

Vision 2020: The Role of Migration In Trinidad and Tobago's Plan for Overall Development

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ABSTRACT

The discussion of development in Trinidad and Tobago almost always looks at economic development, with great emphasis placed on infrastructural improvement, while social development focuses on education and training needs of the population. Traditionally, migration has been largely absent from the discourse on development at the governmental level. This is a gross oversight as Trinidad and Tobago is both a major and receiving country of migrants. However, Vision 2020 does make some provisions for migration from a development perspective. In fact, the country receives one-third of all Caribbean migrants in the region, based on a recent study conducted by ECLAC (2005). The outward migration of graduates and skilled workers from Trinidad stands at 57.2% (Carrington and Detragiache: 1998) and over 75% respectively (OECD study: 2005). The brain drain problem has captured the attention of the government but little concern is paid to immigrant groups in Trinidad and Tobago and their socio-economic and socio-cultural contributions to Trinidadian society. This paper will therefore examine both facets of migration-outward and inward-bound migration to Trinidad and Tobago and the implications for social change and development. Particular attention will be paid to medical brain drain, as well as the migration of teachers and other professionals. Reference will be drawn to the principal groups among Trinidad and Tobago's foreign-born population (with a particular focus on immigrants from Venezuela and to a lesser extent, Guyana, Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines).

INTRODUCTION

A number of factors place Trinidad and Tobago in an advantageous position in terms of its ability to move from a developing country to developed nation status. These include: its strategic geographical location, mineral resources in the form of natural gas, petroleum and asphalt, a robust manufacturing sector, prolific flora and fauna for the emergence of a vibrant eco-tourism destination, a cultural diversity unlike any other in the Caribbean, that could be utilised for the promotion of festival tourism, as well as a highly creative, resilient population.

Since June 2002, the government of Trinidad and Tobago embarked on a national strategic plan to achieve developed country status, entitled Vision 2020. The development plan utilises an approach that is both multisectoral and multidimensional. It incorporates the importance of human development in achieving that goal. There are 27 sub-committees, encompassing a wide area for consideration, including administration of justice, national security, gender issues, and poverty alleviation, to name but a few.

Within the ambit of Vision 2020, population issues are an integral part of the national development process, with a focus on migration. In that regard, six primary goals have been identified:

- **To develop a reliable population database which informs the decision making process of all Ministries.**
- **To minimise the negative impacts of migration on the society.**
- To ensure full access by all of the population to all sexual and reproductive health care and services.
- To achieve the optimum utilisation of the country's land resources for agriculture, settlement and commercial and social activities in a sustainable manner.
- To provide sustainable employment for all or employment, which can provide a sustained quality of life.
- To harmonise the spatial units from which data are collected for decision-making.

The first two objectives are directly linked to migration. The establishment of a population database has one major goal- to ensure that population data and projections are 95% accurate, available and current by Phase 1. Three actions were identified as being critical to realising that objective. They are as follows:

- Strengthen the human resource capacity of its Population Unit.

- Evaluate the methodology used by CSO in arriving at mid-year estimates, population projections, births and deaths data, migration data and data on education including private secondary and tertiary level institutions.
- Evaluate and analyse the 2000 Population and Housing Census data.

Achieving that aim is likely to pose a significant challenge due to the low priority given to migration traditionally and also due to the unreliability and unavailability of migration statistics, given the financial and human resource constraints of the Central Statistical Office (CSO). In fact, at a conference in November 2006, in which the role and functions of the Office were outlined, CSO Director, Peter Pariag, lamented the “long list of organisational weaknesses which are hampering the unit’s effectiveness.” Some of the problems enumerated include “an outdated and inadequate staff structure, poor remuneration packages resulting in staff going to greener pastures, a lack of some key skills and competencies, no succession planning because of staff departures, insufficient hardware and obsolete computer software” (Newsday, Nov 29, 2006).

Achieving the goals of Vision 2020 with respect to population issues will only be possible if the threats to the CSO are eliminated or significantly reduced. Among them are escalating costs of data collection and compilation, untimely dissemination of statistics by other agencies and most importantly, reduced budgetary allocations which restrict the implementation of work programmes. Furthermore, “the proliferation and duplication of statistical processes and products by agencies which depend on the CSO for inputs” is an added threat (Newsday, Nov 29, 2006). The CSO is earmarked for restructuring into an effective high performing agency, as well as the development of a National Statistical System that began on October 1, 2006.

