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Jamaica's Other Green Industry

The Caribbean island aims to unshackle its economy from fossil fuels.



South coast of Jamaica. (Photo: BitHead/Flickr)

September 26, 2014 By *Vince Beiser*



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Being an island in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, Jamaica doesn't have much in the way of natural resources—unless you count the sun and the wind. Which is why it

makes perfect sense that the country is shifting its economy to run on renewable energy, starting with a recently announced deal that promises to double the amount of electricity generated from solar and wind power.

Last week in the capital of Kingston, Jamaica Public Service, the island's lone electricity distribution company, signed [\\$200 million worth of agreements](#) with three solar and wind companies to develop projects that should boost the amount of renewable energy powering the national grid from 6 percent to 11 percent by 2016.

Pushing renewables isn't only a good move for the environment. It also makes powerful economic sense for Jamaica, which depends overwhelmingly on imported fossil fuels. Fully 15 percent of the country's GDP gets spent on those fuels, a huge drain on the national economy. What's more, those expensive imports make the cost of electricity for Jamaican homes and businesses among the highest in the world, with prices as much as four times those in the U.S. That's no small matter in a nation where nearly 18 percent of the population [lives in poverty](#). According to a recent [in-depth study](#) of Jamaica's energy sector by the World Watch Institute, "the high price of electricity is a major barrier to Jamaica's economic development and a leading cause of business failure in the country."

That study, conducted with the Jamaican government, found that renewables could, in theory, meet all of Jamaica's electric needs. "Just 10 medium-sized wind farms could provide over half of the country's current power demand; nearly one-quarter could be met with one square kilometer of solar PV panels," the authors [write](#). Making the switch would bring electricity prices way down while also sparing Jamaicans from pollution and cutting down their [carbon footprint](#) substantially.

Last week's deal was just Jamaica's latest move in that direction. Earlier this year, a law firm in Kingston installed on its roof what is touted as the [world's largest wind-solar hybrid array](#), a collection of gadgets that incorporate [solar panels](#) and small windmills. It's all part of a nationwide push to reach the government's goal of meeting 20 percent of the island's energy needs with renewables by 2030. Mark Konold, one of the authors of the World Watch Institute study, believes that's doable, but cautions that it won't be easy. "The current state of the country's energy sector did not occur overnight, nor will resolving its challenges," he says.

Even if Jamaica reaches its goal, at least one of its neighbors aims to leave it in the dust. Even-smaller [Aruba](#) has been shifting rapidly to wind power and, with the [help](#) of Virgin mogul Richard Branson's nonprofit Carbon War Room, aims to get all of its energy from renewables by 2020.

It's a race that may leave everyone a winner.