

CONFERENCE ON THE CARIBBEAN: A 2020 VISION
REPORT ON THE DIASPORA FORUM
(Professor E. Nigel Harris)

The Diaspora Forum occurred over 1 ½ days. This symposium was the culmination of a number of Town Hall Meetings between representatives of CARICOM Governments and the US Diaspora Community. The aims of these meetings were –

- (i) to engage the Caribbean Diaspora in planning the Conference and in shaping its outcomes;
- (ii) to lay the foundation for follow-up on initiatives expected to emerge from the 2020 Vision Conference; and
- (iii) to evolve a Work Programme for interaction between the Caribbean Community and the Caribbean Diaspora.

The organisers emphasised that this 2020 Vision Conference must be seen as part of a process, drawing on efforts dating as far back as the West Indian Commission held some 16 years ago, and driven today by imperatives of Caribbean nation-building in which the Caribbean Diaspora must be involved as equal partners.

Consultative Town Hall Meetings were held in Washington, D.C., New York, Hartford (Connecticut), Philadelphia, Fort Lauderdale, Boston, Houston, Atlanta and Los Angeles.

Based on these meetings, the framework for the Diaspora section of the Symposium were organised into the following themes –

- (i) The Caribbean Diaspora: Overview of Issues and Challenges;
- (ii) Challenges and Opportunities for the Caribbean-US Diaspora;
- (iii) Economic and Financial Empowerment of the Caribbean-US Diaspora;
- (iv) Mobilising Caribbean-US Diaspora Skills, Knowledge and Professional Networks;
- (v) Banking on the Future: Engaging the Youths; and
- (vi) A Round Table Discussion on the Way Forward.

Each day's session ended with well-attended and interactive meetings between Heads of Government and the Diaspora community. In organising the final recommendations, I have drawn both on the recommendations coming out of both the earlier Town Hall Meetings and the 1 ½ days sessions, organizing them into broad categories that seem most appropriate.

1. **Recognition and Mobilisation of the Caribbean Diaspora**

The contribution of the Caribbean Diaspora to the socio-economic development of the Caribbean must be recognised, and to this end, the following recommendations are made –

- (i) The CARICOM Group of Nations should seek to create a distinct and separate identity recognised by the United States of America (USA) Government, its public and multilateral agencies. The Caribbean

- group of Nations needs to become more visible, to be “branded” in the minds of the American Public.
- (ii) Improvement of efforts by the CARICOM Secretariat and their Governments to promote and share information with the Caribbean Diaspora;
 - (iii) Encouragement of greater connectivity and coordination among Caribbean organisations. A broad umbrella organisation may not be feasible, but consideration should be given to a model of a hive where all groups coordinate and work together as needed towards common objectives. Development of a common database of organisations posted on websites of their organisations and that of Caribbean Embassies should be encouraged;
 - (iv) Increased connectivity between Embassies, Counsels General, Honorary Counsels and Caribbean organisations in each location where Caribbean people reside is important, and they should plan joint activities for the benefit of their communities and the Region;
 - (v) Encouragement of greater utilisation of new Information Communication Technology (ICT) networks to promote connectivity and to disseminate information to the Caribbean Community. These include creation of common user-friendly websites with links to each others websites, emails, auto-dialing, etc.;
 - (vi) Creation of more effective advocacy groups reflecting the numerical strength and financial importance of the Caribbean Community. The formation of a National Political Action Committee, or alternatively Political Action Committees (PAC) in specific States with large Caribbean

