

*Prepared for the Guyana 50th Anniversary Conference
to be held at University of the District of Columbia.*

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April 8th, 2016.

The Role of the Diaspora – A Framework for Collaboration

As a euphemism people call me a financial consultant, but I am particularly grateful that you recognize the development animal in me by asking me to share some thoughts on the role of the diaspora and how we can better fashion a framework for collaboration. I have always introduced myself as a public policy junkie who strayed into the world of finance. So it is events like these that allow me to experience a sense of true liberation. So my full gratitude to the organizers for inviting me.

Now to the topic – the role of the Diaspora – a framework for collaboration. I was asked to keep this to less than 10 minutes, which I will, so here we go.

A short background.

According to a USAID Report, the Guyanese Diaspora is sized at some 700,000 persons which is just less than the population at home. That report referred to Guyana as a nation of migrants. **Guyana for the last 50 years has failed to unleash its potential for a number of reasons including the failure of the nation to effectively harness the energies of enough of our brightest and best.** This failure of the policy-making framework to effectively put our people to work has resulted in a case where over the last 50 years; Guyana has consistently experienced net migration of its people to foreign lands. The big challenge is that although the rate over the last 20 years, the migration rate was some 8.8 per 100,000, a significant portion of those on the planes and boats out of Guyana were tertiary educated. According to a

statement from the sitting Minister of Education, more than 80 percent of our university graduates are migrating from Guyana annual.

You cannot mold a nation with 4 out of 5 of your university graduate NOT contributing to the process. You just cannot. You cannot grow a developing nation at rates of 6 – 8 percent with an average of 4,000 persons permanently and legally leaving Guyana for the United States every year. But the United States is not the top destination for our migrant population. The top destination of Guyanese permanently migrating according to a United Nations report is Suriname, Brazil, Trinidad and then the United States.

Who are we?

I specifically speak of the Guyanese Diaspora in the United States. We are first and to some extent second-generation people of many talents and various levels of accumulated wealth. Irrespective of where we have made our homes, we all feel a deep sense of commitment to our homeland and more importantly our village or in the case of those like me from urban areas, our community – in my case Alexander Village. Now the story is quite different for the third generation who were born here – like my children; for them, Guyana is a tourist destination and nothing else. Home for them is the United States. So there is a disconnect somewhere along the line, be it the third or fourth generation.

So while the majority of us who were born in Guyana, have brought our value structure that was passed down from our ancestors and feel a strong sense of connection to the motherland, what we have failed to do was effectively influence public policy to more efficiently contribute to national development. So while an increasing number of Guyana are living the America Dream with the three-bedroom house and the two cars in the garage and a good pension and medical plan, by and large, we are still a number in these great United States and see our sense of identity as Guyanese rather than Americans. For that sole reason, we want to be part of Project Guyana.

So as we start to think about how we can give back to the motherland, more and more of us 1st generation Guyanese immigrants continue to re-connect with Guyana via social media, visits to the homeland or through our Guyanese-America social organisations like the chapters of the local political parties or our village charities. So we are a powerful tool available to the policy makers in Guyana that is yet to be unleashed.

What do we have to offer?

These great United States has empowered all people regardless of our social class with access to opportunities to unleash our potential once we are willing to work hard, study hard and live within the law. You do not have to be a Kennedy with their connection to make some serious money in these United States. Anyone in this room can do it, but it requires hard work, sensible investments, sound education and some luck.

This means as a collective, our Guyanese Diaspora has much to offer including:

1. Finance using many different types of investment vehicles.
2. Talent in many different kinds of fields.
3. Networks or connections or hook-ups as we call it.
4. Access to new technology.
5. Access to a more efficient work ethics.
6. Access to new markets for Made in Guyana products.

What the Diaspora Brings to the Table.

1. The technical “know-how” to catalyze Guyana’s need to urgently industrialize our agricultural base as a revenue generator especially for foreign markets.
2. Access to knowledge to accelerate the reformation of our justice, security and public service.

3. Access to knowledge to enhance good governance and strengthen public institutions.
4. Partnerships with the private sector, so that it can expand and take its place as the engine of growth.
5. As one of the key stimulator of human and economic development.

Why there are some deep tensions around this question of the contribution of the Diaspora?

