

A POLICY CONCEPT PAPER

A National Social Intervention and Renewal Programme for Jamaica

*A Framework for Rebuilding the Social Fabric
in the Aftermath of Hurricane Melissa*

Kadine P. Reynolds
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Preface

The document that follows is not a recovery plan. Jamaica already has recovery plans, some of them well designed, all of them necessary. What this document offers instead is a different way of seeing the moment the country is now living through.

Hurricane Melissa made landfall on 28 October 2025 as a Category 5 storm, the strongest ever recorded to strike Jamaica. Forty-five Jamaicans lost their lives. More than 626,000 people were affected. At least 120,000 buildings, most of them in the southwestern parishes of Saint Elizabeth, Westmoreland, and neighbouring communities, lost their roofs. The total economic damage has been estimated at between US\$8 billion and US\$15 billion, a figure that amounts to almost a quarter of the country's gross domestic product. The storm also triggered a leptospirosis outbreak, left thousands of families in emergency shelters, and imposed a weight of emotional loss on communities that will take years to carry.

These are the figures the country has been hearing for months. They are true, and they matter, and they should continue to be named and counted and taken seriously. But the thesis of this document is that the figures describe only the surface of what Melissa did. The deeper truth is that a storm of that magnitude reveals the texture of a society in ways that ordinary times do not. It shows who is reached and who is forgotten. It shows which communities have the institutional connections that bring help quickly and which are left to wait. It shows which neighbourhoods have the social bonds that allow them to self-organise and which have been hollowed out by years of neglect, migration, crime, and economic stress. It shows where the state is present and where it is only a rumour.

Melissa was, in this sense, a diagnostic moment. It exposed the condition of Jamaica's social fabric. And what it revealed should concern every Jamaican who cares about the country's future, because what it revealed is that the social infrastructure of our nation is not in good repair.

This document proposes that the response to Melissa should therefore be framed not only as a reconstruction of houses and roads and fields, but as a renewal of the social fabric itself. It proposes a National Social Intervention and Renewal Programme that treats the rebuilding of communities, the strengthening of social bonds, the restoration of trust between citizens and institutions, and the preparation of Jamaica for future shocks as an integrated national project. It proposes that Jamaica's civic and political leadership, across party lines, is uniquely positioned to champion this vision together, not as a partisan initiative but as a shared national undertaking, a deeper conversation that the nation has not yet had in full.

What follows is an argument in several parts. Each part addresses one dimension of the social fabric that Melissa stressed, examines what the storm revealed about that dimension, and proposes specific directions the Programme could take. The parts are not independent. They are the sides of one idea, which is that Jamaica cannot be rebuilt from the roof down. It must be rebuilt from the community up.

Part One — The Argument: Why Recovery Is Not Enough

The word recovery has become the most common word in Jamaica's public conversation since 28 October 2025. Ministers use it. The international agencies use it. The newspapers use it. Church leaders use it. Ordinary people use it when they talk about their homes, their farms, their children's schools, and the mornings that feel different than the mornings before. The word is everywhere, and it is not wrong. Recovery is what Jamaica is trying to do. The question this paper raises is whether recovery, as the word is usually understood, is enough.

The conventional meaning of recovery after a disaster is a return to the condition that existed before the disaster struck. Houses are rebuilt where houses stood. Roofs are replaced where roofs were torn off. Crops are replanted where crops were destroyed. Schools reopen where schools closed. This is recovery. It is valuable work. It keeps Jamaica's economy functioning. It returns families to their homes. It should continue and it should be supported by every Jamaican who can help it along.

But recovery in this sense treats the pre-storm condition as the target. It assumes that what Jamaica had before Melissa was good enough, and that the task now is to get back to it. This assumption deserves to be questioned. What Jamaica had before Melissa was a country in which the poorest parishes were already the most vulnerable. A country in which housing stock in the southwest was already fragile. A country in which social safety nets were already thin. A country in which trust between citizens and the state was already eroded. A country in which the informal economy was already absorbing most of the shocks that formal institutions could not.

Melissa did not create these conditions. Melissa revealed them. The storm was a magnifying glass held over a society that was already strained, and what the magnifying glass showed was not a temporary disturbance but a structural one. To aim at recovery in the conventional sense is to aim at restoring a condition that was itself unsustainable. It is to rebuild a house of cards that will fall again when the next strong wind comes.

