

## **The Caribbean Diaspora: Untapped resources in regional development**

*By Ambassador Curtis A. Ward*

There is no consensus on the political and governance roles members of the Caribbean diaspora should, or could have in the Caribbean region. However, there is no lack of consensus on the value of annual remittances to the economies of Caribbean countries. Governments are in agreement on the importance, and indeed welcome the billions of dollars in annual contributions flowing into the region from diaspora communities.

In addition to billions of U.S. dollars in annual inward emittance flows, diaspora support, which varies from country to country, relieves pressure on some governments by providing education opportunities and health services to many of the poor and marginalized in each country. Assistance provided to Caribbean schools by alumni groups in the diaspora, and annual diaspora organized and led health missions provide free healthcare to thousands of the underserved members of Caribbean societies. While we can quantify in dollars the annual remittances, there is no accurate accounting of the aggregate value of education assistance, healthcare services, and contributions of goods and services to individuals and to charitable organizations annually.

In the meantime, with each passing election in the Caribbean, there is growing unease among members of the Caribbean diaspora that their contributions to nation-building of their respective countries are being taken for granted. This perception persists as diaspora communities continue to be excluded from decision-making processes in the region. Despite some efforts on the part of a few Caribbean governments to establish mechanisms for more effective engagement with the diaspora, there is no serious discussion on meaningful political participation by diaspora communities. It is either that the process is moving too slowly or the mechanisms being contemplated are not up to the task. So far, there is nothing that suggests that any meaningful efforts are underway to address the issue of political representation or participation in the governance of each respective country by members of diaspora communities.

No one is suggesting that finding an ideal formula for any country of the Caribbean will be easy. However, there are already good examples of diaspora engagement by some non-Caribbean countries, and these mechanisms seem to be working to the satisfaction of those governments and their diaspora communities.

Furthermore, political exclusion is not the only issue for open discussion and resolution, and most Caribbean governments, as well as broader Caribbean societies, seem oblivious to the concerns of the diaspora communities. They seem to be unaware, or pretend to be unaware of the vast untapped resources in the diaspora. They ignore the expertise across multiple disciplines and in academia which abound within the Caribbean diaspora. Members of the Caribbean diaspora provide highly specialized and professional services in their host countries to governments, private sectors, and civil society, and have excelled in consultative practices globally, yet their expertise are seemingly unwelcomed in the process of solving Caribbean problems.

Since 2004, the Jamaican government under former Prime Minister P.J. Patterson's administration began to seek meaningful ways to engage the Jamaican Diaspora and to harness the resources of the Diaspora in a meaningful way. The process which began in 2004 was expected at the time to be an example for other CARICOM member states, but that has not materialized and expectations have not been met. Mr. Patterson, when he was foreign minister in the Michael Manley-led government in the 1970s, recognized the potential of the Jamaican diaspora and declared that Jamaica was a country without borders. His premise was wherever Jamaicans were in the world, they took Jamaica with them.

It is true that for many Jamaican and Caribbean members of the diaspora, their love of country seems to grow when they leave their countries of origin and experience life in foreign lands. They become advocates and guardians of mutually beneficial relationships between their homelands and the countries in which they are domiciled. They are advocates for rule of law and good governance, and they are first to respond to natural disasters in their homelands.

So far, the efforts which began in Jamaica in 2004 have not achieved as much as had been hoped for, and no effective region-wide mechanism for diaspora engagement has been put in place. In addition to Jamaica, other Caribbean governments have taken small steps with very little progress so far. While there is some evidence to suggest, including bi-annual diaspora conferences, that Jamaica's diaspora engagement is evolving, albeit slowly, a foundation has been laid to take diaspora engagement to the next level. With a change in government in March 2016, Jamaicans in the diaspora anxiously await the new government's diaspora policies. Diaspora leaders and members anticipate early consultations with the new government.

Many in the diaspora believe there should be opportunities for participation in the governance of their respective countries, such as representation in the parliaments of their native countries, or, at the least, having a say in choosing the political representatives in national

elections. There is quite a bit of resistance across the Caribbean region to any mechanism that would allow political participation by diaspora communities. These issues must be discussed openly and decisions made leading to more inclusiveness.

However, those who resist change to the status quo also want, and indeed expect the benefits flowing from the diaspora to continue unconditionally. Globalization, with the ease of travel and communication, presents new opportunities to break down barriers to meaningful diaspora engagement and to replace myopic thinking with pragmatic and progressive visions on the role of the diaspora in nation-building through effective engagement.

