

Brief for Meeting with the Ministry of Labour & Social Security

Overview

A letter was addressed to Hon. Pearnel Charles, Minister of Labour & Social Security, by Mrs. St. Rachel Ustanny, Advocacy Specialist of JFJ, regarding challenges of Economic and Social Rights (ESR), specifically the right to employment, social security, and benefits ordinary Jamaicans, especially those we have been working with in six communities, namely: Springfield, Fair Prospect, Morant Bay, Majestic Gardens, and the sight-impaired (who reside in the KSA area). MLSS, through Mrs. Dixon, responded favourably to the letter and put steps in place to facilitate a meeting with representatives of the named communities, as well as Mrs. Ustanny on Tuesday, July 15, 2008 at 11 a.m.

Meeting Aims

1. To invite MLSS, as a stakeholder of ESR, to provide assistance to communities in changing problems that hinder the realisation of employment and social security rights
2. To find out the role and mandate of MLSS and key officers towards addressing problems of unemployment
3. To find out what is the plan of the MLSS to address the current high unemployment and underemployment affecting Jamaicans, especially young people, disabled, minority groups
4. To share with the Minister our opinion of the root causes of Jamaica's unemployment problems, and our vision of their solution
5. To find out the level of interest and or willingness of, MLSS, to contribute meaningfully and tangibly to the improvement of employment and social security rights of ordinary Jamaicans

Guiding Questions

1. How sensitive is MLSS to the current unemployment and underemployment challenges affecting Jamaica?
2. What plans and programmes are currently in place or are being planned to address and solve unemployment challenges?
3. What do you think are the root causes of unemployment and underemployment in Jamaica and what kind of approach do you think is needed to address it effectively?
4. From our research, we are of the opinion that the root causes of unemployment and underemployment in Jamaica are: poor and unequal education, which provides an entirely different education to people based on their social class; absence of a Government-led, equity-driven land reform system, which has contributed to problems of squatting, homelessness, and landlessness; absence of equal opportunity legislation, which addresses the specific challenges of Rastafarians, youth, disabled; limited ability of the citizens to contribute meaningfully to discussions about employment and way forward—participation and rights means active engagement, not polls and swift meetings; high cost for tertiary education, which makes it inaccessible to children of the poor, they are therefore restricted to specific professional groups, if any at all, which leads to feelings of failure—the development of their communities will

depend greatly on their empowerment as doctors, lawyers, and other professionals group; the absence of a wealth redistributive system, which is genuinely supported by corporate Jamaica; frustration and lack of satisfaction with work, because it does not provide for them and their families an adequate living standard, and on the other hand the very visible disparity in wealth and access to an adequate living standard between themselves and affluent communities; inability of the Government to provide enough employment to meet/match the current growth in qualified young professionals; and limited support and enthusiasm for small business development, especially in terms of limited loan access and unwillingness of the market and financiers to support new entrants especially in sophisticated businesses.

Addressing these issues will require the Ministry to form a multi-sectoral team involving community representatives of special and geographical communities, what kind of commitment can you make at this time to advocate for the creation of such a team—to look at root causes of unemployment and underemployment and create a strategic plan to address all critical and seemingly non-critical areas?

5. Despite the existence of the Jamaica Council for Persons with disabilities, we have had reports of challenges around issues of stigma and discrimination, non-accommodative and insensitive society and institutions, and widespread intolerance and ignorance. These lead to varieties of difficulties for the disabled including being deprived of a place to live and the right to earn a living. How can members of the community get real assistance with such problems when they do occur?
6. I notice that the handling of issues of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) are extended to industries, factories, and plants. What role does the MLSS play in addressing OHS issues in small, less formal businesses and in the services sector, where persons living with asthma are affected by AC, persons working on computers are affected by poor quality furniture, and where there is an absence of lifts, etc. to accommodate persons with disabilities?
7. What role will the ordinary citizens of Jamaica play (and what opportunities exist for their development) in the plan of the Jamaica Productivity Centre (entity of MLSS) to “galvanise the entire nation into recognising productivity-growth as the highway to sustainable socioeconomic advancement”?