This paper proposes instead that Jamaica should aim at renewal. Renewal is a different word and it carries a different meaning. Renewal does not mean returning to what was. It means using the disruption of the present moment to build something that should have existed before the disruption came. Renewal treats the wreckage not as a problem to be cleared but as an opening, a rare moment when the normal pressures that keep things as they are have been loosened, and when the possibility of doing things differently is briefly and precariously alive.

Renewal is harder than recovery. It requires imagination, discipline, and a willingness to do unfamiliar things. It requires leaders who can see beyond the immediate pressure of the news cycle and commit to longer work that does not produce easy photographs. Most of all, it requires a political class, of every party, that is prepared to behave differently, to put the people ahead of party, to put service ahead of self, and to be seen doing so by the country that will judge them for it.

This is the standard by which Jamaica's political leadership, across the spectrum, has the opportunity, and increasingly the responsibility, to be measured. The answer this paper proposes is that leadership at every level should use the post-Melissa moment to demonstrate, visibly and at scale, what a different kind of leadership looks like. Not in the form of a manifesto to be unveiled at the next election. In the form of action that can be seen, measured, and felt by ordinary Jamaicans in the months and years between now and whenever the next election is called.

Part Two — A Proposal for National Mobilisation

The argument of this paper is that Jamaica cannot be rebuilt from the roof down. It must be rebuilt from the community up. That argument is easy to make and easy to applaud. The harder question is how. How does elected leadership, whatever party holds it, actually reach into every community in Jamaica with something more than words?

This section proposes an answer. It asks something of Jamaica's elected officials, of every party and at every level, that has rarely been asked with this degree of seriousness. It asks that elected officials put their own resources, their own time, and their own money into the service of the people whose name they carry in office. Not as a campaign strategy but as a governing philosophy. Not for a season but as a standing commitment.

The proposal has five integrated parts: a network, a fund, a provision for citizen solidarity, a mechanism of public accountability, and a commitment to permanence.

The Network

Elected representatives at every level, together with their staff, live in the communities they represent. They see the damage Melissa left. They know the families still sleeping under tarpaulins, the farmers who lost their crops, the elderly residents with no one checking on them. They know things about their communities that no ministry in Kingston can know without being told.

This proposal suggests that the existing network of elected representatives, across parishes and constituencies, be activated as an integrated service structure for the duration of the post-Melissa renewal period and beyond. Each representative becomes a local node in a national mesh, personally accountable, in public and in writing, for what is done and what is not done in the community they represent.

The Fund

A network without resources is an intention without teeth. The proposal suggests a dedicated Fund, managed transparently, into which participating elected officials make a public and personal contribution from their own salary.

The Fund would be constituted in phases: a public launch, in which a symbolic first contribution is declared and published; a standing commitment, in which each participating official contributes a fixed percentage of gross monthly salary for an agreed period; and transparent disclosure, in which every contribution and every disbursement is published on a public register, naming the contributor, the amount, the date, and the community served.

This level of transparency is what turns the Fund from a discretionary resource into a public trust. It is what distinguishes a genuine renewal commitment from the informal and discretionary spending that has too often been used, across administrations, to reward supporters rather than serve constituents.

Citizen Contributions: A National Act of Solidarity

A programme built on the contributions of elected officials alone would be a meaningful act. But renewal was never meant to be an act of politicians serving the people from above. It was meant to be an act of a nation rebuilding itself together. For this reason, the Fund should be open, from the first day of its existence, to contributions from any Jamaican who wishes to join the work, any amount, from anywhere in the country or the diaspora.

Every citizen contribution would be recorded with the same transparency as official contributions, with donor permission, on the same public register. No citizen contribution should ever be converted into a political favour, an expectation, or a debt. This is the provision that turns national mobilisation from a political act into a civic one, inviting church communities, civic associations, trade unions, small businesses, and individual citizens to stand alongside elected officials in a shared commitment to renewal, regardless of who they voted for or intend to.

The National Metre and the Public Face

An accountability mechanism that exists only in reports few people read has not truly been made public. This proposal suggests a dedicated public website and a live National Metre as central public instruments: a running total of funds contributed and disbursed, a constituency-by-constituency map showing what has been delivered where, and open registers of every contribution and every intervention, searchable by any citizen, journalist, or researcher.

The website and the Metre are not a substitute for human presence. They are the instrument by which the public can verify it. If the digital record grows while the physical work does not, the public will know within days. That discipline, publishing in near real time, is what makes a renewal programme's presence in Jamaica unfakeable.