The 6 primary goals previously identified are to be operationalised by the commissioning of papers on 8 broad areas, 5 of which cross-cut migration issues:

- The impact of declining fertility and migration on education, the work force and the elderly.
- The review and analysis of existing policies and programmes relating to returning migrants, including deportees.
- Cost benefit analysis of migration.
- Analysis of the causes of emigration.
- The impact of emigration on the family including children, the elderly and the differently abled.

The second population goal, that of “minimising the negative impacts of migration” on the society has three principal objectives:

Objective 1: To reduce the emigration of skilled labour (especially those in the education and health professions) by 20% at the end of 2006.

Objective 2: To facilitate the harmonious assimilation and integration of all return migrants by December 2006.

Objective 3: To facilitate the full integration of documented and non-documented migrants into the society by December 2006, based on recommendations to be implemented from commissioned papers.

It is laudable that the government of Trinidad and Tobago has included migration as a factor with respect to population issues in its Vision 2020 plan. To a large extent, migration has been absent from the development discourse. As such, the task of achieving the goals as stated in the Frameworks for Action will be challenging and colossal. The salience of migration to the country’s overall national development cannot be sufficiently underscored, particularly with the coming on stream of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME) and its implications for the free movement of five categories of workers: university graduates, media workers, sportspeople, artistes and musicians.

Three recent developments have increased the visibility of the migration phenomenon at the national level. Firstly, the signing of the agreement between the government of Trinidad and Tobago and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in December 2006 for the establishment of an IOM Office in Port of Spain; secondly, the announcement by government officials of plans to review the country's foreign policy and finally, the announcement in January 2007 by the Ministry of National Security of plans for "the implementation of new measures to expedite the process of granting work permits and visas to people seeking work in Trinidad and Tobago" (The Guardian Newspaper, January 13, 2007).

While the government of Trinidad and Tobago should be commended for including migration in its national development plan, the present framework outlined in the draft Vision 2020 document does not reveal a clear understanding of the migration dynamics that confront the country at present. Indeed, the current approach to migration is reactionary, not proactive with no clearly-defined short-term or long-term national vision designed to adequately address the problems of migration that Trinidad and Tobago is suddenly facing. Nor should the need for a concerted migration policy be merely a response to the question of border security. Media reports of the sudden increase in the number of people seeking asylum and refuge from Africa and the Middle East; the exorbitant cost of deportation of immigrants; the recent arrest of drug smugglers from Nigeria and Estonia; the steady rise in the number of criminal deportees to Trinidad and the issue of trafficking of humans have exposed the country to an unprecedented level of vulnerability.

A major feature of globalisation is the high degree of mobility that people experience through technological advances in transport and telecommunications. This fact has placed a developing country such as Trinidad and Tobago in the position of being not only a sending country but a receiving country for other

migrants, in addition to a transit point or stepping stone to other destinations in North America. As a developing country seeking to minimise the negative effects of migration, both aspects-inward-bound and outward-bound migration will need to be given consideration in the elaboration of a comprehensive migration policy. In outlining the goal of minimising “the negative effects of migration” as a population issue in the Vision 2020 plan, the multidimensional aspects of migration must be discussed in order to identify appropriate ways and means to first maximise its development benefits. The definition of national community needs to be reconceptualised to include the overseas diaspora, and in so doing, identify the role and potential contribution of the diaspora to development in the homeland. Given Trinidad and Tobago’s present “migration dynamics”, that of ‘source’ and ‘destination’ country for migrants, a transit country, as well as a recipient territory for asylum-seekers/refugees, assessing the effects of migration on the country from a development perspective should entail a four-pronged approach looking at the following areas:

- 1) Migration and Development
- 2) Facilitating Migration
- 3) Regulating Migration and
- 4) Forced Migration

There are numerous issues pertaining to **migration and development** that require consideration. Some of the issues that need to be reviewed include:

- The Creation of a Policy for the Return of Qualified Nationals
- The Exchange of Expertise of Returning Nationals and Retirees
- Remittance/Money transfers
- The Incorporation of Overseas Communities in National Development Plans
- The Implications of Brain Drain and Gain

The successful return and reintegration of qualified nationals needs to be addressed in relation to maximising their professional skills and expertise,

particularly in the case of medical professionals. Returning nationals/retired persons are sources of investment and should be encouraged to save money in their country of origin. Overseas Trinidadians could be offered the incentive to invest money in a National Housing Trust, which could be reclaimed later when they return to the homeland to purchase houses in either Trinidad or Tobago. A similar incentive is under review in Jamaica.

