

Overseas employment programme a lifeline for many Jamaicans

For several decades, the Overseas Employment Programme has been like a silver lining for many Jamaicans, particularly farm workers, providing them the opportunity to improve their lives.

The programme has also been a significant contributor to the Jamaican economy, as a result of the frequent inflow of foreign exchange, being sent home by workers to their loved ones.

This year, the programme is still on a high, despite the harsh economic conditions across the world, as thousands of Jamaicans are expected to take up employment in the United States (US) and Canada. The government is projecting to send approximately 8,000 Jamaicans to work in new areas, along with the traditional apple and tobacco industries.

Percival Hayles is a 52-year-old veteran in the programme. He has been travelling since the 1980s and is one of the 8,000 Jamaicans who are expected to take up employment overseas this year. A farmer from the small community of Glenwood Springs in Clarendon, he has made significant strides with the opportunity that was offered to him many years ago.

"I have been travelling on this programme from 1987 and now I am able to help myself and my family very much. Through this programme I was able to school my children and provide for my household," Hayles tells JIS News.

He says that life, before he first left the island to work on foreign soil, was quite an uphill battle, as he had to till the soil in Clarendon from sunrise to sunset, with very little forthcoming to adequately provide for his family of seven.

"Life was hard before going to the US to work. What I achieved on the programme, it would take a much longer time if I had continued full time on my farm. I used to leave for the farm at 6:00 a.m. and come back home at 5:00 p.m.," he notes, pointing out that he produces Irish potato, cabbage, yam and sweet potato and sells them in May Pen and Kingston.

Hayles says that he is still proud of his achievements on his own farm, but he is able to make more money working in the US.

"I am still working my farm here in Jamaica. It was the one that fed me before I started the overseas programme and I still have a family to feed. I do not work it as hard as before; now I go to the farm at 6:00 a.m. and leave at 2:00 p.m.," he says.

Hayles tells JIS News that the thought of being absent without leave (AWOL) in the US has never crossed his mind, as he is committed to his family.

"As much as the work is hard, I have never thought of running off. I have family living in the US for 30 years and they come and look for me each time I travel there to work, and we have a good time. But I have to come home to my family here in Jamaica because they are the reason I am there. I have no plans to run off, because Jamaica is my home and I have no intentions of staying in the US," he says.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Security, under which the Overseas Employment Programme falls, reports that some families are complaining about the minimal support they receive from those working overseas on the programme. This has led the Ministry to implement a system whereby checks are made with families in Jamaica as well as with workers abroad, to ensure that they are supporting their loved ones back home.

Hayles, who admits that he has heard of the situation, encourages farm workers to support their families.

"I get pay every week and each time I am paid I send money home to my family. The programme is very good and I am encouraging persons, especially young men who get the chance to go on the programme, to do their best and remember their families back home," he says.