

MSI/CIV-JAM Project Launch
March 4, 2004
Hilton Hotel, New Kingston

JAMAICAN CIVIL SOCIETY: THE CHALLENGES OF REFORM

'Everywhere the idea of Civil Society begins with a commitment to the notion of Governance'. Edwin Jones

1. Introduction: Towards Meaning

In company such as this we need not quarrel about the meaning of Governance. It may be better to agree with others in the academic and practitioner communities who see it as *“a set of processes and practices involving multi-agency partnerships; a blurring of the responsibilities between public and non-public sectors; a power dependence between organizations involved in collective action; the emergence of self-governing networks and the development of new governmental tasks and tools”*.

In its practical application then, there are at least four principal *tools and tasks that shape the Governance agenda*.

- The *first* principle is collective action; this implying the need to build cross organizational arrangements for problem solving purposes, through policies of co-strategizing, co-steering and co-managing.
- The *second* purpose and task of governance concern the search for power sharing; working with government, but retaining a degree of autonomy from the state.
- *Thirdly*, Governance is good for nothing without transparency. Accordingly, it requires that transparency must walk on five legs: voice, representation, information, choice and accountability.
- In the *fourth place*, all advocates of Governance accept the need for society wide reform; involving changes in structures and methods, relationships and purposes, roles and responsibilities.

But we must move beyond a tutorial on meaning.

2. The Jamaican Context: Permissive & Resistant

Now we need to reflect on the Jamaican context wherein these tasks and tools are to be applied. This context is at once permissive of and resistant to these Governance norms and standards. Thus, *dynamic tension* defines the context. Such tension partly explains the relatively *small size and general character* of the local civil society community. It partly explains too, why this community appears pregnant with *paradoxes* i.e. self-contradictory orientations; why it appears beset by *ambiguities*, that is to say, unclear about selection of alternative strategies; and why moreover, it appears reticent, in the sense of being, cautious to commit to needed coalition building. We shall return to these besetting sins – paradoxes, ambiguities and reticence.

Yet, powerful social forces are at work in favour of the emergence of a Governance infrastructure in Jamaica. The historic sense of the majority of a people being deprived and wronged represents a ready-made platform for any emerging governance movement. Also playing a part are post-adjustment experiences with the declining quality and quantity of public services, as well as society wide institutional styles that seem to negate aspirations against popular empowerment. Growing political consciousness has also sharpened public protests against anything that is deemed to constitute oppression against the citizen.

At the same time some equally powerful international currents have flowed in favour of strengthening the local governance impulses. First, the world-wide democratic movement, driven by modern technology, has helped to spread the ‘marketing’ and ‘transfer’ of governance principles and structures to us. Secondly, the governance ethos has been strengthened by widespread belief that it is a catalyst for national economic development. Thirdly, it was thought to be instrumental in curbing corruption in government and as an antidote to fiscal irresponsibility. In any event, countries like Jamaica had to genuflect to certain governance principles as “conditionality” for external loans. Needless to say, a dedicated core of independent local advocates has been willing to press for a new culture of governance, with or without external impetus.

A confluence of “crisis” factors, some capable of paradoxical effects, also shaped the governance movement locally. One such factor may be observed in a turn away from the political parties and the political system generally. Increasing crime rates and unorthodox forms of public protest also constitute reliable evidence of chronic crisis. Non-transparent governmental transactions reflect other symptoms of that condition. Administrative under-capacity and some incompetence are additional flashpoints of crisis. Westminster-type governmental doctrines and arrangements further encumber the ground because they little predispose to the power sharing. And which eyes have not seen or ears heard, that pockets of social exclusion, cynicism and the culture of corruption equally portend crises for good governance.. Skilful and political and civil society leadership may, however, yet convert these presumed deficits into assets.

