

**March 4, 2004
Hilton Hotel
Kingston**

CIVIL SOCIETY STRENGTHENING PROJECT LAUNCH

Under its democracy and governance programme, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has pledged unconditional commitment to support the work that is being carried out by the Civil Society Strengthening Project (CIV-JAM).

That commitment came from USAID's Mission Director, Mrs. Karen Turner, who was recently speaking at the official launch of the project at the Hilton Hotel in Kingston. In so doing, she hopes to "assist organisations to establish benchmarks to improve performance, strengthen accountability and diversify funding as a means of securing operational independence and ensuring sustainability."

One of the reasons we need a strong civil society was due primarily to the fact that "the active involvement of citizens in the affairs of state is the underpinning of a strong democratic society. A more active citizenry can help build better communities and ultimately stronger nations," Mrs. Turner told a gathering led by Chief Justice of Jamaica, Hon. Lensley Wolfe, Custos of Kingston, Canon the Hon. Weevle Gordon. Keynote speaker was Professor Edwin Jones, who spoke at length addressing the practical application, principal tools and tasks that shape the governance agenda.

Referring to a recent assessment of democracy and governance in Jamaica, Mrs. Turner noted that "Jamaica still faces serious challenges to democratic development, including further deepening of democratic habits and responsibilities among citizens, achieving a healthy and sustainable balance of power between and among political parties and state institutions as well as between the state, the private sector and civil society."

That was one of the reasons why they at USAID were proud to work with many local and regional partners some of which were represented at the Civil Society Strengthening Project launch, and to deepen Jamaican's democratic institutions because they believe that it was a very critical area of development here in Jamaica.

Mrs. Turner reiterated that the USAID Civil Society Strengthening Programme seeks to provide civil society organisations working in areas such as crime and violence reduction, human rights, improved citizen security and good governance with the tools to more effectively carry out their mandates. They promised to focus on institution strengthening, strategic planning, financial management, proposal writing and fund raising. In the end, they hope to build more vibrant, energetic civic groups who can individually and collectively advocate for positive change.

Civil society organisations were more than just advocates and watch dogs, Mrs. Turner said. "They are partners with the government in maintaining and strengthening a vibrant democracy; they can fill critical gaps where there is a shortage of government resources; and they can provide critical services to communities and thus the country. As organisations perhaps closest to the grassroots, she added, they could serve as critical conduits between government and the grassroots, and thus ensure those at the grassroots feel a sense of inclusion in an opportunity to voice their preferences in constructive ways."

Nevertheless, she said, the task ahead of us was important, and one at which we could not fail. “A strong, effective and responsible civil society is an essential ingredient for cementing Jamaica’s long standing democracy and ensuring that all the critical component of a vibrant democracy can ensure Jamaica’s democracy well into the future,” said Mrs. Turner, who pledged USAID’s continuing support to this effort.

Dr. Ira Lowenthal, Chief of Party, MSI, laid out some of the background against which the project was designed and as they embarked on the implementation of this programme, laid out some of the assumptions that had and would continue to inform their work here over the next several years.

In his welcoming remarks, he noted that “democratic governance essentially resides in an ongoing interactive conversation between those who have been duly elected to protect and serve public interest, on the one hand, and those who take it upon themselves to organise on a non-partisan basis in order to more effectively aggregate, articulate and pursue matters of public concern or sectoral interest as these emerge over time—and quite frequently, obviously. between elections,” not just at election time.”

While the project has gathered momentum, Dr. Zeric Smith, Technical Director, MSI (based in Washington, D.C.), presented to the said audience a description how the process has unfolded. The MSI/CIV-JAM programme, he said, was first conceptualised against a background of persistent crime and violence in Jamaica when he accompanied a number of colleagues here two years ago to initially research the democracy sector for USAID.

“We heard again and again from our interlocutors about the problem of public security, crime and violence, and how citizens in Jamaica seemed to have a growing sense of alienation that seems to be closely linked to a sense of insecurity and concerns about crime and violence,” explained Dr. Smith.

Both of these issues, he added, would have dramatic implications for governance and that they both offer challenges and opportunities for enhancing democratic processes.

Meanwhile, brief presentations were also made by representatives from the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Local Government, Community Development & Sports.

Mrs. Marcia Beverly, speaking on behalf of the Ministry of Justice, welcomed the USAID effort, which she described as “a partnership to strengthen the capacity of civil society groups in adopting a mature and responsible set of laws.” She said the Ministry has committed itself in supporting the process as far as was possible and relevant.

Ministry of Local Government, Community Development & Sports’ representative, Mr. Keith Miller, having expressed “great gratitude and support” for the civil society strengthening initiative, said the ministry was “appreciative of any effort that is seeking to strengthen civil society and to aid the process of the transformation of our governance processes in Jamaica, and we therefore look forward to the benefits that will flow and the synergies between your initiative here and the programme of the Ministry.”

Professor Edwin Jones of the University of the West Indies delivered the keynote address titled *Jamaican Civil Society: The Challenges of Reform* in which he cited four principle tasks of governance: “collective action” which implies the need to build cross-organizational arrangements; “power sharing” to bring civil society into proximity of government while retaining a proper autonomy; “transparency” without which “governance is good for nothing”;

and “the need for society wide reform” involving changes in structures and methods, relationships and purposes, roles and responsibilities. Yet Professor Jones noted that governance practice in the Jamaican context “is at once permissive of and resistant to these Governance norms and standards”.

Problems were noted at the level of state institutional governance practice including: “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, Westminster-type governmental doctrines and arrangements that are “little predispose to the power sharing” and in particular “pockets of social exclusion, cynicism and the culture of corruption equally portend crises for good governance.” Looking toward solutions to this state of affairs, Professor Jones pointed to the possibility of “skilful political and civil society leadership” converting “these presumed deficits into assets.”

On the part of civil society Professor Jones concluded that “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” said Prof. Jones. To do so, he pointed out the need to: re-engineer their management infrastructure; reframe civil society’s philosophy to enhance new modes of thinking and new styles of advocacy; and to reconstruct social relations to encourage the building and maintenance of collaboration around common issues with more civil society partners.

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