with evidence that participation mattered. Most channels did not publish consultation summaries or decision notes. When documentation existed, it was often generic, offering high-level statements about “considering all input” without specifying which issues were raised or how they influenced outcomes. Citizens consistently reported that, after participating, they were left with no indication that their contribution had shaped anything.

Some institutions did send acknowledgement messages, but these were typically automated “thank you” replies that did not meaningfully close the loop. Others provided updates only through stakeholder groups rather than through publicly accessible channels, leaving people outside those networks uninformed.

Patterns in this category were stark:

- Absence of public-facing decision records for most participation processes.
- Inconsistent archiving practices, with documents disappearing once projects ended.
- Limited transparency into decision-making contributes to perceptions of predetermined outcomes.

### Illustrative Examples of Good Practice

Having a functioning system of record builds up a visible institutional memory that chronicles decisions and provides evidence of how citizen input was considered and incorporated in otherwise ephemeral decision-making processes. The Spark Programme’s

digital presence, specifically its website, stands out as one of the most comprehensive efforts to provide a transparent system of record. Executed as a hybrid channel, the initiative uses a centralised platform to aggregate information sharing and updates, but decentralises community consultations through Members of Parliament. While there

are gaps in providing the rationale for decisions, the Initiative outlines recommendations from citizens, Members of Parliament, and centralized or technical actors. The platform is also constructed to provide updates on subsequent road repairs and other developments that flow from stakeholder consultations.





### Public Participation Ecosystem (System of Record)

Evaluates public participation channels based on the System of Record component of the Citizen Public Participation User Needs Framework

CHANNEL	SYSTEM OF RECORD (MAX SCORE: 5)				TOTAL
	13. CLEARLY EXPLAIN WHY A DECISION HAS BEEN MADE	14. RECORD OF PRIOR DECISIONS	15. RECORD OF RESULTS PRODUCED	16. QUALITY OF ACCESS	
Constituency Development Fund (CDF): MP Meetings					2
HEART/NSTA: Community Training Interventions (CTIs)					1
JSIF: Community Consultations					3.5
JSIF: Project Steering and Community Committees					3.5
KSAMC: Public Consultations Public Infrastructure					1
MEGJC: Climate Change Advisory Board					0.5
MLGCD: Parish Development Committees					0
NEPA: Public Consultations					0.5
NHT: Social Housing Programme					0
NHT: Capacity Building Programme					3
NHT: Infrastructure Upgrade Programme					3
National Secondary Students' Council (NSSC)					1
NWA: Community Meetings					2
NWA: SPARK Community Consultations					4.5
Project STAR: Community Transformation Boards (CTBs)					2.5
SDC: Community Development Plan Consultation					2
SDC: Local Economic Development Support Programme					2

## Ecosystem-Level Interpretation

There are gaps between how institutions engage in public participation and what citizens value the most in meaningful engagement. Channels exist, but responsive and meaningful dialogue about how to engage or whether engagement is working does not appear to be taking place. Quality is driven by institutional capacity rather than mandate, leading to uneven experiences across sectors and parishes.

Weak feedback loops, unclear processes, and inconsistent access reinforce citizen scepticism. Higher-performing channels demonstrate that quality participation is possible, but the ecosystem lacks shared standards, coordination, and accountability mechanisms necessary to ensure that all Jamaicans can participate meaningfully.

To strengthen the ecosystem, institutional actors will need to adopt shared standards, invest in capacity, and design mechanisms that close the loop between citizen input and public action. These opportunities are explored in Chapter 6.

Participants consistently described trust as shaped by whether engagement processes aligned with expectations







# Recommendations



Across most of the evaluated channels, there was **little** evidence of a connection between tangible outcomes and community consultations



The findings of this study show that Jamaica does not lack opportunities for public participation. Rather, participation processes often operate as fragmented and procedural activities, with limited coordination, inconsistent standards, and weak visibility of outcomes. While numerous engagement channels exist across government and civil society, they rarely function as parts of a coherent system capable of translating citizen input into decisions and actions.