But another set of countervailing forces has been working decisively to delay acceptance of the governance norms. These include persistent moves to politicize the public sphere. Their comprehensive by-products are demonstrated in the triumph of the partisan interest over the public interest. For in practice, partisan distribution of the public largesse continues to obstruct the sense of public duty required by the governance formula. The sense of public responsibility is stifled because public discourse is typically conducted within partisan frameworks. And other mainstream governance initiatives find opposition in the natural self-division of the polity. In consequence, clientelic politics continues to breed low trust, constricts the space for social capital formation, and engenders commitments, across the board, ‘to beating the system’.

All these constraints on change are fed and supported by our strong and continuing anti-intellectual tradition. This is at once evident in the willingness to celebrate uninformed viewpoints in the public discourse as well as in suspicion of new ideas. In other episodes, the anti-intellectual ideology manifests itself in expressions of self-negation - the sense of incompetence to independently organize and produce developmental change. This lack of critical tradition creates special difficulties for collective civic action. In particular, it

has tended to make social learning and un-learning a problematic enterprise. It has generated and reinforced the go-it-alone mentality in most sectors of the society. Here, in particular, it may help to explain the resilience of mutual mistrust, cynical suspicion and ‘grudgefulness’ as remarkable social traits. Of course, all these orientations represent obstacles to the institutionalization of good governance practices.

3.Paradoxes, Ambiguities and Reticence in the Civic Realm

Despite the presence of these contending social forces in Jamaica, several organizations within the civic realm have been rallying around an activist-advocacy governance agenda. **Management Systems International** has identified nearly two dozen such organizations, and a wider network of ‘partners, resource groups and stakeholders’ as candidates for strengthening. That, largely because their style of action, ostensibly intended to transform challenges into opportunities for governance, is contradicted by *paradoxes, ambiguities and reticence*.

Money problems and capacity gaps excite some of these contradictory organizational behaviours. They shape the dominant personality and orientations of civil society groups, which are now remarkably urban-centred and with limited rural reach or engagement. These problems encourage as well potentially compromising reliance on various forms of external sponsorship. And herein reside special risks of the transfer of inappropriate ideological messages, inappropriate advocacy agenda, and inappropriate management approaches. In reality, these problems, real or potential, continue to excite competition, nay, struggles for external sponsorship, among our civil society organizations.

A strong sense *paradox and ambiguity* inheres in our civil society movement that purports to embody a broad social base, but is predominantly populated and led by ‘middle class’ people. Their preferred style is to mobilize around *crisis* issues and situations. Their organizations fabricate little direct association with the diverse range of ‘common interest’ groups in the civic realm. They are certainly slow to identify with those frequent expressions of public protests that are directed at anything considered to constitute oppression and neglect of the citizen.

Notice too, that an evidently weak moral conviction exists among our pre-existing professional groups. They continue to press any but single purpose institutional concerns. Thus, in practice the prevailing pattern of social advocacy and action may be read to mean: teachers for teachers; trade unions for workers; students for campus-based matters. Private sector agents would concentrate on matters of private business economics. Protests against injustice would supply the impression that justice is divisible and not a holistic concept. And overall, there continues to be little meaningful civic coalescence around the great public governance issues of the day, such as are embodied in on going state reform programmes.

Elements of ambiguity and ambivalence are evident as well in the mode and choice of *demand making strategy*. Good pressure group action usually obeys the path and sequence of *serious research and presentation of evidence - negotiation and bargaining around the evidence - petitioning and claim making - then agitation or demonstration as actions of last resort*. Here, however, the dominant style often proceeds differently. It tends to skip stages, often starting with agitation and demonstration. The resulting adversarial approach would therefore devalue itself: Devalue itself because a significant portion of public opinion considers it irrational, insincere, partisan, lop-sided and anti-government. How strategies are packaged and marketed therefore remains a major challenge to our governance-seeking organizations, in this place and at this time.

Perhaps, however, the greatest sin besetting the expansion and maturity of effective civic activism in Jamaica is the retreat from investment in real, rather than symbolic coalition formation. Commitment to collaborative approaches is the great asset that civic formations can bring to the democratic governance process. For the simple logic of coalition building hangs on the belief that it can deliver at least *four* benefits. *First* it is the best way to solve complex governance problems. *Additionally*, it helps to promote and consolidate legitimacy and shared learning. *Further*, collaborative institutional arrangements carry opportunities for the joint sharing of best practices, costs and risks.

