

Growth Opportunities in Dominica - Role of the Diaspora

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Process*

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Acting High Commissioner, His Excellency Mr. Brian Bellevue, Distinguished Representatives of Dominican and fraternal organizations, My Dear Dominicans and Friends of Dominica:

It is, indeed, an honour to have been invited to share some of my thoughts with you on the occasion of this Dominica-UK Symposium "***Sustainable Socio-economic Development of a Nature Island State***". I bring you greetings + from our nationals in North America and in Dominica. We have much work ahead to continue to help in the development of our homeland.

The State of the Dominican Economy

Those of you who are in touch with the situation at home know that the country is in a serious economic crisis. Over the past several years, output and employment have declined. There has been a 35% retrenchment in bananas, and weak growth in non-banana agriculture and stay-over tourism. Average growth in 1996-1999 was 2.5% of GDP, but contracted by 4.5 % in 2001. Revenue and savings deteriorated while expenditures increased. The fiscal gap which stands at US\$ 22.5 million (EC\$60.5 million) has been financed by external borrowings, recourse to banks, and arrears to Social Security, and the private sector.

To attempt to restore order to the public finances and to reverse a deteriorating trend our Government called upon the International Monetary Fund. Support also came from the European Union, World Bank, the Caribbean Development Bank and others.

The IMF recommended:

1. Increased tax revenue by improving efficiencies in tax administration and collection
2. Tightening expenditure by phasing out certain tax concessions
3. Restraining public sector wages

In the Government's recent EC\$292 million budget, the following proposals were put forward:

1. 7.5% sales tax increased from 5%

2. 8% wage cut for public servants with 5% reduction on salaries and 3% stabilization levy which is generally applied on all income.

Fortunately, inflation still stands at about 2% but employment will suffer and so will consumer confidence.

On the brink of this third millennium, we must confront the twin challenges of globalization and the promise of new technology. In this information age, the question is: What role can our Diaspora play in ensuring that we are not going to perpetuate the division between rich and poor, colonized and colonizers, born of the past five hundred years of conquest? Will this assembly of Dominicans and their descendants who came to Britain to seek a better life, now turn back and assist the uplift of their homeland? As a small Caribbean island, Dominica is sanctuary to the last preserve of the Tropical Rain Forest, long destroyed elsewhere in the region. We do our best to preserve our 365 rivers and streams. In 1997, the UN branch, UNESCO, declared our Morne Trois Pitons National Park a World Heritage Site. At great cost, we have maintained our environment and built an eco-tourism industry and so preserved Dominica as the Nature Island of the Caribbean...some say of the World.

In our region, through the Organization of Eastern Caribbean states (OECS) and the Caribbean Community, CARICOM, we are working toward enhancing free movement of goods and people, economizing on the use of resources for marketing and diplomatic representation, with the objective of erasing old barriers to trade and development.

Dominica, like other islands of the Caribbean, sees the use of information technology as an equalizer. We must aspire to be struck off the rolls of debtor nations. Our limitations of size and population are not insurmountable, when knowledge is the currency of progress. In essence, we must build an entirely new knowledge based economy. To that end we are engaged in partnerships with the University of New Orleans (UNO) in Louisiana, Clemson University/Archbold Tropical Research & Education Centre, and York University, Canada, to help train our people build such a knowledge based economy. By so doing, we also enlist our overseas communities in that struggle for development via knowledge transfer and to help reverse the brain drain.

As we enter the 21st century, small, developing states like Dominica must come to terms with the rapid re-organization of global economic structures around them.... No longer can we plead poverty for preference. The World Trade Organization (WTO) has been used as a platform to whittle away any preferences that Britain or our other European allies have seen fit to grant our banana trade because of past relations and the small size of our producers.

The Special Role of DAAS

Those of us who founded the Dominica Academy of Arts & Sciences in 2000 have answered with a resounding call to duty. We plan with our affiliate Dominican organizations to assist in any way we can. We will not be alienated from our roots, our culture, and the land of our origin. That by uniting our human resources under the proud banner of the DAAS we will place those talents at the service of development of our communities at home and abroad.

DAAS is an online "electronic, networking academy". We maintain a website, da-academy.org, which includes a Directory of skilled and professional Dominicans and a section for "Discussion Papers" of greatest relevance to the development of the homeland. The database has been made available to government and private sector to access various skills as needed. A full board and management team have been appointed. The DAAS has also broadened its reach to include students currently pursuing studies and honorary membership.

