



The World Today

Tall Buildings- Export opportunities for the Construction sector

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Today, a key component of our Vision 2020 thrust is the building of infrastructure which is highly dependent upon the construction sector. The construction industry in Trinidad and Tobago currently employs in excess of 100,000 persons. In this regard one has to be concerned about the future of the industry after this infrastructural development is completed. The question that we wish to broach here is not whether or not the pursuit of this development as it is now being undertaken is appropriate or not, but more importantly, what do we do with the skills with which we have built this infrastructure, after this current construction cycle has ended?

The answer to this question may actually present us with an economic opportunity that would allow for the creation of a new export sector. If one were to examine current trends in developed countries it can be seen that while the tendency is towards the creation of knowledge based economies, the concomitant effect is that less sophisticated white collar jobs are moving to low cost locations in developing countries. A key example of this is the movement of data processing and call centre jobs to India, Barbados and even Trinidad and Tobago.

A not often discussed trend in this phenomenon of jobs moving from developed to developing countries is the status of technical based occupations in these developed countries. It is an issue of increasing concern in the United States (US) that more students, especially the brighter ones, are not enrolling in technical institutes at the rate that the US economy would require them in order to facilitate its future economic growth.

In Trinidad and Tobago, our current developmental thrust has created training programmes such as the Multi-Sector Skills Training Programme (MUST). This programme created to address the lack of skilled workers in the construction industry can serve as a catalyst for the possible future export of high quality and skilled construction services.

There are examples currently of how a country can leverage on its domestic strengths in a services sector in order to create a lucrative export industry. A noteworthy example is Cuba, which exports doctors and medical professionals around the world. In this regard, imagine if you will, a Trinidad and Tobago in 2020 with a surplus of well trained and specialised construction workers. Imagine as well a MUST programme at that time with the capacity not only to transfer specialised skills to new construction sector recruits but also with the help and support of the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Labour, being able to identify and market to other countries the unique skills of the Trinidad and Tobago construction industry. In doing so, these agencies would be in

a position to provide the right environment locally to facilitate innovation, investment and increased participation in construction services as an export commodity.

This is not a farfetched dream. The University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) today boasts that many of its potential graduates for its offshore drilling programme are hired by foreign multi-national oil companies before they graduate. A key aspect of demand for this specialised skill as taught by UTT is as a result of the simple fact that worldwide, there is a demand for skilled drillers and in Trinidad and Tobago the complex geology of our petroleum bearing structures make the skills of our locally trained drillers a desirable commodity in the international petroleum industry.

Likewise, with regards to the construction sector, it is not implausible that with the right planning and strategising, local persons can be trained for the construction industry with the necessary cutting edge skills that will make them not only employable now but also in 2020 and beyond. This is as well indicative of another key aspect of planning for the future. It involves not only the creation of dynamic institutions that are able to train our nationals for these future possibilities; it would necessitate continuous research and assessment of the prevailing trends and technologies that would define the construction industry of the future. It must necessarily involve as well the pursuit of investment opportunities in foreign research institutions and agencies that specialise in construction technologies. Also there would need to be the expansion of the current Research and Development Facility (currently being pursued by the Ministry of Trade and Industry) to the local construction sector in a way that would allow for the creation of patentable value added technologies that would enhance the foreign exchange earning capacity of the construction sector.

It is therefore imperative that from a policy perspective we as a nation innovate creative ways for utilising excess capacity that may be available to us at the end of our current thrust of infrastructural development. This not only applies to the construction sector but as well to all activities with a potential for export competitiveness. In the context of construction services, as a result of the large number of persons that are currently employed in this sector, the potential opportunities for it to contribute towards the divestment of the economy are quite significant. The long term legacy of the construction sector is therefore potentially that of a dynamic high income earning sector.