Remittance management can be improved with the assistance of financial institutions; as more attention needs to be paid to the implications of remittance flows towards national development. While Trinidad and Tobago is a smaller remittance economy in relation to other Caribbean territories, the overseas diaspora's contribution to the homeland economy is not negligible. According to the IDB Report (2005), "remittances from Trinidadians abroad represent 0.7 per cent of GDP," or 97 million US dollars. Nonetheless, remittances are not meant to be a panacea for development and growth. In fact, a World Bank report on remittances in the Caribbean states that "there is evidence that remittances of such a large magnitude (in the relevant countries) have contributed to the overvaluation of the domestic currencies and led to high reservation wages." Furthermore, remittances are touted as a compensation for the problem of brain drain, but the long-term losses of human capital through outward migration of the highly-skilled can never be recouped through financial remittances.

The issue of brain drain is particularly relevant but not unique to Trinidad and Tobago. The emigration of skilled labour, particularly of teachers, doctors and nurses (medical brain drain), is a major hindrance in the development process of the country. Like most Caribbean territories, Trinidad and Tobago is plagued by alarming rates of brain drain, both in terms of skilled workers and professionals, as well as university graduates as Table 1 indicates.

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE RATES OF TERTIARY-EDUCATED CARIBBEAN MIGRANTS

| Country | Tertiary Educated Share of Total Migrants | Migration Rates of Tertiary Educated |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Dominican Republic | 22.6 | 14.2 |
| Jamaica | 41.7 | 67.3 |
| Trinidad and Tobago | 46.7 | 57.2 |
| Guyana | 40.7 | 77.3 |

Source: Adapted from Carrington and Detragiache, 1998.

Over 75 per cent of university graduates from Trinidad and Tobago are studying and living abroad contributing to brain drain that threatens the country's long-term development (OECD Report:2005). This exodus of skilled workers is already adversely affecting the country's long-term economic development by preventing it from reaching a critical mass of human resources. In addition to the flight of human capital of highly skilled workers, the record low levels of unemployment have resulted in the inability to meet labour demands in the services and manufacturing sector, construction, energy sector, medical profession and teaching service.

In addition to losing highly qualified workers, the vast majority of migrants are generally in the most productive age group, 20-45 years old. Migration must therefore be understood as a phenomenon to extend the opportunities and overcome the limitations of small, developing states in the Caribbean, particularly in light of inadequacies in the health and education sectors. However, in turn, migration "also increases the demand for education in the sending country", a cost which these countries must bear (World Bank Report: 2005). Education policy and curricula must be aligned with the goal of diminishing inequalities that actually encourage migration. Elizabeth Thomas-Hope (2002:54-5) is critical of the education system in the Caribbean, which according to her "has contributed to the potential for migration as well as facilitating actual moves in a number of ways. The traditional education of the upper and middle classes has encouraged

the movement to metropolitan centres in order to achieve at levels to which aspirations have been raised...For those who aspired to high status occupations but who could not achieve them because of the low level of their educational opportunities, migration has provided the substitute for scholastic achievements and the means to improve their status and life chances through an alternative avenue.”

Migration and subsequent brain drain, weakens skills and capacity in the country, particularly in relation to alarming rates of doctors, nurses and teachers leaving the region. According to the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO:2006), 50% of the nursing positions in T&T and Jamaica remain unfilled. The phenomenon is likely to change in light of the CSME, as Jamaican nurses are less well remunerated than their Trinidadian or Barbadian counterparts. Already, more Jamaicans are applying for CARICOM skills certificates to work in other member states than any other nationality. Moreover, “the excessive migration of skilled labour not only creates immediate gaps in the labour force, which affects productivity, but also means that the resources invested in education and training may never be fully recovered” (World Bank:2005).

Brain drain is capturing the attention of regional governments. However, not enough mention is made of ‘brain gain’. Trinidad and Tobago has historically provided a haven for many other Caribbean nationals in search of work. In fact, the country receives one-third of all Caribbean migrants in the region, based on a study conducted by ECLAC (2005). A disproportionate number of these migrants are Grenadians, Vincentians and Guyanese. The country’s close proximity to the South American mainland naturally favours the migration of Venezuelans to Trinidad, a practice which is rooted in the historical movement of peoples from both Venezuela and Trinidad for centuries. In the contemporary context, more recent arrivals of Venezuelans are linked to the dissatisfaction with the Chávez regime, fuelling sudden increases in the numbers of students and professionals. A growing Colombian population is also noteworthy. Venezuelans now comprise

the largest non-English speaking group among the foreign-born population (see Table 2).

The figures are a gross misrepresentation of reality, as actual numbers of Venezuelans are not available, but those voluntarily registered at the embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in Port of Spain, supersedes that figure by more than 1,400 nationals. Most Venezuelans are undocumented and choose not to register with the Embassy. A recent study of Venezuelan residents in Trinidad (Reis:forthcoming) indicates that many of these immigrants possess a very standard of education and level of professional skill. These factors have significant implications for addressing the acute brain drain problem in Trinidad and Tobago.

