

The Role of the Dominican Diaspora

by

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Background

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. Marten 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 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 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 theme.

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 circumstance and 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 PMH, the Dominica Sustainable Energy Corporation (DSEC), and the runaway success of The Dominican.net is further proof of a people wanting earnestly to give back to their country.

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. By joining in partnership with government, resident Dominicans, and those scattered across the globe, much needed change can be realized.

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. In 2001, this figure had swelled to EC\$12.1 million, and a further \$1.5 million was sent through postal money orders. Contributions in kind also run into the millions. 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, the Sisserou Club of Boston, and the Roosevelt Douglas Foundation (RDF).

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.

New Initiatives

Just in the past year, several initiatives have been undertaken by the Diaspora,

which provides a glimpse of the opportunities that exist and also hints 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 (See attachment). 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.

In 2000, Gabriel Christian and Raglan Riviere started the Dominica Academy of Arts and Sciences (<http://www.da-academy.org>) with its stated goal of creating a database of skilled and professional Dominicans whose expertise could be called upon, when needed, to aid in the development effort. These persons were been given an opportunity to be available for the development effort without having to resign their posts, or leave their businesses to return to Dominica on a full time basis.

The database will be made available to government and private sector to access various skills as needed. DAAS has reviewed and made recommendations on the Integrated Development Plan (IDP). Today, close to 200 persons have registered with the Academy, and a full board and management team have been appointed. The DAAS have also broadened its reach to include students currently pursuing studies. Dr. Clayton Shillingford now serves as the DAAS president.

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 have 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 expect 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 of this year, 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 has been made to the United States Inland Revenue Service for the obtaining of 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), 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 should be appointed within government to liaise with and 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 individual will be the official link between the Diaspora and Dominica, and will coordinate the local efforts with that of the Diaspora.

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 as show-offs etc. 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 Dominicans.

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