The recommendations below seek to strengthen the institutional architecture that supports participation and improve how engagement processes operate in practice. They are organised across three levels: institutional reforms, which address coordination, standards, and governance arrangements; programmatic improvements, which focus on the design and delivery of participation processes; and citizen-centred measures, which aim to improve transparency and the public's ability to see how their input influences decisions. Together, these measures aim to shift public participation in Jamaica from fragmented consultation toward a more coordinated and outcome-oriented.

## Institutional Recommendations

1. Operationalise the Provisions of the Local Governance Act (2016)

**Fully implement the participatory provisions of the Local Governance Act, clarifying the roles and functions of Parish Development Committees (PDCs) and Community Development Committees (CDCs)**

Although the Act provides a statutory framework for participation, implementation of all its provisions has been uneven. Operationalisation would involve enacting and strengthening these structures so they can serve as reliable and accessible spaces for citizen engagement in local planning and decision-making. This includes ensuring that PDCs and CDCs are operation-

al and functioning consistently, while being supported with the institutional resources needed to carry out their mandates. Strengthening these mechanisms would help to reinforce participation as a routine element of local governance rather than the ad-hoc activity it currently is practiced as.

2. Implement Shared Participation Standards Across Government

**Update and fully implement shared participation standards for public engagement processes across government institutions, building on the Cabinet Office's Consultation Code of Practice for the Public Sector.**

The Code, first issued in 2005, provides a foundation for good consultation practice but has not been systematically applied across government. Updating and operationalising it for digital engagement would help to improve the consistency and predictability of public participation channels, establishing baseline expectations around clarity of process, accessibility of engagement opportunities, appropriate timelines, feedback to participants, and documentation of outcomes.

3. Harmonise Participation Mandates Across Governance Levels

**Coordinate participation processes across community, parish, and national levels to reduce duplication and consultation fatigue.**

Involves both horizontal integration across institutions operating at the same level of governance, and vertical integration between community, municipal, and national processes. Greater alignment would allow insights gathered through one engagement exercise to inform subsequent planning and decision-making, avoiding wherever possible communities to repeat the same consultations. This improves the cumulative value of engagement while reducing the burden placed on citizens and community organisations.

4. Resource Citizen Engagement as Shared Infrastructure

**Recognise the Social Development Commission's community engagement capacity as shared governance infrastructure, establishing cost-sharing mechanisms that allow institutions relying on it to contribute to its maintenance and strengthening.**



Many institutions rely on the SDC's community profiles, planning processes, embedded personnel, and long-standing relationships with residents to engage communities. These assets effectively serve as shared engagement infrastructure across government and civil society, yet responsibility for maintaining them largely rests with a single institution. Allowing agencies and programmes that draw on this capacity to contribute to its upkeep, via cost-sharing or partnership agreements, would reduce pressure on the SDC while strengthening the sustainability and quality of participation across the system.

#### 5. Strengthen Core Participation Functions Across Coordinating Institutions

**Clarify and strengthen the core operational functions that institutions responsible for coordinating or delegating participation and planning processes are expected to perform**

Effective public participation depends not only on institutional design but also on consistent execution. Findings suggests that persistent gaps in follow-through, coordination, docu-

mentation, and feedback stem from unclear or weakly defined responsibilities across the participation ecosystem. Strengthening participation therefore requires clearer articulation and adherence to a core set of functions, including the need to:

- Maintain a public registry of participation channels and their outputs, to reduce duplication of effort and enable more coordinated engagement across them
- Promote consistency in how participation processes are executed, including clear timelines, consistent engagement formats, and acknowledgement of inputs
- Advocate for and amplify participation outputs and community priorities across institutions
- Aggregate recurring citizen concerns and operational challenges across participation entities for shared learning
- Provide shared (tools, processes, and support) infrastructure to low-

er the execution-burden faced by smaller entities.

