

THE JUSTICE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

Barbados for decades has placed much emphasis on the administration of justice as a means of achieving and maintaining integrity in the judicial system. In recent years, however, the Barbadian civil justice system has been constrained by a backlog of untried cases, delays in accessing justice, and inadequate use of technology.

Thus, in 2001 with the aid of a US\$8.75 million Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) loan, the Government embarked on an ambitious justice improvement project to reform and strengthen the justice sector. The total cost of the programme is US \$12.5 million of which \$3.75 million is financed by the Government. This led to the establishment of the Justice Improvement Programme Secretariat (JIPS) in 2002 within the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) with oversight for the implementation of the project. The Secretariat which is located at "Goding House" Spry Street, Bridgetown is managed by a Project Director and has a staff complement of nine (9) officers.

The overall objectives of the programme are to modernise the justice sector by improving the court administration and processes and enhancing access to justice. It also includes steps to prevent criminal behaviour and rehabilitate imprisoned offenders. This would result in greater efficiency in the justice system by reducing the cost to taxpayers, increasing the speed with which citizen can access justice, and a more expeditious processing and resolution of cases. It will also redound to better execution of crime prevention and offender rehabilitation strategies.

The programme has three main components: Sector Management, Access to Justice and Youth and Rehabilitation. The sector management component includes expanding computerisation, modernising the court reporting capacity, and implementing sector-wide information systems.

The Access to Justice component will support the implementation of modern case management techniques, an improved legal Aid structure, and promote the use of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

The third component, Youth and Rehabilitation, will provide institutional strengthening and capacity building for the Probation Department and the Government Industrial Schools to increase their capacity to implement and monitor alternative sentencing options such as parole and community service orders. This component will also provide for the rehabilitation of Prisons inmates with a view towards reducing the incidences of crime and recidivism.

The main beneficiaries of these changes include the Prisons, Law Enforcement, Probation Services and the Government Industrial Schools. But apart from these agencies, other key stakeholders include the Office of the Attorney General, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Despite several difficulties, the programme has made gradual progress towards the realisation of the programme's goals. For example, by year end the courts will be outfitted with a court management information system (CMIS), called JEMS. This electronic system will strengthen the overall management capacity of the courts.

One of the major successes of the sector management component is the training of transcription officers for the courts. Initially, about ten officers were trained in transcription techniques and then in February 2006 an additional four officers were trained. There has also been an upgrade in the software to ProCat from Total Eclipse, a more user friendly software.

This revolutionary intervention which relieves the judges of taking long hand notes has resulted in a significant reduction to the delivery time of court transcripts to the trial judges, litigants and attorneys less than forty eight (48) hours. It has also resulted in a reduction in the number of backlogged cases which were due to delayed transcripts. It is expected that other technological enhancements such as Audio Digital Court Reporting will soon be introduced into the court system.

Access to justice is another area of success, albeit limited. In order to complement the technological enhancements in the courts, local training in judge-driven Case Management techniques and the new Rules of Civil Procedure have been provided for the staff of the courts, the judiciary and the Bar Association. In addition, three judges have benefited from overseas training in the United Kingdom.

Significant strides were also made in the area of alternative dispute resolution (ADR). In 2003 members of the judiciary, the Bar Association, Civil Association and officers from no less than ten (10) Government departments involved in mediation were provided with introductory training in ADR. More advanced and certified training will enable mediators to be available to the courts to expedite the processing of cases that are suitable for mediation. This is expected to reduce the probability of a backlog of cases.

The programme has also spearheaded a six (6) month pilot programme in conflict resolution to the Barbados Youth Service in 2005. The findings of the pilot are being studied and it is hoped that an improved pilot can be rolled out to other agencies. In addition, a legal Aid study was undertaken to improve the structure of legal Aid. This final report is currently under review.

Finally, there has been gradual success in the Youth and Rehabilitation component with the prequalification of interested applicants for the Probation and Prison Rehabilitation programmes in progress, and the preparation for the construction of a new Young Offenders Institution (YOI) at Dodds, St. Philip.

The Justice Improvement Programme is, therefore, on the road toward repositioning the Administration of Justice in Barbados, making it more responsive to the needs of the local, regional and international environment. To this end citizens and residents of Barbados will experience a more efficient, effective and expeditious system of the dispensation of justice.