There are different opinions and general confusion on who comprise the diaspora. There shouldn't be. In order to move forward with meaningful and effective solutions to the issue of effective diaspora engagement, it is important to have a clear and universally acceptable definition of diaspora.

Who comprise the diaspora? The International Organization for Migration (IOM) provides such a definition. Accordingly, the IOM defines the diaspora as:

*“Emigrants and their descendants, who live outside the country of their birth or ancestry, either on a temporary or permanent basis, yet still maintain affective and material ties to their countries of origin.”*

The key to this definition of diaspora is the qualifying phrase:

*“...yet still maintain affective and material ties to their countries of origin.”*

This definition suggests that, as Caribbean people, those who have severed their ties to their countries of origin, effectively relinquish claim to be regarded as members of their countries' diaspora. Empirical data, if available, would confirm that the levels of patriotism exhibited by Caribbean people abroad is unmatched by their compatriots at home, and most Caribbean diaspora members *maintain affective and material ties to their countries of origin*. They strive to provide support to their countries of origin, but often are forced to operate through *ad hoc* mechanisms as governments across the region have failed to establish appropriate mechanisms for broad engagement.

Failure to engage effectively with the Caribbean diaspora in nation building compounds a great loss in the availability of human resources for social and economic development to the countries of the Caribbean. A World Bank study of the diaspora, generally, has found that a significant percentage of Caribbean emigrants are highly educated. Caribbean countries

constitute the world's top five emigration countries of tertiary-educated, 2010/2011, rated as a total of emigration. Guyana leads the world with 93%; followed by Haiti: 75.1%; Trinidad & Tobago: 68.2%; Barbados: 66.2%; and Jamaica: 48.1%. (See Table 1 below)

**Table 1**

<b>Top 30 Emigration Countries of Tertiary-Educated, 2010/2011 emigration rate, percent of total</b>	
<b>Guyana (1<sup>st</sup>)</b>	<b>93.0%</b>
<b>Haiti (2<sup>nd</sup>)</b>	<b>75.1%</b>
<b>Trinidad &amp; Tobago (3<sup>rd</sup>)</b>	<b>68.2%</b>
<b>Barbados (4<sup>th</sup>)</b>	<b>66.2%</b>
<b>Jamaica (5<sup>th</sup>)</b>	<b>48.1%</b>
<b>Belize (12<sup>th</sup>)</b>	<b>33.4%</b>
<b>Bahamas (23<sup>rd</sup>)</b>	<b>20.5%</b>
<i>Source: World Bank Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016, Third Edition</i>	

Other studies have shown that a large percentage of Caribbean emigrants have achieved post-graduate and professional level studies, and are engaged disproportionately in management and professional positions in the countries in which they are domiciled. In terms of raw data, Jamaica is the only Caribbean country on the top-30 list at 24<sup>th</sup> in the world, with 292,000 tertiary-educated emigrants. To offer a context and perspective on this data, India tops the list with 2,221,000 and Peru at 30<sup>th</sup> with 259,000. Among Caribbean countries, Jamaica has by a large margin the highest number of its citizens living in the diaspora.

Jamaica with a population at home of approximately 2.7 million the 292,000 tertiary-educated Jamaican emigrants in the diaspora comprises a significant part of the global Jamaican population. As noted above, diaspora members provide highly specialized and professional services wherever they reside. Successive governments' inability to tap into this resource effectively is a demonstration of the lack of appropriate mechanisms to engage the Jamaican diaspora. The same may be said for other countries of the Caribbean and their inability to benefit from the vast resources of their diaspora.

The recession years had significant economic effects on Caribbean economies. Diaspora remittances played a significant role in helping to prop up Caribbean economies by providing

billions of dollars to the treasuries of the region. Although there were fall offs in the level of remittances, the numbers were still quite significant. For CARICOM countries, since 2006, remittances to Jamaica have never fallen below US\$1.8 billion, an annual low for the decade 2006-2015. As the U.S. is by far the world's top remittance-sending country (US\$56 billion in 2014) the drop in remittances to the region was expected, as the deep recession in the U.S. was a contributing factor. However, remittances to Jamaica for the ten year period 2006-2015 totaled US\$21.152 billion. In the case of Haiti, remittances continued a steady climb from 2006 of US\$1.063 billion to US\$2.02 billion in 2015. Guyana's remittances have also shown steady growth from US\$218 million in 2006, to a high of US\$469 million in 2012, and, following lower levels for 2013 and 2014, settled at US\$337 million in 2015. While I have found no empirical data to support any conclusion as to why these lower levels were realized by Guyana in these years, it may be possible that the national elections there contributed to the lessening of the remittance flows. It would be instructive to determine if there was any connection. (See Table 2 below)

