**Evolution of a Professional Association of Youth Workers in Jamaica Case Study**

Prepared by the Jamaica Professional Youth Workers Association Limited

The development landscape of Jamaica closely mirrors international trajectories since the country’s independence in the early 19060s. This sees youth development as a practice and an approach closely following along religious, sociopolitical and economic lines. Youth work was identified pre-colonially in the efforts of many faith and uniformed groups, as well as, in the emancipatory efforts and agendas of the country’s heroes such as Marcus Garvey who stimulated community youth groups and activist movements. Post colonially youth work was evident in the government agendas of community development and the provision of education and employment opportunities for young masses. While these agendas remain important many leaders across many sectors can be identified as being engaged by the practice of youth work. One such leader is the current youth minister in the Jamaican 2017 parliament who was engaged by youth workers in youth leadership programs.

The country’s achievements in the profession have always been closely linked to the efforts of the Commonwealth Secretariat, that enabled the introduction of basic exposure of youth work as a practice in the early to mid-1980s. This history is important, because the birth of the Youth Workers Association in Jamaica in 2006 came out of these efforts of regional youth development partnerships. In developing nations such as Jamaica youth development while important, pales in priority to rising inflation, crime and one of the world’s largest debt burden held by a small state. Hence, a small group of graduates from the Commonwealth Diploma in Youth Work convened the Association to begin to respond as professionals, not just to young people, but to the needs of development in general.

These issues that face Jamaica have never been seen by the association, as an insurmountable hurdle, but only as a test of the values and principles of the practice we seek to professionalize. Hence, our evolution has been from a kneejerk responding baby, trying to provide training and technical support to hundreds of youth workers and youth serving organizations, to a politically savvy partner of government, non-government and community groups and now to an independent social enterprise equipped to advocate and present youth work as the viable option it is, to sociopolitical and economic development; not just in our country, but in our region. The Association has identified that sensitization and exposure to youth development, not just as a practice but as a science, an approach and a process has been useful in educating the masses towards recognition. At times, this exercise felt futile to our members but revisions to policy and out-performance of recipient organizations of our efforts, are consistent proof that people will only begin to recognize what they become aware of over time.

This journey has seen us extend out partnership and experience to the Commonwealth Youth Programme as a partner and contributor to initiatives such as the first global Alliance of Youth Work Associations. Our contributions are a result of our recognition that as an association in a developing nation plagued with so many grave economic, political, social and environmental challenges, we must increase international support through a greater collective voice and by extension force of similar professionals if we are to ensure growth as a professional sector. This is the hope we have in the Commonwealth Alliance of Youth Workers. We believe that resources can be leverage at this level that will better sustain the efforts of professionalizing youth work globally.

Finally, the association continues to provide training to build the capacity of not only workers but practitioners at the grassroots level in Jamaica, while we proposed policy and legislative action on youth work at the decision-making levels through our Position Paper proposal to the Ministry of Education and Youth in 2016. Our continued operation and ambitions can only be realized through consistent funding, which we do not believe resides only in outside international funding sources. So, with our knowledge and expertise in human social capital development we have packaged and offer several products to the public, private and social sectors. These have begun to generate income while providing employment to youth work professionals. We continue to carve out a niche for training and youth development expertise as our evolution continues. While our efforts of strategically raising the profession to a place of recognition continues, we understand that this along with everything we do, can only be done, through collaborative partnerships across sectors locally and across nations regionally and internationally.