

CONCEPT PAPER
A Safe (Violence-Free) Community

An island of only 2.6 million people, Jamaica is today locked in a crisis of aggression and violence. In 1970 its homicide rate was 8; thirty-five years later in 2004 it reached 55, and is set to rise to 64 or 65 should the remaining months of 2005 follow the pattern of the past eight months. Forty percent of the recurrent hospital budget of the Ministry of Health is consumed in the treatment of trauma. Scholars at the Mona Campus of The University of the West Indies estimate that the cost to the country of criminal violence alone is between four and five percent of GDP. The damage to the country's image overseas, not least among the Jamaican Diaspora, is incalculable, while at home there is no easy way to estimate the fear, mistrust, edginess, personal depression, social tension and demoralisation that are the by-products of the escalating rate at which people are being murdered.

This aggression and violence is to a great extent an urban phenomenon, although the differences between town and country are not as sharp now as they were up to thirty-five years ago. And as far as urban centres are concerned, the Kingston Metropolitan Region, covering an area of less than ten square miles with a density of close to a million people, swelling to one-half the entire population on a very busy commercial day, accounts for nearly 80% of homicides and violent crimes. Of that, the inner city communities along the Kingston waterfront and uptown pockets and the Spanish Town sprawl are responsible for the overwhelming majority.

What are the factors fuelling this savage rage? The youth being both the major perpetrators and the victims of this violence, scholars have pointed to their social exclusion in the form of poor education, unemployment and poverty, their changing value-system, weaknesses in their construction of masculinity, wide gaps between the social classes, an under-resourced and ineffective law enforcement and criminal justice system, and corrupt politics, among others.

While it cannot be gainsaid that macroeconomic and social progress are necessary foundations on which sustainable peace can be built, equally it is incontestable that subjective efforts of agencies and individuals can play important roles in turning violent communities around. Recent experience in Boston, New York, Bogatá and Soweto, as well as the experience of the Kingston communities of Mountain View and Grants Pen provide optimism that carefully planned interventions can reduce significantly the propulsion of the youth to violence as a means of resolving conflicts or achieving goals.

Particularly the local experiences have taught us that attaining peace is one thing, sustaining it is another. In all cases, external intervention is called for by the youths themselves, in the form of jobs, skills, literacy, sports and

capital injection. Where reversals have taken place, it is quite often because the external intervention takes too long to begin or is too little.

The proposed initiative under the Violence Prevention Alliance (VPA), building on these experiences, is not merely another in a larger menu of approaches. It is different in that its success explicitly depends on a working alliance between the social classes. Sustainable peace in the Kingston Metropolitan Region is not possible unless the communities of the working people want it; nor is it possible unless the classes that have or can access the capital needed want it. And it will not be possible unless recipient's hope and donor's generosity meet as one.

How the VPA's Violence-Free Communities Initiative works is as follows. Once a community, whether on its own or through the effort of external agents, establishes a cease-fire, it calls on the Violence Prevention Alliance for external assistance to carry the peace process further. The VPA, once it confirms the status quo, immediately mobilises that assistance to the scale necessary to help the community rise to the next level of peace and stability. As a way of encouraging communities to strive to achieve and maintain a peaceful coexistence, the Violence Prevention Alliance (VPA) is proposing that the Private Sector and the Government adopt a scale of incentives that would be proportionately linked to the efforts of the communities. In other words, the external assistance is calibrated to serve as an incentive for rejecting violence and grasping peace, which translates into development.

In practical terms, the following are needed:

- Criteria by which to measure a community's violence-free progress*
- An inclusive inspectorate to evaluate a community's status*
- An endowment of US\$50m*
- A Board of Trustees to manage the endowment*
- An administrative structure that is accountable for the funds disbursed*

1. The Criteria for establishing Violence-Free Communities

These have been worked out over a period of six months, between February and August 2005, and involving wide participation of community representatives, experts and activists. Six arenas of development have been identified, each with its criteria. The six are Absence of Violence, Dispute Resolution Mechanisms, Governance, Education, Police Relations and Community Development.