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Introduction

Many people are rightfully anxious about the COVID-19 crisis, how it poses a danger to public health and how it impacts the economy. We are mostly pleased with how the government has been handling the crisis.

Nobody was prepared for this and we do not expect it to be handled perfectly, so we are glad that the government tries to adapt its approach after trial and error and with new developments. In this light, we would like to give our own recommendations.

These may sound idealistic and it is up to the government to decide what can or cannot be done, or what has or does not have a reasonable cost for the benefit it provides to our people. These are not normal times and we therefore cannot limit ourselves to normal thinking.

Who We Are

LANDS is an emerging grassroots movement that aims to build a network of political cadres and non-political community clubs to discuss current affairs, national problems, and the problems being faced by people in communities, in order to come up with democratic solutions. We were founded in November 2016, and most of our members and observers are youth. While we have mostly kept a low profile so far, we are internally active and constantly discussing the affairs of the nation and region.

Roughly 150 persons are involved in LANDS. We currently have 6 different groups in the network. Each group is autonomous, has its own leader, and its own meeting schedule. We held over 80 meetings in 2019 and we have had over 30 meetings so far in 2020. Our positions on issues are based on meetings held in our different groups, whose leaders report to and consult each other.

Small working committees, consisting of people from different groups, are responsible for reading reports of meetings and using those to inform the organisation's overall stance on an issue. This position paper is based on multiple meetings held by the different groups over the past few weeks; it was developed by 3 members of the Political Bureau of the organisation and edited by a member of the Communications Committee.

This paper consists of individual recommendations; we do not expect the government to accept all our recommendations, as some are even alternatives of others so that the government can choose one or the other, but we hope that they are taken into consideration.

Lockdowns and Curfews

We understand the importance of lockdowns and curfews, but it is difficult for some people to comply because of their realities. Many households lack water, and many don't have enough resources to stockpile food for 1-2 weeks.

We understand limiting people being on the road, but the limited shopping times have defeated their own purpose as they cause crowds to form as many people rush to one area in a moment, creating situations where the virus can spread easily.

We have seen long lines and crowds forming around buildings that sell groceries or offer remittance services. As shopping hours are limited, there is a higher concentration of people on the road. People wait in long lines to access goods and services, and it is difficult for people to collect money through remittances and then find time to shop afterwards.

It is even more difficult for elderly and/or disabled people, and people in general who have large households but do not have their own private vehicles.

Distribution of Food

For the above reasons, we ask that the government consider giving food relief to specific communities. This can be something done street by street to avoid people crowding the distribution points in the same way that they have done with commercial retailers. It can be free, or it can be sold.

Whether the government distributes food for free or obtains food to resell at a low price to people, the effect will be that people do not have to leave their homes and form crowds in commercial areas. The distribution doesn't need to be done on 1 day; some streets or some communities can be served on 1 day and others on another day, or it can be spread across more than just 2 days.

Distribution of Free Food

We do not need NIDS to distribute food if it will be done for free, and the distribution does not have to be done perfectly. Councillors and MPs should have some sense of familiarity with their constituents, and they should have an idea to be able say roughly how many people live on a street or in an average household in an area. Adults have TRNs, and children should be registered with schools. There should be a way to estimate how many people are in an area.

Distribution of Food for Sale

If the food is not being distributed for free, the government can facilitate transportation and allow the private sector to do the sales. Spending money on fuel will be much less than spending it on trying to save lives if we can't flatten the curve. This is a national emergency situation; surely there is room to spend money on food relief in some way.

With hotels closed, many farmers are complaining that they have no markets to sell their produce; at the same time, people are complaining that they do not have food. The state can step in and bridge this strange gap; it is as absurd as the strange phenomenon that exists in the US where there are more empty unused homes than homeless people.

Managing Transportation on Shopping Days

Alternatively, the government could have a 'total lockdown' but, instead of allowing specific times for shopping when everyone will go out at once and crowd commercial retailers, it could let specific communities have their shopping periods separately, and provide transportation using police/military vehicles or JUTC buses.

People could be required to wear masks and to wash their hands with soap and water in full view of everyone, right outside the vehicle, immediately before they enter. Buses could be filled to only half capacity, to allow distancing. They would also have to be cleaned or disinfected after each set of persons that they transport, in a similar manner that airplanes were being disinfected on the onset of this crisis.