DAAS has reviewed and made recommendations on the Integrated Development Plan (IDP). Today the DAAS with membership of 285 to date partners with at least a dozen or more Dominican associations worldwide, including your own DUKA, (Dominica UK Association), DONA (Dominica Overseas Nationals Association), DDA (Dominica Development Association) and others. We have partnered with our fraternal affiliate, the Rosie Douglas Foundation, to host two national development Symposia in New York and Roseau. Some of our members have built the first Dominica Sustainable Energy Corporation, DSEC and are intent on providing the island with electrical power from wind and geothermal energy. We have joined with and supported the Dominica Cadet Corp as a viable antidote to the disease of drug use, and delinquent behaviour among our youth. We have worked to unite Dominican students into one national federation, and currently are engaged in building a Dominican Math Society as a new affiliate, as we appreciate the role in technological advancement of that root science. Our affiliates have taken our leadership in fostering volunteerism and nation building by donating books, medical supplies, anti-drug/anti-gang literature, ambulances, copy machines, lathes and other technical equipment, band instruments, uniforms, and the like to schools, libraries, hospitals, cadets, and other segments of Dominican society.

All of this would not have been possible without the embrace of patriotic, teamwork inspired by non-partisan approach to nation building. We abhor political, racial and class divisions and seek to build a unified national will focused on uniting Dominicans at home and abroad for common uplift. We seek to educate our people in the art of tolerance, good governance, transparency and ethics in all dealings, and the need to be skilled at conflict resolution. In that fashion we have made great strides.

We do not have all the answers to Dominica's ills and cannot dictate to our homebound compatriots what is best for them. Our decisions are worthy and have long-term value where they derive from collaboration not confrontation or dictation. Likewise, we work vigorously to diminish the petty jealousy and backbiting which has turned away many a Dominican who returned home to enjoy the fruits of hard work in these cold northern climes. Our task is difficult, but it is doable. We try to accomplish what other Diasporans like the Chinese, Indians and Irish have done for their own respective native lands. We need a Dominican government and opposition which will be receptive to this new effort to rally our people for development. With our economy on the decline, our best hopes reside in a competent and united population. Those of us with the skills are Dominica's best hope, where we organize ourselves, build our banks, housing projects, airlines, technologically advanced companies and invest our money and talent in Dominica. When we do that successfully, we will have shown ourselves worthy inheritors of the spirit of resistance exhibited by our forbearers. The DAAS is not a talk shop and our record and that of our affiliates speak volumes about the spirit of faith and "can do."

As I welcome you and thank you for your leadership in making this gathering possible, I repeat the phrase by which we abide: *Together Everyone Accomplishes More*: **TEAM**, and together we do better.

The Role of the Diaspora

Background

Let me now say a few words about the Dominican Diaspora in general. Over the past thirty years, Dominica has lost an astonishing fifty thousand of its finest sons and daughters to migration. The vast majority of this new emigration wave has made it to the shores of the United States. Others have gone on to build lives in Canada, the United Kingdom, the rest of Europe, the United States Virgin Islands, the French Antilles, St. Maarten and elsewhere around the globe.

Building on a sound primary and secondary education in Dominica, most have gone on to distinguish themselves in their adopted homelands in areas as diverse as economics, business, nursing, science, agriculture, teaching, maintaining oil rigs, pioneering in medicine, information technology, law and politics. No discipline is too difficult, and no career appears unattainable.

For a sizable number of Dominicans living overseas, there is a desire to reach out and assist their homeland. There is a stirring among Dominicans who have migrated from Dominica, and who are now beginning to understand and appreciate the role that they can play in helping to make a difference in Dominica.

This new attitude is at once astounding and reinvigorating. Scores of persons are expressing a desire not only to give back as they have always done, but also to go beyond that, take it to the next level. Like a wild fire, the vision for a new Dominica is being ignited and reinforced in the hearts of the faithful, and it is catching on. Like a Nation taking up arms to defend its borders, a displaced people are rallying around a common cause.

Signs of that hunger and commitment were spectacularly displayed at the Diaspora New York Symposium held in December 2001. For the first time in a very long time, the Diaspora was beginning to take stock of their circumstances and to ask how they could contribute to Nation building in a more meaningful and structured way. Other initiatives such as the National Development Fund (NDF), the Dominica Academy of Arts and Sciences (DAAS), Friends of Princess Margaret Hospital (FPMH), the Dominica Sustainable Energy Corporation (DSEC), and the runaway success of The Dominican.net provide further proof of a people wanting earnestly to give back to their country. The 40ft container of pharmaceutical supplies recently donated by DUKA and the ECG machines that the Joint Dominican Associations are donating are further examples of that spirit.

