



FROM THE GROUND UP: DEVELOPING JAMAICA'S NATIONAL LAND AGENCY, 2000 – 2016

BACKGROUND

In 2001, registering or transferring land in Jamaica was an uphill battle. Only an estimated 55% of country's parcels were formally registered. Documentation, tax payments, and legal and survey fees barred many, particularly rural residents, from obtaining titles. Bureaucracy also posed a barrier. Four separate departments handled different aspects of land administration, leading to weak coordination, delay, and corruption. Even straightforward transactions dragged on for weeks. Simply getting information was a struggle and fraud was commonplace.

The governing People's National Party as well as the main opposition party agreed on the need to reorganize the land administration system, improve access to titling and other land services for the poorest Jamaicans, and ultimately register more properties.

In 2001, the government merged the four departments into a single, semi-autonomous National Land Agency (NLA) with a mandate to improve service delivery.

REFORM STRATEGY

From the outset, the new agency's CEO, Elizabeth Stair, and her management team faced a series of daunting tasks. They had to lead the merger of four separate departments, each with its own culture and procedures. After the merger, the new agency had to control corruption and dramatically improve services—all of it in the face of substantial anxiety and resistance from the civil service staff.

When the NLA officially opened on April 1, 2001 senior management and most of the staff were in place and the agency had a budget of J\$317.7 million (US\$6.5 million) for its first year.

KEY ISSUES

- **Executive agencies**
- **Streamlining administrative tasks**
- **Digitizing records and processes**
- **Performance management**

The new agency had clear goals: reduce turnaround times and improve customer service. Achieving those goals would require re-training staff; installing a results-based performance management system; reviewing and reengineering dated, paper-based procedures; and introducing a range of technologies to facilitate information access and increase efficiency.

ACTIONS TAKEN

Managers used a variety of tactics to maintain staff support and cohesion throughout the restructuring. Because existing staff had to reapply for their positions and new personnel from the private sector had little public sector experience, the first step for the NLA management team was to ensure that everyone in the new organization could work together. Agency-wide and divisional meetings, individual counseling sessions with human resources officers, and group training sessions all provided opportunities to air staff concerns and promote a sense of shared purpose.

A key part of the transition was geared toward preventing fraud and improving efficiency in administrative processes. In the past anyone in the titles division could access records. To minimize tampering, the NLA overhauled its records storage, placed titles in locked, fireproof rooms, restricted access to a few people, and installed cameras to monitor them. The titles

division also introduced a separate front-office to assist clients and a back-office where agents processed documents securely. To improve turnaround times, the agency also streamlined certain procedures like survey-checking and introduced standardized forms for common transactions.

Performance management at the both the organizational and individual levels helped the agency achieve targets set by the Ministry of Land and Environment for the number of transactions processed and turnaround times. Division directors met monthly to ensure each division was receiving the support it needed and to review any performance issues.

The shift toward computerized transactions—not just digitized versions of manually created records—was part of the agency’s planning from the earliest stages but was implemented gradually due to resource and capacity constraints. The eLandJamaica system and the electronic Land Registration System set templates for the NLA’s use of technology both to serve clients and to strengthen internal operations.

RESULTS

By 2016, after 15 years in operation, the NLA had recorded much progress. Property registration now took 30 days compared to 70 days in 2001. Transfers took just 5 days rather than 25, and survey checks required only 35 days rather than 182. Both agency staff and clients said preventive measures had made fraud more difficult—although measuring it was extremely challenging.

The agency, required by law to cover 75% of its operating budget, became more self-sustaining over time. The proportion of expenditures covered by revenue rose to 76% in 2005–06 from 51% in the 2001–02 fiscal year, even as spending rose to J\$613 million from J\$317.7 million in nominal terms. The agency has since remained above the required 75% level. In 2014–15, the agency covered 79% of its budget of J\$1.4 billion.

There was still room for improvement. In 2015, only 58% of properties were registered, and despite efforts to lower the costs and increase access, it was still difficult for poor landholders to formalize their rights. Even so, overall the NLA substantially improved services and set a model for other developing nations.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Advantages of functional consolidation.** Merging four divisions into a single semi-autonomous agency allowed the government to streamline service delivery, standardize procedures, and reduce processing times.
- **Overcoming resistance and curbing graft.** A strong, unified management team and a consistent message helped answer internal opposition and external critics of the transition. Staff retraining, individualized targets for performance tied to financial incentives, and new procedures and technologies helped establish a new operational culture.
- **Additional barriers remain.** Despite the agency’s successes, Jamaica’s overall experience also demonstrates the range of additional barriers to land registration, including stiff documentation requirements, high costs in the form of fees and taxes, and limited awareness of the requirements, that can prevent many property owners from formalizing their claims.

For related interviews and in-depth analysis of Jamaica’s National Land Agency, read the full case study:

<https://successfultsocieties.princeton.edu/publications/ground-developing-jamaica-national-land-agency-2000-2016>.

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