Something like this could use a schedule. There could be 3 periods of 4 hours each, each day. This would be 15 periods for the Monday-Friday week or 21 periods if we count the weekends. Each community could be given 1-2 slots in a week when it would be allowed to take transport provided by the government to do essential shopping.

Different communities can be assigned to different commercial areas in an organised way, to maximise the number of communities that can use a slot at once without their members encountering each other. 2 communities that will be bused to 2 different commercial areas could be put in the same time slot for shopping.

Special Measures for Access to Pharmacies

Another proposal is to provide vehicles for pharmacies to do pickups and deliveries of prescriptions, or to provide vehicles to transport persons to/from pharmacies – even outside of designated shopping hours – if they have a prescription.

Economics of the Crisis

There is an obvious slowdown in economic activity due to the virus crisis, despite the fact that there has not been a total lockdown. Some businesses have closed operations because the measures make it impossible for them to operate without a loss or, in some cases, to operate at all.

Many workers of many establishments have been left without any income but are still expected to find money to stock up on food, to pay rent and utilities, and other expenses. The working-class people of this country should not be left to the mercy of the situation.

Rent Cancellation

We ask that the government mandate that residential rent be cancelled for at least 3 months, whether April to June of this year or whatever time period it deems fit. The rent that would have been paid should not be added on to future rent after this period, which is why this is being referred to as a cancellation.

Many people are not earning an income right now, and others are at least seeing significant reductions in income. The reality is that the economic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis has been a loss for almost everyone; we are entering a general recession period. A landlord missing a tenant's payment of rent is no bigger loss than a working-class tenant simply not having income in this time of crisis and economic insecurity.

Moratorium on Mortgages and Loans

We ask that the government mandate a 3-month moratorium on the payment of all loans and mortgages. This would mean a no-penalty postponement of all payments and the pushback of the due/milestone dates/payments of all existing loans by 3 months.

Moratorium on Cut-Offs by Utility Companies

We ask that the government mandate a 6-month moratorium on the cut-offs of utilities. In some countries, utility payments are being outright cancelled, but we understand why the government could not adopt such a measure. Energy and telecommunications are private entities; forcing them to offer free service may have negative effects on business confidence in the economy, and the government likely cannot afford to compensate them if it decides not to force them.

With that established, we therefore ask for a 6-month moratorium on cut-offs. This means that people would still owe money to utility companies for usage of their services but would not have their services cut off due to non-payment between April and October. This would hopefully give people time to get back to work and get their finances together before being expected to pay for utilities. JPS requires customers to show up in person to request reconnection; this is dangerous.

Investigation into Unethical Practices by Utility Companies

Many persons have been complaining about increases in their electricity bills, and these are worth at least an investigation and transparent explanation if nothing else. The JPS has attempted to explain why drops in oil prices have not been reflected in electricity bills, saying that crude oil and its derivatives only account for about 30% of energy generation, but:

1. This should still mean some reduction.
2. People are complaining about dramatic increases (claiming that they are experiencing doubling and tripling) of their electricity bills, not just the lack of a decrease.

Better explanations are owed. As a monopoly that affects everyone's lives – and with continuing to use the name “Jamaica Public Service” – the JPS must be accountable to the people by at least offering better explanations. If the case is that the JPS made bad decisions as a private sector company which are leading to unnecessary increases in operating costs, it should hit the profits of its shareholders and the salaries of its executives, rather than passing these costs on to the people of Jamaica who did not make the company's decisions for them.

A sense of economic insecurity already exists, and social unrest may develop if the government does not address this. Multiple things are showing that Capitalism is unsustainable, and any monopoly makes this even worse. In the long term, especially given such extraordinary circumstances and other challenges like climate change staring us in the face, the government could consider renationalising electricity:

- A public company could take on the role of managing the energy grid and billing consumers, even if this means leaving power generation in private hands while the public company merely buys from independent power producers.
- In such a case, the government and/or the public company could find a way to force the independent power producers to compete with each other to offer low rates on a monthly or quarterly contract basis, or whatever other system or procedure could be designed or developed.

Agriculture

More than ever in recent times, we are seeing the importance of food security. With the slowdown in global trade due to the COVID-19 crisis, and with locust swarms threatening food security in many countries in Africa and Asia, we need to take food sovereignty seriously and become less reliant on imports for food.