Dominicans scattered around the globe are forging new partnerships. Dormant associations are being revived, and new ones formed. The feeling is that as a people, we possess the means within ourselves to lift our Nation. The task of Nation building while not an easy one is made infinitely easier when people understand their common destiny regardless of geographic location, realize their potential and are willing to sacrifice and give all for the good of country. Through partnership between government, resident Dominicans, and those scattered across the globe, much needed change can be realized. It is a tragic miscalculation for our leaders to ignore that tremendous human resource and capacity.

Traditional Contributions

Over the years, Dominicans residing overseas have played a consistent part on an individual basis in contributing to the local economy. This support has usually involved the provision of financial and material support to family and friends, including help in migration, sponsorship, and in obtaining health care. In 1996, approximately EC\$4.0 million was deposited in local banks by overseas-based Dominicans. By 2001, this figure had swelled to EC\$12.1 million, and a further \$1.5 million was sent through postal money orders. These transfers have a significant ripple effect on consumer spending especially at Christmas time. Contributions in kind also run into the millions as evidenced by the continuously growing "Barrel Economy." Several in the Diaspora have also contributed to the housing market through the purchase and/or building of homes in Dominica.

Although the numbers have fluctuated over the years, several Dominicans have returned in a personal capacity to work, or to set up businesses. This has included retirees as well as younger professionals. The number of young people returning has however been woefully inadequate, with most opting to remain overseas after completing their degrees or

professional qualifications. Those who return often complain of a system that is often hostile and not necessarily accommodating of their contribution.

At the group level, Dominicans are organized through various associations and social groups. Several such groups exist in the larger cities of the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Among the better-known groups in the United States are the Dominica Houston Association (DHA), the Dominica Association Mid-Western USA, the Dominican American Relief and Development Association (DARDA), the Dominica Association of Washington, CODIA in New York, and the Sisserou Club of Boston.

In the United Kingdom, there is the Dominica United Kingdom Association (DUKA), Dominica Bradford Association, and the Dominica Overseas Nationals Association (DONA). In Canada, the Commonwealth of Dominica Ontario Association (CDOA), the Sisserou Cultural Club of Ontario, and the Commonwealth of Dominica Association of Hamilton. In Europe, there is the Dominica Sweden Friendship Association, and the Kalinago e. V of Germany.

While several of these groups have sent money, equipment, provided assistance in times of natural disaster, and material support to institutions and groups in Dominica, others like the Sisserou Cultural Club and the Kalinago concentrate on promoting and preserving Dominica's rich cultural heritage.

The Diaspora constitutes a widely endowed group of persons. They have consistently demonstrated their capacity to deliver goods and services to various communities to support development goals. This has been done in normal as well as times of emergency. They have also adopted the approach of consultation and collaborative effort. The IDP (Integrated Development Plan) Team embraced this as evidence of an inclusive approach and accepted our guidance at all stages of the planning process.

For further involvement in planning and development, it has been proposed that the Government establish a Unit at the highest level of the public service to facilitate participation and eventual reentry of Diaspora persons into Dominican society. The Unit would be the conduit and mechanism to resolve problems faced by returning Dominicans. The Unit could also be the avenue to encourage investments of expertise and finances into the local economy.

Measures that can be pursued by the Diaspora include:

- Expansion of the directory of Dominicans with skills, and experience of particular relevance to the development focus of the country
- Strengthening the link between the Diaspora and local community organizations e.g. DAAS local chapter, Rotary Club
- Identifying, tracking and recruiting those who have been trained in fields relevant to development needs of Dominica

New Initiatives

Just in the past year, several initiatives have been undertaken by the Diaspora, which provide a glimpse of the opportunities that exist and also hint at the direction that the Diaspora is headed in bringing a bigger focus to the efforts of Nation building. While these initiatives are new and forward thinking, they also serve to reinforce the traditional role of Dominica Associations while giving added perspective to the Diaspora's involvement.

Several of the newer initiatives have focused on bringing to bear the tremendous human resource and expertise of the Diaspora. Dozens of Dominicans have excelled in their chosen careers, and in some instances are at the very top of their chosen professions. The newer thrust is therefore aimed at harnessing this tremendous human potential, which exists within the Diaspora.

In December 2001, several hundred Dominicans attended a Diaspora Symposium in New York organized by the Roosevelt Douglas Foundation (RDF) and the Dominica Academy of Arts and Sciences (DAAS). The symposium examined ways in which the Diaspora could better assist in the development process in Dominica. Participants came from the US, Canada, the United Kingdom and the Caribbean including from Dominica.