The Commitment to Permanence

The fifth and final pillar is the hardest to sustain and therefore the one that matters most: that this is not a campaign. Political actors do remarkable things during election seasons and disappear when the votes are counted. This proposal suggests that Jamaica's leadership, of any party willing to try it, break that pattern openly and on principle. The Fund continues whether or not an election is coming. The reports continue whether or not the party proposing them is leading in the polls. The commitment is to stay.

Why This Would Be Revolutionary

There is nothing in the individual components of this proposal that is original. What would be new is the combination, done at full scale, conducted in the open, funded from personal resources and citizen solidarity rather than state or donor sources, and committed to permanently rather than episodically. This combination has rarely been attempted anywhere in the Commonwealth Caribbean.

The deeper reason it would be revolutionary is that it changes what politics is for. Under the conventional model, a party campaigns for power, wins it, and then uses the resources of the state to serve its interests and reward its supporters. Under the model proposed here, elected leadership serves its people first, earns the right to govern through visible sacrifice, and treats the pursuit of power as a consequence of service rather than its purpose.

A Note on Feasibility

The most common objection to a proposal like this one is that it is too ambitious, that transparency will be resisted, that permanence is unrealistic. This objection deserves to be taken seriously. The history of Caribbean politics gives it weight. But the objection is also the reason the proposal deserves to be tried. A programme launched in public, funded from personal resources, and accounted for monthly on an open register is a programme that cannot fail quietly. Either it endures, and the country sees that; or it collapses, and the country sees that too. Both outcomes tell Jamaicans something they need to know about the leadership that proposed it.

Part Three — Seven Dimensions of the Programme

Part Three sets out the substantive dimensions in which a National Mobilisation would carry out its work, the areas of social life that Hurricane Melissa stressed most severely, and where constituency-level presence, transparent funding, and visible accountability could deliver the greatest benefit.

1. Mental Health and the Quiet Crisis of Trauma

The emotional burden left by Melissa is one of the storm's quietest and most serious effects. Estimates place the number of Jamaicans requiring psychological first aid at approximately 25,000, with at least 15,000 reached so far. The Programme treats mental health and psychosocial support as essential national infrastructure, not as a specialist niche.

2. Community Infrastructure and the Places Where Social Life Happens

Communities are held together not only by houses but by the spaces where people meet one another: schools, clinics, community centres, churches, playing fields, and public gathering places. The Programme treats the restoration and strengthening of these spaces as a priority equal to the restoration of roads and electricity.

3. The Frontline Workforce of Care

Social workers, community organisers, teachers, nurses, pastors, and other frontline carers are the actual architecture of Jamaican community life. The Programme formally names this workforce as essential national infrastructure and commits to investing in its training, recognition, and support.

4. Housing, Livelihood and the Vulnerabilities Melissa Exposed

Melissa exposed housing informality, poor building standards, absent insurance coverage, and livelihood dependence on single income streams that collapse in one bad week. The Programme treats these as social problems to be solved, not as unfortunate realities to be accepted.

5. The Trust Gap and the Work of Rebuilding It

The erosion of trust between citizens and institutions is one of the quietest but most damaging patterns in Jamaican life. The Programme builds transparent, inclusive, community-led oversight mechanisms that rebuild trust by doing things differently, with elected leadership modelling the behaviour it wants to see.

6. Labour, Employment and Economic Dignity

The households most devastated by Melissa are the households that were most economically vulnerable before Melissa. The Programme integrates social support with economic opportunity: skills training, small enterprise support, cooperative structures, financial inclusion, and the patient livelihood rebuilding that lasting recovery requires.

7. Preparing for the Next Storm

The next hurricane will come. The Programme treats social preparedness as a public investment, building the human infrastructure that will hold the country when the next disaster arrives: which communities know their

neighbours, which have functional local committees, which can self-organise when the state is slow. These are the indicators of a society ready to endure.

A Closing Word

Jamaica is at a moment in its history that will not return. The damage from Hurricane Melissa is real, and it will be part of the country's story for a generation. But the moment after a disaster is also a moment when things can be done that could not be done in ordinary times.

This document has proposed one thing that could be done differently: that Jamaica's elected leadership, across party lines, using existing structures and resources, opening the work to any Jamaican who wishes to join, make a visible commitment to the renewal of the country's social fabric and carry it out in public, in every constituency, month after month, for as long as it takes.

Whether any part of this framework is adopted is, of course, a decision for those in a position to act on it. The document is offered without conditions and without attachment to any office or party. If any part of it proves useful, the writing will have done its work. If the framework is not adopted now, the ideas remain on record, available to any serious leadership, at any future moment, that decides the time has come to do something different.

Kadine P. Reynolds

Kingston, Jamaica