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PRESS RELEASE

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CHILD MONTH 2014:

RESCUING AND REVALUING
'CHILDREN OF A LESSER JAMAICA'

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Child Month 2014 in Jamaica has started with well intentioned proclamations of love, care and protection for our children. The reality for thousands of Jamaica's children however, is far from the ideals that we profess. In fact the compelling statistics of neglect, abuse, injustice and suffering of Jamaica's children demand that our nation confront this disturbing reality as a critical human rights and developmental issue, with more serious implications than any other social, economic or political challenge.

Since 2002, Hear the Children's Cry has given voice to the plight of the 'children of a lesser Jamaica'; that is, a Jamaica where poverty, violence, parental neglect corruption and ineffective state policies consistently rob a large percentage of our children of their childhood and rights to healthy development, happiness, freedom and status as citizens. Yet despite all our efforts and the concerns raised in the media and other public fora, we enter Child Month each year conscious of the dissonance which exists between what the society professes as our love and value for our children and what we actually do, and perhaps more pointedly, what we fail to do.

MANY JAMAICAN FAMILIES CANNOT COPE

Each Child Month, we therefore regurgitate the problems and engage in lengthy discussions regarding whose responsibility it is to care and protect the children of Jamaica. To many people the obvious answer is “the parents of course” However, studies conducted by respected sources such as the Planning Institute of Jamaica (PIOJ) and UNICEF, among others, clearly show the socially fragmented, economically weak and dysfunctional state of many Jamaican families, which render them unable to cope and therefore unable to provide the urgent interventions and solutions required.

So we turn to the State and invariably the State turns the problem back on the parents and wider community, while it grapples with what it considers the more important and serious problems of the economy and crime. In the midst of all of this many NGO’s and Public sector agencies find themselves working in the trenches, with tremendous commitment, but with meager and insufficient resources. And so we continue to state and restate the problems and at best find “band aid” solutions for our deeply wounded children.

WOEFULLY INADEQUATE INTERVENTIONS

We all know in the light of mounting evidence that our best intentions and “band-aid” interventions are woefully inadequate to confront the challenge of rescuing and revaluing the ‘children of a lesser Jamaica’. Each media report and damning revelations of abuse, rape, exploitation, incest, violence and murder drives home the disturbing truth that Jamaica’s children are in crisis and by extension that our nation is in crisis.

So should we by now not realize that children bred on violence and mental and physical abuse cannot provide the foundation for a health citizenry? And indeed are we not already reaping the whirlwind of our failure to protect, nurture and rescue our children?

Varying reports of children and youth in homes, state care, schools and mainly poor, vulnerable communities paint an alarming picture of deviant, violent and anti-social behaviour. Hear the Children’s Cry In its Child Watch Report shows over 2,000 children a year running away, or

lured away from home. Growing numbers are becoming involved in criminal activities, including prostitution and gang membership.

We must be careful however not to make the children our scapegoats for the failures of our systems and policies which have marginalised, frustrated and corrupted them. We must avoid absolving ourselves of blame and responsibility by labeling them “bad pickney”, “uncontrollable” and by extension “irredeemable”. We must instead all take responsibility for the distressful and dangerous conditions under which a great many of Jamaica’s children live and are negatively socialized.

A FOCUSED APPROACH TO FINDING SOLUTIONS

Once we can move away from blaming the children and each other, we can begin to seek out and find meaningful solutions. The solutions can only belong to all of us, if we all embrace the fact that this is a national problem, not a children’s problem. From this perspective we can then take a focused and organised approach, as we would to save the economy or fight crime. Since we expend most of our energy on the economy however, let us weigh the economic and developmental cost of children, who through abuse, neglect and exploitation will become dysfunctional, antisocial members of our society.

Let us quantify the cost of building more prisons to lock away our youth. Let us look at the health cost involved in trying to fix their broken bodies and minds. Most importantly let us examine the spiritual and social cost to our society, as we lose the trust and faith of our children and youth and waste their promising potential to crime and immorality. I dare say no IMF deal will fix this economic and social damage, if we do not count the cost to our nation and act with urgency to invest in programmes to rescue and revalue our children.

We must invest in all our children and this investment must be more than mere words. We must bring Government, NGO’s Private Sector organisations community representatives, social workers, counselors, psychologists, educators, spiritual leaders and our most innovative minds together to tackle the challenge. We must clearly define the issues, analyse the best strategies, agree on the most effective interventions, establish a SMART plan, which is specific,

measurable, realistic and time framed and we must find the resources, both human and financial to get the job done.

Rescuing and revaluing the ‘children of a lesser Jamaica’ must become the nation’s number one priority. As the situation now stands, the neglect, abuse and injustice being meted out to our children is the nations’ number one shame and the major threat to building a cohesive society and stable Nation State that can take us into a successful and promising future.

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