This was the first time an event of its kind was held and it signaled a new beginning for a complementary approach between residents and the Diaspora in focusing on a common theme for Dominica's development. Several participants came out of the Symposium with a renewed sense of commitment and dedication to Dominica, and to working together. As a direct result of having made contact with Dominicans for the Symposium, one such individual was later able to interest the Boeing Corporation in considering a business opportunity in Dominica.

Drawing largely from the database, a core group of individuals came together in 2001 to form the Dominica Sustainable Energy Corporation (DSEC). The stated goal of the organization and in keeping with the country's profile as a Nature Isle is to explore and develop alternative and sustainable energy options for Dominica.

Already, DSEC has been granted government backing to do a pilot study to demonstrate the technical and economic effectiveness of wind energy generation in Dominica. Eight months after receiving the go-ahead from Government, DSEC installed its first one-kilowatt wind turbine in Delices, and expects to complete the technical aspects of the pilot phase within a year. At the same time, DSEC has raised the profile of Dominica as a model for sustainable energy technologies through a series of presentations made to various funding agencies.

DSEC provides perhaps the best example of how resident expertise can be linked with the Diaspora to move projects and initiatives along. An integral part of the DSEC organization

is a group of resident Dominicans working seamlessly alongside their counterparts residing overseas. In an age of computers and cutting-edge communications technologies, the functioning of DSEC serves as a good model for future ventures.

In March 2002 under the auspices of the DAAS, the National Development Fund was launched. The Fund aims at seeking financial support from Dominicans, other interested persons, business establishments, and philanthropic organizations in the US and elsewhere. Proceeds from the Fund will be directed to projects primarily in education, health, sports and community development in Dominica. Application was made to the United States Inland Revenue Service and DAAS has obtained tax-exempt, non-profit status.

In an attempt to keep issues of pertinence to Dominicans in the Diaspora as a center of focus, The Dominican.net, an on-line news publication was set up in June 2001. The publication not only keeps its readers informed of what is going on in Dominica, but it also provides searching commentary and highlights issues for consideration by the Diaspora.

The Way Forward

Given the changing role of the Diaspora in the affairs of Dominica, this very important constituency cannot continue to be ignored, and ways must be found to actively engage and encourage further participation. Many in the Diaspora complain that they are either being ignored or not taken seriously by those on Island.

Clearly rather than being frowned upon, the efforts of the Diaspora should be welcomed and encouraged:

- A greater emphasis should be placed on securing both the financial and human resources that are available from the Diaspora. To this end, there should be a concerted effort to encourage increased levels of savings in local banking institutions through organized targeted marketing. Added incentives should be given for the building of homes on Island. Credible investment schemes should be floated to the Diaspora.
- With regard to the tapping of human resources, competent Dominicans should be made to feel that they have a contribution to make. Far too often, Dominicans who are accepted and welcomed in other countries are denied the same opportunities to perform in Dominica. There should be a structured approach within Dominica in concert with the DAAS to tap into a tremendous pool of resources for consultancies, and even donated time.
- Dominicans in the Diaspora should be encouraged to invest in Dominica. Much interest has been expressed in joint ventures between the Diaspora and locals, yet because of the absence of any formal structures and sufficient incentives, an important opportunity is being missed. Given the size of the Diaspora (estimates range from 50, 000 to 100, 000 maybe more), a targeted campaign aimed at

encouraging Dominicans to visit should be launched and sustained. There should be more active promotion for various cultural and national events.

- A liaison Unit should be established within government to actively seek the support of the Diaspora. Too often, Dominicans wishing to contribute on an individual level do not know in which direction to turn or to whom to address their concern. This Unit will be the official link between the Diaspora and Dominica, and will coordinate the local efforts with that of the Diaspora.
- We have proposed to the Government, the National Development Corporation (NDC) and the tourism business to use the Diaspora as direct marketing agents to give our stay-over eco-tourism a boost · We wish to partner with Government to improve the quality of our human resource and institutions.
- We support the IDP recommendation for sustained export promotion.

There is a realization that small independent efforts toward a common goal can succeed in turning a country around. What remains therefore is for an extinguishing of the suspicions that have always accompanied the relationship between Dominicans at home and those abroad. The days of dismissing returning Dominicans should be a thing of the past. The policy of exclusion of competent, well-meaning Dominicans in the development process must stop, and as such, there should be a concerted and sustained effort to take full advantage of what the Diaspora has to offer Dominica and Dominicans.

May God bless all our efforts.

I thank you.

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