TABLE 2 FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO BY COUNTRY OF BIRTH

| Country | Numbers | % of total |
|------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Barbados | 2,411 | 4.7% |
| Grenada | 16,589 | 32.7% |
| Guyana | 5,140 | 10.1% |
| St. Lucia | 1,306 | 2.5% |
| St. Vincent | 11,625 | 22.9% |
| Other Caribbean | 2,155 | 4.2% |
| India | 768 | 1.5% |
| Venezuela | 1,337 | 2.6% |
| UK | 2,157 | 4.2% |
| USA | 2,430 | 4.7% |
| All other | 3,942 | 7.7% |
| Not stated | 846 | 1.6% |
| TOTAL: | 50,666 | |

Source: Migration Report, Central Statistical Office, 1997.

In fact, a preliminary study of the Venezuelan student population in 2005, revealed that over 73% of those interviewed had some level of tertiary education and/or professional education and training (Reis:forthcoming). Further research is required to ascertain the exact level of skills that South American migrants possess, so that they can be maximised and better integrated into the host country, an objective stated in the Vision 2020 Draft National Strategic Plan.

TABLE 3 SUMMARY OF PROFESSIONS OF VENEZUELAN NATIONALS REGISTERED AT EMBASSY

| Main Categories | Female | Male | Occupied in field | Occupied in other field | Student | Not occupied |
|------------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Administrative | 147 | 69 | 6 | 6 | 13 | 191 |
| Engineering | 132 | 155 | 0 | 2 | 32 | 253 |
| Finance | 70 | 41 | 2 | 2 | 11 | 96 |
| Industrial | 23 | 38 | 0 | 1 | 15 | 45 |
| Marketing | 38 | 16 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 45 |
| Medical | 38 | 22 | 1 | 0 | 12 | 47 |
| Other | 96 | 89 | 10 | 7 | 13 | 155 |
| Science | 13 | 10 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 19 |
| Technical | 12 | 24 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 28 |
| Tourism | 27 | 12 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 28 |
| Total | 595 | 470 | 24 | 22 | 117 | 902 |

Source: Compiled by author based on data provided by the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, forthcoming

Furthermore, “the 2006 register of Venezuelan nationals of the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic indicates that an extremely large percentage possess impressive levels of education and are widely represented across a variety of professions, many of which are sought in the current labour market. These include systems engineers, civil engineers, petroleum engineers, accountants, interpreters, teachers, nurses, doctors and surgeons, pilots, economists, photographers, pharmacists and architects, to name but a few. In fact, Venezuelans registered at

the embassy were represented in 145 professions or categories of professions” (Reis:2006).

Trinidad and Tobago needs to be a **facilitator** of migration as the country has virtually attained full employment. Migration would have to be facilitated to meet the labour needs of the rapidly growing Trinidadian economy. Based on IOM recommendations (May 2004), some of the following areas need to be addressed if Trinidad and Tobago is to facilitate migration to the country:

- Workers and Professionals
- Students and Trainees
- Family Reunification
- Recruitment and Placement
- Documentation
- Language Training
- Cultural Orientation and
- Consular Services

Human capital can be sourced through specific labour migration programmes, with the signing of bilateral agreements between Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago for the supply of semi-skilled and skilled workers in the manufacturing, energy, construction and services sector. In Trinidad and Tobago’s current expatriate labour environment, the Philippines and Cuba are a source of supply of medical professionals and pharmacists; while recent attempts have been made by the Ministry of Health to encouraging foreign-based T&T doctors to return in order to fill shortages in the health sector. Construction companies have been importing skilled construction labourers from Asia-China, Taiwan and Malaysia, as well as Turkey. The government intends to implement measures that would allow skilled craftsmen from within the Caribbean region to be exempt from work permit requirements. A recent trend includes the hiring of African nationals from Nigeria and Ghana to work as security guards in local security firms. Government is working towards expediting the process of granting work permits and visas so

that foreign nationals can assist in the rapid expansion in the construction, energy, tourism and investment sectors.

The implementation of these measures will require not only amendments to current immigration legislation to include provisions for multiple entry visas and the introduction of a group work permit application form, but also more stringent checks on people's movements both entering and leaving the country. The entire system of documentation of immigrants needs to be revised and updated. At present, the Immigration Department is unable to provide data on arrivals and departures. Visitors are processed upon entering the country only but not when leaving.