Moreover, civic collaboration is instrumental because it makes society more informed, more intelligent, and more involved, and therefore more defensive of governance principles. Yet there is *reticence* here to fully exploit the benefits of coalition building. How may we confront this and other persistent governance challenges facing Jamaica today?

4. Confronting the Challenges

The first step toward building sustainable collaborative institutional arrangements involves embracing *a new way of thinking*. Thinking *up side down*, or in radically different ways. Thinking *inside out*, or comprehensively and drawing on the range of available technical knowledge and cultural wisdom. These forms of thinking involve both reflective and futuristic styles. The reflective dimension requires taking into account the forces and processes that have historically affected the governance system. Of course, the futuristic approach concerns thinking through the medium and long-term implications of the agenda of governance. It also means pursuing that agenda with the determination to stay the course in the face of obstacles and setbacks. All these forms of thinking are elevated in an environment where habits of co-strategizing and co-managing are energized by the spirit of voluntarism..

Effective coalition building equally requires the common understanding that it is a long-term process, which carries its own dialectic. Even where coalition formation is relatively strong, those governance reforms that open the bureaucracy and the executive to external scrutiny will take some time. Anticipate as well that programmes of coalition building will be fraught with possibilities and risks. Thus, commitment to principled coalition building must be seen as a resource that increases all-round capacity. Moreover, for the coalition to be successful it must operate in frameworks that are flexible in both structure and operation. As well, coalitions become viable when members share a sense of a common future and recognize their inter-dependence. For these orientations yield their own synergy by strengthening reciprocity and the motivation to pull together for common purposes. It is within such frameworks that *trust* is normally built and maintained.

But the maintenance of trust is no easy matter. It requires the availability of appropriate incentives and regulatory principles to guide behaviour. On going education and training, transparency and opportunities for collegial interactions are essential for the transformation low trust societies, such as ours. The sense of equality, where no one partner is too strong or too weak, is certainly critical to operational viability. By contrast, where coalitions are loose or opportunistic they become automatically exposed or vulnerable to sectional jealousies, disrespect for differences, and become open to other disruptive forces that normally lead to *crises of legitimacy*.

In reality, Jamaica is not short of issues around which the community of civil society organizations, now suffering from the absence of organic links, could rally more coherently to re-invent themselves. For instance, on going, comprehensive programmes of *state reform* are awash with great issues, directly and indirectly affecting the life and life chances of every citizen. Yet, on most of these issues civil society remains cautious or ambivalent to commit to meaningful public discourse or broader forms of engagement. Let a new pattern of collective action begin.

5. Conclusion

So we conclude that all modern societies need a governance infrastructure to help ensure that the life of man and woman would escape the trap of becoming... 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'.

Whatever their limitations, we assume that civil society organizations in Jamaica are committed to playing a guardian role in respect of good governance principles and practices in both the public and private spheres. Yet, the quality of their guardianship can, should, and must be strengthened if we are to escape the traps and consequences of poor governance. For a start, they must move to improve their programmatic and organizational performance. And that process must begin:

- *with re-engineering* their management infrastructure to broaden overall capacity for strategic planning and risk management;
- *with re-framing their philosophy* to enhance ability to promote new modes of thinking, new patterns of public education, and new styles of demand making and advocacy;
- and importantly, *with deconstructing and then re-constructing* their social relations to encourage the building and maintenance of collaboration, around common issues and platform, with more civil society partners.

Let it also be understood that collective strategizing around common vision, purposes and interests must contemplate the long-term nature of the struggle to reform Jamaica's governance. For in reality, governance reforms normally require *cultural shifts*, which are the most difficult process to be institutionalized.

I thank you; and God bless.

Edwin Jones
UWI
March 2004