

Caribbean Development - Rudderless and in a State of Existential Drift

By David Gomezⁱ



A couple of earlier articles on social media related to the subject of Caribbean development have given pause for thought where the overall trajectory of development of the Caribbean region is concerned. One of those articles heralded the rather refreshing news that Jamaica has decided to forge ahead with strengthening its bi-lateral relations with the Dominican Republic marking a break from what has been a pattern of retrograde political passive-aggressiveness by Caribbean states towards the D.R. - this stance has, among other things, hampered instead of advanced relations between the two. The other is the news of the Caribbean Development Bank's launching of a toolkit to support Public-Private Partnerships in the region. If this can be leveraged with the recent injection of externally funded development capital for private sector development within the Caribbean region then there should be much optimism for economic development ... One cannot help but ponder though on the likelihood that the promise of these types of initiatives may be diluted by what can only be understood as a region that is in a state of existential drift - rudderless and with, in my view, the need for a new captain of the ship if not a new ship altogether. Why this summon?

In 2016 the United Kingdom voted to exit the European Union (what is popularly referred to as BREXIT). It is rather telling that CARICOM had prior to this eventuality not conducted any major study of the likely impact of such an outcome on the region. And it seems that even after the advent the kind of analysis which surely is needed to inform development or adoption of any policies by the region that still does not seem to have been completed. By this claim what is meant is analysis which takes into consideration the entire gamut of Caribbean-British relations (and post-BREXIT

Caribbean-EU relations) in its historical and contemporary contexts and not just focus on likely impacts in the area of trade. Such analysis rather needs to fully examine the socio-political dimensions of the respective relationships and how those may be affected by the vote, including for the current (but in my opinion, much maligned) efforts at extracting reparations for certain historical experiences. This kind of analysis could be the difference between twenty years of unrivalled growth and development going forward or twenty years of more of the same development back-sliding the region seems to have become comfortable with. Is it that the proverbial Caribbean ship does not see a need to be guided by this kind of sextant?

The region is also, not surprisingly, mute on a clear strategy on economic and political relations with China. One recent paper argues that it found that "...Chinese

trade, investment and loans have supported the left-leaning governments in the region that are attempting to develop alternative post-capitalist societies and that China's leaders seek allies among developing countries to join with them in creating a new multipolar and more equitable global order" (Harris, 2015). If that is true then it is concerning for a couple of reasons. One, this is likely to impact on US-Caribbean relations and in this age and time the region can ill-afford to be further relegated to the fringes of international society. There is much at risk here if one hasn't yet realized this. And two, while the promise of a more 'equitable global order' is appetizing Caribbean states don't seem to have done enough for this to be realized in any meaningful way. To be sure, Caribbean states are still characterized by exclusionary and much too easily corruptible political and economic institutions. Equally or perhaps more important though is the need for Caribbean economies to understand exactly what export and trade opportunities to China truly exists and how those may be pursued, as well as what types and levels of Chinese investments are possible and how those may be attracted and secured. Without this enterprises are playing blind-folded...

Finally, the region does not seem to have any acceptable position either on the issue of Haiti, or conversely on its relationship with the Dominican Republic or worse it predicates any such positions on achieving outcomes that are not consonant with development progress. By this I don't mean holding 'grudging positions' against the latter for either its policies regarding descendants of Haitian migrants born there or for the protectionist stances against possible competition from its industries and enterprises or both. Rather it points to the need for a clear meaningful regional strategy towards addressing the challenges that Haiti's membership within the regional construct brings with it, as well as discontinuing the prevailing policy of fear over competition that may be forthcoming from the other half (more like two-

thirds) of the island of Hispaniola. The CARIFORUM construct is one, the mechanics of which, seems to be overly fraught with much petty jealousies and an illogical desire on the part of many to hold on to carved-out spaces for uncompetitive economic industries, sectors and enterprises in CARICOM economies (just check the list of protected sensitive industries in any trade agreement to which the region is party). As a result, the CARIFORUM construct has, for all intents and purposes, arguably not resulted in deeper and more meaningful relations between the D.R. and Caribbean economies - Kingston's decision therefore can best be understood as their perceived need to break away from this lunacy.

The Caribbean region has come a long way since the heady days of the astute but now elderly (and for some, past) statesmen who were brash enough to state their objectives for Caribbean regionalism and savvy enough to pursue the dream. That trajectory of

development however seems to have gone off-course and in the current turbulent waters of international politics and the growing populist tendencies spreading across the world the Caribbean ship seems to be simply adrift - rudderless and content with mere existence, and is likely seen by many external partners as a poor cadger easily satiated by purses of development financing marked by 'soft conditionalities' of where and how the monies are best spent. The buccaneers and pirates of an era past would never have settled for such an unmooring - perhaps its time to set this ship right. Ahoy (new) captain! Anchors up! Sails up - starboard tack!

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