One important 'catchment area' in terms of visitor arrivals, those who sojourn for specific periods is Venezuela, Colombia and other South American nations. The presence of many Spanish-speaking students and workers in the country points to an inevitable need to encourage greater use of the Spanish language. In March 2005, the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish (SIS) was launched under a cabinet directive as a separate unit of the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Proficiency in Spanish is as much a prerequisite as computer literacy for preparing the population for Vision 2020.

In terms of Consular Services, in addition to the government's announcement of plans to expand its overseas consulates and embassies, the traditional role they have played in the past will have to be extended to facilitate the updating of the population database of Trinidadians overseas.

As one of the major recipient countries for other overseas communities, Trinidad and Tobago has to ensure that it regulates migratory flows properly and effectively. This includes:

- Systems for Visa, Entry and Stay
- Border Management

- Technology Applications
- Assisted Return and Reintegration
- Counter-trafficking
- Counter-smuggling and
- Stranded Migrants

The factor of Border Management falls under the purview of the Ministry of National Security. A number of initiatives have been undertaken with the aim of improved border control, such as the OAS-funded National CICTE desk, or Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism. The IOM has a great role to play in this area, as it provides the government with technical cooperation in strengthening migration management systems and capacity-building, in addition to counter-trafficking programming. The presence of the IOM will greatly assist the government in strengthening the country's security posture in a US Department of State-funded project entitled "Strengthening Technical Capacity in Trinidad and Tobago."

The final main area of migration that needs to be covered is that of **forced migration**. Trinidad and Tobago has also become a primary destination in the Caribbean for migrants seeking both refugee status and asylum. Forced migration entails:

- Asylum and Refugees
- Resettlement
- Repatriation
- IDP's (Internal Displaced Persons)
- Transition and Recovery
- Claims and Compensation and
- Elections and Referenda

Refugees and other displaced persons have forced Trinidad and Tobago to create a comprehensive policy to deal with this special category of mobile populations.

As a signatory country to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and/or the 1967 Protocol, Trinidad and Tobago is obliged to provide humane treatment to and alternative solutions to incarcerating refugees and asylum-seekers. Recent negative media reports about the handling of 13 African refugees from Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea Conakry, Sudan, Senegal and Burkina Faso illustrate the lack of understanding of the current situation and its far-reaching implications, such as the legal obligation to provide basic assistance and care to refugees outside of the country's penal system. This is an example of the extent to which globalisation has placed a small, developing country in the position of the role of a developed nation wont to providing asylum to displaced persons fleeing war and conflict, ecological disaster, political or social upheaval in their country of origin. Providing subsistence for these refugees or their eventual repatriation is extremely costly for countries such as Trinidad and Tobago with limited funding.

Deportation of criminals from the North Atlantic countries also constitutes forced migration.' The deportee is an involuntary returned resident. The entire Caribbean region is faced with the urgent need to have a specific policy related to deportation, documentation of returnees, a programme of reinsertion and assistance, etc. Policies are needed not only for North-South deportations, but also for South-South deportations. Diplomatic relations are tested between countries facing contentious deportations, particularly between Jamaica and the Cayman islands; French Guyana and Suriname, Guiana and Trinidad and Tobago.

CONCLUSION

Migration and social and economic development are virtually co-terminous. The impact of migration on Trinidad and Tobago's socio-economic and socio-cultural development is critical in devising an approach to its management and for the creation of effective policies to improve the way in which the country manages, regulates and facilitates migration. As a receiving country of trafficked and smuggled persons, asylum-seekers and refugees, Trinidad and Tobago needs to

review measures that ensure respect for and protection of the human rights of all migrants, as well as the prevention and combat of smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons. The multidimensional aspects of international migration and development relate to economic development (remittances); social development (brain drain and gain); and the issue of mobile populations and security and health. Particularly in light of the CSME, Trinidad and Tobago needs to promote the building of partnerships and capacity-building, the sharing of best practices at all levels, both bilaterally and regionally, for the benefit of the country and its migrants.

There is another dimension to migration that is often overlooked-the psychosocial. Issues such as the difficulties that ‘barrel’ children face in learning at school is a direct result of the absence of parents, often the maternal figure in the home, as many women leave their families behind in search of domestic work in the United States. The term ‘barrel economy’ is used to describe the regular practice of sending goods from North America to the Caribbean in barrels that are shipped from the host county to the country of origin.

The myriad examples of migration-related issues have a direct impact on the country’s ability to achieve and sustain long-term growth and development. There are a number of initiatives that can be undertaken at the national level, but common problems such as brain drain, harnessing remittances for development projects, the deportee issue and greater harmonization of data collection efforts can be addressed at the regional level (CARICOM) and through international cooperation.

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