We have noted statements by the government in the past, especially by Audley Shaw from years ago, which make us confident that the current government will act in our national interest in this regard. We have commended these things before, in a position paper sent directly to Nigel Clarke shortly before engaging him in person in 2018.

We would like to join the call made by Don Wehby and Christopher Levy to suspend imports of many things that are produced locally. With hotels, restaurants, and many entertainment venues now closed, many farmers have lost a critical market and now need to sell their goods on the local market. The coming oversupply of locally-produced goods can be redirected to supply our local market and – hopefully – to be used as raw materials in processing to make products with longer shelf lives.

This crisis is teaching us that we may need a long-term re-alignment of our economy to guarantee our nation's food security so that we can better manage other crises in the future. As stated elsewhere in this position paper, it is absurd that we simultaneously have farmers complaining about a lack of markets and people complaining about empty shelves and crowded places where they aren't able to get food. This is not something that can be left to resolve itself, especially during the extraordinary measures being taken to curtail free movement during this crisis.

Education

Education has been significantly affected by this crisis and the requirements of social distancing, as physical classes have been halted for more than 2 months. While online classes are being offered and many middle class children appear on TV smiling while using their computers from the comfort of their homes, the reality for many of our children is that they don't have internet in their homes; many don't have laptops or tablets.

Cancellation of the Term

One proposal is to have cancellation of the school term, including cancellation of monies paid for this term. Students would have a fresh start in September, given that things would settle by then.

This is obviously not an easy decision. Tertiary institutions in particular would have expended money already for this period and would need to be compensated; we are asking the government to take the hit in that case, to allow students to access education without the worry that they had to pay for a term that they did not complete.

Foreign Affairs

We are asking the government to review its foreign policy alignment in light of recent events. The crisis continues to shed light on the true nature of certain countries in the world. We are also asking the government to condemn certain recent actions.

Shipments of Critical Supplies

A certain country had prevented Jamaica and other countries from receiving shipments of critical supplies and equipment during this crisis.

The Health Minister, Dr. Christopher Tufton, outright said that a certain country – which he eventually identified to be the United States – had blocked us from receiving a shipment of 20,000 testing kits. This also calls into question whether we will be able to get the ventilators that we had planned to have ready by May.

Other countries in the region were prevented from receiving shipments of testing kits, personal protective equipment for healthcare staff, and ventilators. These countries include the Bahamas, the Cayman Islands, Barbados, and Antigua & Barbuda.

Venezuela had to send supplies to Antigua & Barbuda, and had also chosen to send supplies to other countries including Grenada and St. Vincent & the Grenadines. Venezuela has also been aiding Cuba by providing planes to transport medical workers to deliver aid across the Caribbean and in some other parts of the world as well.

Blockades and Sanctions

The blockades and sanctions against Cuba and Venezuela are hindering those countries' abilities to combat the virus in this time of crisis. While the government has failed to oppose the US' inhumane measures towards Venezuela, it has verbally expressed opposition to the US blockade that is often called "the embargo" against Cuba. Despite these verbal condemnations, the government of Jamaica continues to smile and be extremely friendly with the US, the same country that has prevented us from receiving over 20,000 testing kits at a time when we definitely need to be doing more testing.

Military Aggression and Posturing

The US has sent military vessels near Venezuela's waters, in an unnecessary and unjustified act of aggression intended to intimidate Venezuela. We ask that the government of Jamaica condemn this action and call for the withdrawal of all US military ships and personnel from the region. The region should remain a zone of peace.

Summary of Recommendations

To summarise our recommendations, we are calling on the government of Jamaica to:

1. Consider distributing supplies or reorganising the lockdown to allow people to have access to food and essential goods without needing to form large crowds at commercial centres.
2. Cancel all residential rent for 3 months and mandate all banks and other financial institutions to give a 3-month deferral on loans and mortgage payments.
3. Prevent utility companies from cutting off utility services for the next 6 months, and investigate the Jamaica Public Service for unethical practices.
4. Assist farmers in distributing their crops, especially considering that many have lost business due to hotel and restaurant closures.
5. Consider cancelling the school term and put necessary measures in place so that parents or students do not have to pay for the term that was cancelled.
6. Condemn the recent hostile actions by a particular country against other countries in the region, and seriously reconsider our relationship with that country.