



## **The World Today**

### **Understanding Development Challenges of the Caribbean**

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I would like to take the issue of development challenges beyond the “economistic” interpretations of our governments, regional organizations and the World Bank. The primary prescription these days is to put in place a “strategic agenda for improving competitiveness”. This undoubtedly makes sense. But I have wondered whether the story ends there. My thoughts center on our weak sense of purpose, deteriorating community values, and a paralytic deficit in democracy.

This year, four CARICOM countries- Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago- will fall into the World Bank’s category of “High Income Countries”. Five- Belize, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines- will be in the category “Upper Middle Income Countries”. And two- Guyana and Jamaica- in the category “Lower Middle Income Countries”.

The GNI pc of Caribbean countries in the first two categories will range approximately from US\$20,000 to US\$ 5,000 a year. Even the lower end is more than twelve times greater than the GNI pc of the 40 odd Least Developed Countries of the world. And it exceeds or equals that of countries like Mauritius, Malaysia, Turkey, Venezuela, Argentina, Russia, Brazil, Iran, Thailand, China and India. Many of the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations, relating to , for example, poverty and hunger, primary education, maternal mortality, child mortality, gender equality, governance, have not only been exceeded, but surpass the indicators even of some developed countries.

So, is it not “time to take in the begging bowl”? Time for us to be mindful of our place in the world, of self-reliance and responsibility. Indeed, time to set up our own modest CARICOM external development aid fund for poor countries? And time for the donors too, especially the European Commission, to engage in a less self-serving partnership, in a way that strengthens, rather than undermines, the very qualities on which sustainable, competitive, self-reliant , self-respecting development is built?

Most of the income increases in Caribbean countries has come from windfalls- from tourism, and in the case of Trinidad and Tobago from petroleum; virtually without trying, certainly without sweat and tears, without really being put to the test of creating development. Two of these countries aspire to so-called “developed country status” in ten to fifteen years. One of them boasts of advancing towards a “world class society”. Yet, it is far from clear what societal values these two countries, and indeed all CARICOM countries, already have, or aspire to?

If Barbados is the prototype of the future Caribbean economy, and of a world-class society we are truly in deep trouble. For the experience of that country (as some other small prosperous States like Iceland and the Spanish Balearic Islands) exemplifies the shortcomings of current conceptions of development, especially in very small States. For it now faces serious problems of environmental sustainability, beach erosion, coastal degradation; damage to the landscape; the need for more and bigger roads, as the motor vehicle population escalates out of control, circulation is paralyzed, and the air polluted; a high incidence of obesity and other non-communicable diseases; the need for larger airports, power plants, sewerage plants, hospitals; mounting pressure on the water supply; increasing dependence on fossil fuels; prohibitively high prices for housing, excluding ownership by young people; diminishing land availability for house construction; overvaluation of the exchange rate; loss of competitiveness with very poor service in a services-based economy; the ethical and moral issues the Prime Minister himself referred to, and xenophobic attitudes towards fellow Caribbean citizens.

Jamaica now has the unenviable, unique, distinction of languishing in a state of virtual economic stagnation for some four decades, notwithstanding tens of billions of dollars of external multilateral, bilateral, and private financial inflows. A country you might say

that, unlike its antithesis Barbados, tries without succeeding. Its prolonged, crime-ridden stagnation mirrors the poverty of social capital, and the “two Jamaicas” bifurcation that paralyzes that society.

In the Eastern Caribbean States the decline of traditional agriculture seems to have loosened community bonds, the social glue that holds society together. Social networks are being weakened or are disappearing, and with that such values as reciprocity and trust. The sense of a common purpose and self-esteem seem to be fast declining, as a mentality of free-riding, and the pursuit of dubious international services take hold.

Caribbean States have made a great virtue of their devotion to the practice of (Western-style) “democracy”- meaning adult suffrage, regular four-yearly general elections, and majority-based representation. But is this light form of democracy well adapted to the needs of all societies, and in particular to micro-communities, and societies with sharp racial polarization?

In the micro-communities of Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean States that form of democracy imposes a kind of rigidity that makes it impossible to resolve major cross-cutting problems (e.g. the exchange rate, motor-vehicle congestion and circulation gridlock, residential, agricultural, commercial, utilities and school zoning, the environment, education policy, and waste disposal). The result is that in these micro-communities governments avoid tackling virtually all those really crucial and contentious issues. Governance becomes confined to second-tier domestic issues and personal spam that then take on an urgency and political heat of their own.

In Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago the existing racial division, in which the two major races constitute near-equal proportions of the population, is a recipe, under the present democratic form, for economic and social paralysis (in Trinidad and Tobago staved off or postponed by the insulation of petroleum wealth). No one ethnic group, in a situation like this, ultimately can govern effectively, and with the legitimacy that ensures broad-based development, and a secure and trusted feeling among all citizens of social and political inclusiveness.

The problems that now lay siege to these micro-States and racially divided societies call for more advanced forms of democratic governance- participatory democracy, societal

consensus, abolishing class stratification into governors and the governed, politicians and citizens, the government and opposition, and speed decision-making. In fact, you might even say, in the final analysis, for advancing the “end of politics”. For the truth is that in these micro and racially divided States politics and what we now call democracy so often results in a citizenry , in an “opposition”, in an under-class of the governed, that has little voice, and, indeed, sometimes literally no voice at all.