### Programmatic Recommendations

#### 6. Create Reference Implementations for Key Public Participation Stages and Interactions

**Develop and disseminate reference implementations for key stages and interactions in public participation processes**

These reference implementations could take the form of illustrative examples, reusable design patterns, or tested models that demonstrate how participation can be structured to meet citizen-needs in practice. This can pertain to the announcement of engagement opportunities, the onboarding participants, or how post-engagement feedback is provided. These reference implementations can be adapted to serve the unique needs of the institution adopting them, helping to reduce the need for reinvention across institutions and improving the baseline quality of engagement processes.

#### 7. Employ the Citizen Public Participation User-Needs Framework as a Design Checklist

**Institutions should use the Citizen Public Participation User-Needs Framework as a practical design checklist when planning and reviewing public participation processes.**

Applied during the early stages of participation design, the framework can help programme managers and designers identify gaps in clarity, access, timing, responsiveness, and follow-through before engagement activities are launched. It may also be used to review and refine existing participation channels. Used consistently, it can help institutions improve the quality and user experience of participation processes.

#### 8. Increase the Visibility and Reuse of Community Development Plans and Consultation Outputs



**Encourage institutions to reference, publish, and build upon existing community development plans and consultation outputs when designing new engagement processes.**

New engagement exercises are often initiated without reference to prior work, leading to duplication, consultation fatigue, and missed opportunities to build on existing community input. Adopting an Open by Default approach to publishing community development plans and consultation outputs would improve discoverability and support coordination across institutions. Procedural prompts encouraging institutions to review existing plans before initiating new engagement activities could further reduce duplication while preserving institutional flexibility.

**9. Create a Platform to Track Participation Outcomes**

**A public-facing platform should be created to allow citizens to track participation activities, outcomes, and implementation progress across government.**

A publicly accessible platform could bring together information on participation exercises and subsequent decisions across ministries, executive agencies, and municipal corporations. The platform could draw on existing records and reporting practices while presenting information in a coherent and accessible format. Organising information by geography, issue, or institution would improve transparency and help demonstrate how citizen input contributes to decisions and policy outcomes.





# Endnotes

---

- 1 CAPRI, Who Gets What? Mapping Rights, Access, and the Future of Jamaica's Cities, no. R2503 (Caribbean Policy Research Institute, 2025), [www.capricaribbean.org/sites/default/files/documents/report-onecity-who-gets-what-08282025-1.pdf](http://www.capricaribbean.org/sites/default/files/documents/report-onecity-who-gets-what-08282025-1.pdf).
- 2 Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 11., ed. Eleonore Kofman (Blackwell, 2008).
- 3 Habitat III Policy Papers: Policy Paper 1 The Right to the City and Cities for All (United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, 2017), <https://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/Habitat%20III%20Policy%20Paper%201.pdf>.
- 4 Laura Robinson et al., "Digital Inclusion Across the Americas and Caribbean," *Social Inclusion* 8, no. 2 (2020): 244–59, <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v8i2.2632>.
- 5 D. Alexander, L. Døhl Diouf and K. Prescod, "Digital Inclusion in Caribbean Digital Transformation Frameworks and Initiatives: A Review," Studies and Perspectives Series-ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean (Santiago), no. 112 (2023).
- 6 John M. Bryson et al., "Designing Public Participation Processes," *Public Administration Review* 73, no. 1 (2013): 23–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2012.02678.x>.
- 7 A. Cornwall, "Unpacking 'Participation': Models, Meanings and Practices," *Community Development Journal* 43, no. 3 (2008): 269–83, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsn010>.
- 8 John Gaventa and Gregory Barrett, "Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement," *World Development* 40, no. 12 (2012): 2399–410.
- 9 "IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation," Federation of International Association for Public Participation, 2024, [https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/iap2\\_spectrum\\_2024.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/iap2_spectrum_2024.pdf).
- 10 Bryson et al., "Designing Public Participation Processes."
- 11 David Girvan and Norman Girvan, *Working Together for Development: D. T. M. Girvan on Cooperatives and Community Development 1939 - 1968* (Inst. of Jamaica Publ. Ltd, 1993).
- 12 Bryan, Patrick, and Karl Watson. "Not for Wages Alone: eyewitness summaries of the 1938 labour rebellion in Jamaica." Kingston: Department of History (2003): 16.
- 13 Gavin Myers. "Finding Common Ground in a Strange Land: Collaboration by Caribbean Diaspora Voluntary and Community Organisations." PhD diss., The Open University, 2025.
- 14 Girvan and Girvan, *Working Together for Development*.
- 15 Clinton Johnson, "The Historical Background to Community Councils in Jamaica," *Community*

Development Journal (Jamaica) 17, no. 3, (1982): 250–55.