- populations acting at the local level and coordinating with other PAC groups at the Federal level to promote Caribbean interests are important;
- (vii) Utilising both Diaspora Community Groups and Embassies and Consulates to launch programmes to encourage Caribbean nationals to become citizens who can vote in US local State and Federal elections should be encouraged. For new Caribbean immigrants, Embassies, Consulates and other Diaspora organization should prepare and distribute contingency packages assisting them in adjusting and becoming active members of their USA communities;
- (viii) More effective use should be made of media resources to disseminate information about the Caribbean, with Caribbean media persons in the US being provided with increased access to Caribbean leaders. Short informative and popular promotional material on such matters as the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME), (about which there is such a lack of knowledge in the Diaspora), should be utilised to inform and educate the Diaspora about the Caribbean;
- (ix) Caribbean Carnivals in various US and Canadian cities offer effective ways to preserve and celebrate Caribbean culture and to draw the Caribbean Diaspora community together. More effective use of carnivals should be made by Caribbean Government representatives and local Diaspora communities to mobilise, educate and empower the Diaspora. Carnivals should not be seen only as fun events, but as opportunities for raising awareness of Caribbean culture and history, and as foci for mobilisation and empowerment of the Diaspora. Organising Committees of Carnival events and Diaspora groups should use every opportunity to bring to the attention of local and state leaders the economic and social

- value that these carnivals bring to the communities in which they are held;
and
- (x) Like carnivals, sports represent an important vehicle for promoting Caribbean interests. Initiatives to promote Caribbean sports in the US and exchange visits of teams should be promoted.
2. **Mobilising Caribbean-US Diaspora Skills, Knowledge and Professional Networks**
- (i) A database of skilled persons in the Diaspora should be created. Every effort should be made to link those databases with relevant Government, business, academic and civic organisations in the Caribbean. Specific efforts should be made to include medical doctors, scientists and persons with technical expertise who can help drive development.
- (ii) Scholars in USA institutions and organisations such as the Institute of Caribbean Studies and the National Coalition on Caribbean Affairs should link with like organisations in the Caribbean, such as the University of the West Indies, to create Think Tanks charged with conducting research and proposing policies that will influence US policy-makers to promote legislation to support Caribbean Regional and Diaspora interests.

In addition to sharing their findings with the US and Regional Governments, these Think Tanks should serve to inform PAC and other relevant Diaspora and Regional advocacy organisations.

3. **Economic and Financial Empowerment of the Caribbean**

- (i) Remittances from the Caribbean amount to in excess of US\$3 billion and make up the fifth largest economy of the Region. Presently remittances are used largely for personal consumption and not investment. There is overwhelming consensus that more effective and attractive instruments need to be developed by Caribbean Governments and the business sector, so that a larger proportion of remittances can be converted to investments in the regional economy. Caribbean Governments should recognise that as immigration laws change, and fewer first generation immigrants present in the Caribbean, the size of remittances will decrease. Hence, future economic development should not rely excessively on the promise of remittances, but on programmes to educate and keep skilled people at home to contribute to the development of the Region;
- (ii) In recognition of the importance of expansion of trade to Caribbean and Diaspora development and empowerment, an appeal was made to support and enhance initiatives such as the Caribbean-US Trade and Investment Council (TIC);
- (iii) Organisations such as the Caribbean American Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CACCI) in New York should serve as a model for other similar groupings in other locations where there are large concentrations of Caribbean peoples. The mission of CACCI is *to promote economic development of Caribbean business owners in the New York area, North America and the Caribbean.*
- (iv) Some of its activities include -

- (a) Partnership with State Agencies to provide technological support to assist Caribbean entrepreneurs;
 - (b) Collaboration with Ms. Una Clarke to create Micro-enterprises, a US\$1.4 million project that helps vendors to become entrepreneurs;
 - (c) Creation of a Minority and Women Business Programme;
 - (d) Promotion of the first Caribbean Trade Centre in New York, a building housing meeting rooms, conference centres and vendor spaces. The Caribbean American Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CACCI) should be assisted in their present efforts to *create a database of women and minority entrepreneurs which can link with Caribbean Chambers of Commerce and relevant Caribbean Government departments* to provide broad information about entrepreneurs in the Caribbean Diaspora;
- (iv) Caribbean organisations and institutions based both in the US and the Region should develop well thought-out ideas which might serve as the basis for well-written proposals to approach American-based foundations for funding. These foundations control in excess of US\$72 billion in funding, only a small fraction of which currently gets to Caribbean countries and Diaspora organisations;
- (v) Caribbean Governments should do more to attract investors from the Caribbean Diaspora back home, and should create a more welcoming and

empowering environment for retirees wishing to return home; making good efforts to learn and utilize knowledge and skills of these persons.