**Table 2**

<b>Remittances to the Caribbean 2006-2015 (US\$ Millions)</b>					
<i>Country</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2007-2014</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>Total: 2006-2015</i>	<i>% of GDP 2014 - Top 30 worldwide</i>
<b>Antigua &amp; Barbuda</b>	19	169	22	208	
<b>Barbados</b>	87	920	110	1,117	
<b>Belize</b>	64	611	83	758	
<b>Dominica</b>	22	184	24	230	
<b>Dominican Republic</b>	3,054	58,211	4,985	66,250	
<b>Grenada</b>	28	202*	No data	230	
<b>Guyana</b>	218	2,721	337	3,276	<b>10.6% (24<sup>th</sup>)</b>
<b>Haiti</b>	1,063	12,383	2,020	15,466	<b>22.7% (8<sup>th</sup>)</b>
<b>Jamaica</b>	1,924	16,908	2,320	21,152	<b>16.3% (17<sup>th</sup>)</b>
<b>St. Kitts and Nevis</b>	33	362	52	447	
<b>St. Lucia</b>	28	234	30	292	
<b>St. Vincent and the Grenadines</b>	26	238	32	296	
<b>Suriname</b>	2	47	9	58	
<b>Trinidad &amp; Tobago</b>	91	908	129	1,128	
<i>Source: World Bank Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016, Third Edition</i>					
<i>*No data for 2014</i>					

As shown in Table 2 above, in 2014, three CARICOM states were among the world's top Remittance-Receiving countries as a percentage of GDP. Haiti leads the way with remittances amounting to 22.7% of that country's GDP in 2014, followed by Jamaica with 16.3% of GDP, and Guyana with 10.6% of GDP. By any economic calculation these are significant numbers for these countries and the value of remittances to the economic and political stability of these countries cannot be overstated. The money transferred by remittances is mostly personal transfers which are spent in the local economies thereby supporting indigenous economic sectors and local employment. These funds are spent on food, clothing, housing, education, and healthcare, and are spread across all economic sectors. The foreign currency ends up in the coffers of financial institutions, including the central banks, and is available for funding imports of goods and services into these countries. Governments are able to factor, with certainty, remittances into their economic planning and projections.

As the World Bank Factbook aptly stated:

*Remittances resulting from migration constitute reliable sources of foreign exchange earnings, and cushion households' income during bad times. Remittance inflows to developing countries are more than three times official development aid (ODA); and even bigger than foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows once China is excluded."*

The World Bank's conclusions are borne out by the available data for 2013. The figures for countries such as Guyana, Haiti, and Jamaica are particularly instructive. Guyana, with inward remittance flow of US\$328 million, received only US\$200 million in FDI and US\$100 million in ODA in 2013; Haiti, with US\$1.781 billion inward remittance flow received US\$160 million in FDI and US\$1.17 billion in ODA in 2013; and Jamaica, with inward remittance flow of US\$2.172 billion in 2013, received only US\$590 million in FDI and US\$70 million in ODA that same year. Jamaica's combined FDI and ODA was about one-third the total inward remittance flow. It should be noted, also, that the high level of ODA to Haiti in 2013 was reflective of the international community's response to rebuilding Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake and should not be considered as the norm.

Unquestionably, the Caribbean diaspora communities have a valid case for increased recognition of their invaluable input in the economic well-being of their home countries. Concomitantly, Caribbean governments should view their diaspora communities as an integral part of nation building, and that includes a role in the political processes and governance of their homelands.

It is recognized by diaspora communities' experts at the World Bank and other international organizations that the people in the diaspora are bridges between state-of-the-art in policy, technological, and managerial expertise and the local conditions in their homelands. Their connections on both ends are important assets. Their cultural competences place them in good staid. Some countries, such as India take full advantage of diaspora resources. Therefore, is it time Caribbean governments recognize the value of their diaspora and act expeditiously and forthrightly to put the requisite mechanisms in place?

***Prepared by Curtis A. Ward***