



Remarks by

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at the

Launch of the Civil Society Strengthening Program

Hilton Kingston Hotel

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3:00 p.m.

Master of Ceremony, other members of the head table,
Doctors Smith and Lowenthal of Management Systems
International, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I am extremely pleased to be here this afternoon at the
launch of USAID's Civil Society Strengthening program. I
view this program as a key pillar of our democracy and
governance program here in Jamaica.

Some might ask, "Why do we need a strong civil society"?
Well, my answer would be that the active involvement of
citizens in the affairs of the state is the underpinning of a
strong democratic society. A more active citizenry can help
build stronger communities and ultimately stronger nations.

Democracy is not just a matter of voting and choosing one's
leaders; it is also a matter of open debate of policies,

accountability to the governed, adherence to human rights, and insistence on the rule of law.

A recent assessment of democracy and governance in Jamaica stated 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.”*

This is why we at USAID are proud to work with many local and regional partners, some of which are represented in the audience today, to deepen Jamaica’s democratic institutions because we believe that this is a very critical area of development here in Jamaica.

USAID's Civil Society Strengthening program seeks to provide civil society organizations working in areas as crime and violence reduction, human rights, improved citizen security, and good governance with the tools to more effectively carry out their mandates. We will focus on institution strengthening, strategic planning, financial management, proposal writing and fundraising. In the end, we hope to help build more vibrant, energetic civic groups who can individually and collectively advocate for positive change.

You may hear some say that active civil society groups can undermine governmental authority. And in some quarters the relationship between government and civil society might even be regarded as adversarial. These views are an injustice to both the government and civil society groups.

Yes, civil society groups may be aggressive advocates for the issues they represent. And yes, civil society organizations may serve as watchdogs to ensure governments are accountable to the public. But these actions are not antagonistic to government, governance or democracy. In fact, an effective, responsible civil society is a critical factor for ensuring the rule of law and is the hallmark of a strong democracy.

In any event, civil society organizations are more than just advocates and watchdogs. They are partners with the government in maintaining and strengthening a vibrant democracy. Civil society organizations can fill critical gaps where there is a shortage of government resources. They can provide critical services to communities and thus the country. As organizations perhaps closest to the grassroots, they can serve as critical conduits between government and the grassroots and thus ensure those at the grassroots feel a

sense of inclusion and an opportunity to voice their preferences in constructive ways. Civil society organizations can lead the way in championing the rights of those whose voice is underrepresented. For example, civil society organizations have done a better job than any other segment of society in integrating women's issues into the process of nation building.

In order to be effective as advocates, grassroots representatives, watchdogs, service providers, or whatever other role a civil society organization chooses to play, the organization must be sustainable. A comment by Amsale Maryam, chairperson of the Association of Development Agencies, during a conference leading up to a Commonwealth conference on civil society and governance, captures well the importance of sustainability to achieve organizational and program goals. There she said "*We're struggling because we depend mostly on international*

donors, and most of our work is actually through project funding. Most of the time we do not get core funding for administrative and recurrent expenses and that is why most NGOs become dormant and are less efficient.”

In an environment of diminishing international donor assistance, dependence on international donor funding is anything but sustainable. Under this civil society strengthening program, we will assist organizations to establish benchmarks to improve performance, strengthen accountability, and diversify funding as a means of securing operational independence and ensuring sustainability.

Finally, I would like to highlight a unique and perhaps the most important feature of the civil society strengthening program and that is its emphasis on collaboration of civil society organizations rather than competition.

You can have greater impact on the issues you care about by working collaboratively with other civil society organizations. By working collaboratively you can share best practices; your collective voice on issues gains more attention; and the strength of that voice gives added legitimacy and seriousness to the issue you're advocating. So although our assistance includes support for your individual institutions, in my view the most important aspect of our civil society strengthening program is that which is aimed at fostering in Jamaica a culture of collaboration not competition among civil society organizations.

The task ahead of us is important and one at which we cannot 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 components of a vibrant democracy can ensure Jamaica's democracy well into the future. I stand here as a partner and

pledge USAID's continuing support to this effort. With the government, the private sector, civil society and the donor community working together for a better Jamaica, the obstacles ahead are not so daunting.

Thank you.