

The Jamaica Debates Commission on Monday morning told members of civil society and the media that it would be fully ready to stage political debates in a matter of weeks if the political parties agreed on the formats and number of debates in which they are willing to participate.

At a breakfast forum at the Terra Nova Hotel, the Commission says it has been encouraged by the agreement in principle of both major political parties to participate in debates before the next General Elections are held.

“That is usually the first step in the process”, JDC Chairman Gary Allen told the forum, adding that “working out the details of what format is agreed between the debaters and the number of debates to be held are always the more challenging details”.

The JDC Chairman said that funding support for the staging of debates is a significant hurdle to be navigated, but suggested that if prospective support can be converted into commitments within a week or so, the commission could be ready to stage debates by the end of November. He said the support of Corporate Jamaica would be welcomed and is being requested.

It was noted that the Commission would wish to stage no fewer debates than the three (3) that were done in 2007, but noted that the time frame of when elections will be held has already been identified as a factor that could limit the number.

Mr. Allen pointed out that verbal communication with representatives of the two major political parties has given him an indication of what may be doable or not, but he pointed out that the commission would not make any further statement on that until after a meeting with the parties' General Secretaries later this week.

The Commission says it has looked at formats that could include town hall type debates with questions from an audience, debates that could focus more on “economic growth acceleration” rather than just economic management and performance; a debate on the relevance of local government or local government issues, a debate on a “youth agenda” for the country, as some of the ways of having more engaging debates.

He said some of these ideas have been broached with political representatives and others are to be discussed with the political representatives.

The Commission solicited from the gathering of Civil Society representatives, their views on these range of issues.

The forum was presented with information that showed, significant growth in attention to the last debates, as found by a scientific opinion poll, conducted shortly after the last set of debates.