

The Cost No One Counts

On what unresolved conflict is really costing Jamaica, and the conversation we are not yet having

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Every year, thousands of Jamaican families fracture over something that could have been resolved in a room. Every year, workers and employers spend months in adversarial proceedings over disputes that a trained neutral could have settled in an afternoon. Every year, communities harden around old wounds that no one ever sat down to address, because no one showed them how, and no one offered to help.

We count the cost of crime in Jamaica. We count the cost of court delays and judicial backlog. We count, endlessly, the economic cost of violence.

We do not count the cost of unresolved conflict before it becomes any of those things.

That is the number no one is talking about. And it is, by any honest measure, enormous.

Consider what happens in the average Jamaican community before anything reaches a courtroom or a police station. A dispute between neighbours over a boundary or a tree or a noise escalates over months. Each exchange makes the next one harder. Trust, which was the invisible infrastructure holding the street together, quietly disappears. Children absorb the tension. Small acts of community, the shared resource, the borrowed cup of sugar, the watching of each

other's yards, contract. The community becomes more expensive to live in, not in money, but in the daily cost of vigilance and hostility.

Now multiply that by every unresolved family dispute, every workplace conflict left to fester, every community grievance that never found a neutral ear. The aggregate cost is not theoretical. It shows up in staff turnover, in property values, in the mental health burden carried disproportionately by women and children, in the rate at which talented people leave communities and sometimes countries looking for somewhere that feels less exhausting to inhabit.

"We do not lack the capacity for peace. We have simply never been given the tools for it as a society, and never been asked to account for what that absence costs."

Jamaica does not lack institutions. The Dispute Resolution Foundation has been doing this work for thirty years. The ADR Committee at the Jamaican Bar Association brings legal expertise to the question. The Jamaica International Arbitration Centre handles commercial disputes with rigour and professionalism. The Jamaica ADR Society works at the community level, training ordinary Jamaicans to resolve disputes before they require any institution at all. These are not small achievements. They represent decades of investment in a different way of handling conflict.

What is missing is the legislative architecture that would make their work reach everyone, not just the people who already know to ask. A statutory requirement for pre-action conciliation in employment disputes. Settlement agreements that can be registered with the courts. Properly resourced Labour Officers with defined time

limits and enforceable outcomes. Multi-channel access, by telephone, in parish, not just in Kingston, so that a worker in St. Elizabeth does not have to travel to be heard.

This is not radical. The United Kingdom built this framework in 2014. Barbados attempted it in 2012. The International Labour Organization identified it as a regional priority at its technical meeting on access to labour justice in February 2025. The 30 Caribbean labour officials who convened at the ILO's subregional symposium on dispute resolution in October 2024 committed to pursuing exactly this kind of reform. Jamaica was in that room. The conversation is happening at the international level. It has not yet properly happened at home.

There is something deeper underneath the policy argument, though, and it is worth saying plainly.

The failure to resolve conflict well in Jamaica is not primarily a legislative failure. It is a cultural one. It is rooted in a long history of people being taught, in different ways and at different levels of society, that the person on the other side of a dispute is an obstacle rather than a human being with needs of their own. That winning matters more than resolution. That to seek a middle ground is to show weakness.

That culture is transmitted. It is transmitted in households, in schools, in the way community elders model or fail to model what it looks like to disagree without destroying. It is transmitted in the absence of books that show children from Rockfort or Arnett Gardens or August Town that the skill of standing in the middle of an argument, of listening for what both sides need, is a skill that belongs to them, that was always available to them, that has a name.

No legislation reaches that level. Only education does. Only the slow, deliberate work of giving people, from childhood onwards, a different vocabulary for disagreement.

"The reimagining of Jamaica does not begin in Parliament. It begins in the yard. It begins with the eight-year-old who is taught, for the first time, that there is another way."

Jamaica is not a broken society. It is a society that has been carrying an unnecessary weight for a very long time. The weight of conflict that compounds because no one intervened early enough. The weight of disputes that became permanent features of communities that might, with a single honest conversation, have been resolved and forgotten.

The tools exist. The institutions exist. The practitioners exist. What has been missing is the public recognition that this matters. That the cost of getting it wrong is not borne only by the individuals inside the conflict. It is borne by all of us.

That recognition is the beginning of something different. It is worth starting now.

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