- 16 Social Development Commission, “Community Development in Jamaica,” *Community Development Journal*, 1974, 40–42.
- 17 Michelle Mycoo, “Commonwealth Caribbean Cities, Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience: Empowering Local Government,” *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, October 9, 2024, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.5130/cjlg.vi29.9042>.
- 18 Final Report of the JSC of the Houses of Parliament on Constitutional and Electoral Reform (Parliament of Jamaica, 1995), <https://roadtorepublic.mlca.gov.jm/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Final-Report-of-the-JSC-of-the-Houses-of-Parliament-on-Constitutional-and-Eleitoral-Reform-1995.pdf>.
- 19 Auditor General’s Department, Auditor General’s Department – Compliance Audit of the CDF, (Auditor General of Jamaica, 2020), [https://japarliament.gov.jm/attachments/article/2326/CDF%20Compliance%20Audit%20Report\\_Tabling\\_Nov.%202020\\_Final.pdf](https://japarliament.gov.jm/attachments/article/2326/CDF%20Compliance%20Audit%20Report_Tabling_Nov.%202020_Final.pdf).
- 20 Christine Clarke and Carol Nelson, “Built to Last: Sustainability, Growth and Development—The Road to Vision 2030,” in *Jamaica’s Evolving Relationship with the IMF: There and Back Again* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59204-2\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59204-2_10).
- 21 Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?*, 2012.
- 22 Mansuri and Rao, *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?*
- 23 Cornwall, “Unpacking ‘Participation.’”
- 24 Nirmani I.A.P., “Barriers to Digital Participation in Developing Countries: Identifying Technological, Social, and Cultural Obstacles to Community Involvement,” *GSC Advanced Research and Reviews* 23, no. 2 (2025): 061–071, <https://doi.org/10.30574/gscarr.2025.23.2.0130>.
- 25 Archon Fung, “Putting the Public Back into Governance: The Challenges of Citizen Participation and Its Future,” *Public Administration Review* 75, no. 4 (2015): 513–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12361>; Björn-Sören Gigler and Savita Bailur, eds., *Closing the Feedback Loop: Can Technology Bridge the Accountability Gap?* (The World Bank, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0191-4>.
- 26 Rebecca Rumbul, “Developing Transparency through Digital Means? Examining Institutional Responses to Civic Technology in Latin America,” *JeDEM - eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government* 8, no. 3 (2016): 12–31, <https://doi.org/10.29379/jedem.v8i3.439>.
- 27 Cornwall, “Unpacking ‘Participation.’”
- 28 S. Schmidt and J. Mueller, *The Emergence of Participatory Budgeting in Mexico City*, in *Participatory Budgeting in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Taylor & Francis, 2020.
- 29 Terri-Ann Gilbert-Roberts, “Rethinking Youth Participation in CARICOM Regional Governance,” in *Youth Participation in the Caribbean* (Routledge, 2022).
- 30 Gilbert-Roberts, “Rethinking Youth Participation in CARICOM Regional Governance.”

# Notes





## Who Gets Heard? Citizen Engagement and Youth Participation in Urban Governance

---

To read any of our published reports in full,  
please visit  
[www.capricaribbean.org/reports](http://www.capricaribbean.org/reports)

Contact us at:  
[onecity@capricaribbean.org](mailto:onecity@capricaribbean.org)  
or by telephone at  
(876) 970-3447 or (876) 804-1848



MONA GIS



foundation  
BOTNAR

SlashRoots