- (vi) *Growing rates of crime and gun violence are a substantial barrier to economic development in the Caribbean, and one of the factors leading to high emigration of skilled persons from the Region.* Intense collaborative efforts should be made with the US Government to limit the drug trade, to decrease export of guns from the US to the Caribbean, and to develop programmes in the Caribbean through entities such as the newly formed Institute for Criminal Justice and Security at the University of the West Indies to address rising crime and violence. These efforts should include promotion of poverty reduction, greater family cohesion, and more effective methods to promote competency-based education and to reduction of delinquency.

4. **Emerging Caribbean Youth**

A well-educated youth population, both in the Caribbean and the Diaspora, is the most critical requirement for a sustainable future of both our communities. Building knowledge, creativity, innovative and leadership skills among our youth should be the highest priority of our Governments and the Caribbean Diaspora in the US. The following recommendations were made –

- (i) Efforts should be made to expand youth-focused initiatives, in particular the CARICOM Youth Ambassadors Programme, so that these programmes reach out to youth groups and relevant organisations in both the Caribbean and the USA. Areas of focus for joint activities should include -

- (a) Crime prevention;
 - (b) Peer Education Programmes in relation to HIV and AIDS, reduction of obesity and promotion of healthy life styles;
 - (c) Promotion of mentorship and other educational programme. Youth groups should promote programmes that promotes attributes among their peers such as cultural sensitivity, tolerance, knowledge of history, and ability to communicate effectively;
- (ii) Utilisation of new ICT technologies to link youth of the Caribbean with those in the Diaspora, should be encouraged, including web chat room projects, electronic connections between Caribbean and Diaspora classrooms, etc.;
 - (iii) Development of Youth Exchange Programmes, through linkages between Universities and Colleges in the Caribbean and like institutions in the US;
 - (iv) Encouragement of programmes that support exchange of teachers at all levels of the education spectrum from primary through tertiary, and Continuing Education;
 - (v) Joint programmes that address high drop-out and delinquency rates of Caribbean children, both in the Region and Diaspora, with specific attention to the declining achievement of males (both in the Diaspora and the Caribbean) require comprehensive and urgent attention by all Caribbean organisations and people;

- (vi) Encourage increased support by Diaspora communities for Caribbean educational institutions from basic through tertiary, which should include:
 - (a) provision of volunteer teachers
 - (b) academic exchange programmes,
 - (c) monetary and other gifts in kinds; and
 - (d) assistance in getting access to entities in the USA, such as Foundations, Corporations, and other organisations that might have interest in the Caribbean.

5. **Next Steps**

- (i) Publication, broad dissemination, both in print and electronically, of the final documents from the Conference to all Diaspora organisations and groups in as many parts of the USA as possible where Caribbean groups reside;
- (ii) This Conference must be seen as part of a process, and dialogue should continue in different cities and other locations with large Diaspora communities, utilising wherever appropriate, opportunities for the Town Hall Meetings format. These sessions should be organized such that there is broad representation of CARICOM Governments and involvement of Diaspora organisations, People should be drawn from all national groups that comprise the Caribbean, with specific efforts being made to include the Surinamese and Haitian Diaspora.

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- There should be recognition that large sections of the Caribbean Community do not attend meetings. Thus, more active individuals in the Diaspora should be encouraged to utilize email, social and other informal gatherings to disseminate information about the Caribbean Region and to encourage individuals to link with websites providing relevant information. This “silent majority” will need to be energized particularly to support elections of politicians promoting our interests and in providing support for issues of import to our community.
- (iii) Preparation of a specific Work Programme designed to mobilize and empower the Caribbean Diaspora to support their own and Regional growth. Such a programme should prioritise action items, identify accountable individuals, and establish measurables and timelines, wherever possible, to ensure implementation of key recommendations arising out of this historic gathering.

***Submitted to the Plenary Session
Thursday, 21 June 2007***