1. Lack of data on what is out there and thus Diaspora policy making in Guyana is being done in an environment of guesstimation and even total ignorance.
2. Unnecessary emotional fear of these “Yankees Guyanese”. This fear manifest itself into silly comments like “you all did not endure the struggle and are now coming back to take over”. I hear such silliness only weeks ago from a high profile member of civil society who met me on the protest like for Courtney Crum Ewing. This fear is petty and has no foundation in the forward movement of Guyana, yet it is there. If we are to bring clarity around the critical developmental gaps in Guyana, we will recognize the need to urgently embrace and court the Diaspora as a tool to grow the national economic pie for all to get more?
3. Failure to engage the Diaspora in a systemic manner on the developmental needs of the nation with a view of filling the gaps in a collaborative manner. Rather those privileged few in the Diaspora, especially the financiers with connections to politicians are allowed to force themselves into positions that may not necessarily in the nation’s best interest. Such situations insert much distrust into the system and cause much resentment for the Diaspora.

Some solutions

In its manifesto, the ruling Coalition promised the following:

1. An enterprise and economic development policy that provides a level playing field for local entrepreneurs and investors and our huge Diaspora to develop our abundant resources - NOT DONE!
2. Diaspora Integration - APNU+AFC will implement a series of incentives to attract this talent and their wealth in the development of Guyana – NOT BEING DONE ENOUGH!
3. APNU+AFC will establish Diaspora desk offices at its Embassies and High Commissions in New York, Toronto, London and the Caribbean to solicit investments and entrepreneurial and other skills to develop Guyana - NOT DONE!

The lessons to be learnt from this are that the solutions are not being framed in an environment of collaboration. Meaning rules, institutions and a framework.

What can be done?

1. Gathering of the data and inventorizing the Diaspora – both the legal immigrants and illegal immigrants as potential investors using a special purpose vehicle such as Diaspora Bonds that will offer greater returns on what is on offer in the developed world. So let us start this process with the North American Diaspora. Also, this Database can serve as an access point to tap skills on a paid consultancy basis rather than exclusively full-time jobs for those who want to contribute.
2. Inventorize all the Guyanese associated organisations – all the Village Association, Political Association, religious organisations, ex-police etc. as mobilisers of talent to fill gaps in the developmental process. Right now we have a national suicide crisis in Guyana and many Diaspora Groups are committed to helping but their efforts has resulted in many situations where they are literally crawling over each other in a most haphazard, disjointed manner that may not be delivering the intended outcome for those with the most needs.

3. Make available to Diaspora members a special NRG Passport Card, which can be a revenue generator for the Guyanese State. In addition to national pride, these cards offers certain privileges such as access to weekly updates on a Diaspora Knowledge Network which highlights group discount rates on tourist activities, access to advertised vacancies in Guyana, access to the procurement of goods and services opportunities that the Diaspora can tap into and special access to GO-INVEST on all legal investment ideas. This will also grant you automatic invites to an annual Diaspora Conference to be held in one of the major Diaspora population centers, along with invites to National Activities and Conferences in and out of Guyana on all major developmental issues.
4. Establish an online Diaspora University as part of UG. This will allow for the Diaspora to fill technical gaps at UG by offering their skills at teaching in specialized areas. These classes will be conducted on-line with a once per semester fully paid stint for the Diaspora participant at UG to do direct face-to-face teaching for a full week with the students. The focus will be on the transfer of knowledge in the pure sciences, mathematics, agriculture science and engineering.
5. Establish a Guyanese community welfare fund that will be managed by a team of Diaspora philanthropist who shall be elected every year from contributing shareholders. These funds will be used to offer scholarships, medical assistance and other social intervention for the at-risk population.
6. Establish a Global Advisory Think Tanks that will have Guyanese based policy makers collaborating along side members of the Diaspora and working on ideas that can help to unleash clogs in the developmental process. For example – how to financially structure the energy model that will transform Guyana from a 90 percent fossil fuel energy producer to a 50 percent renewable energy producer in 10 years. Ideas on how to structure the Diaspora Bond or framing how to

better channel remittances for national development or setting up of a State development Bank can all be investigated using this Think Tank which will have access to international talent.

Programmatic response

To get any of this done, we need a programmatic response. This means the establishment of a Diaspora Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, managed by re-migrants with full autonomy to act in the best interest of this collaborative relationship between Georgetown and the Diaspora. But this Department must be enshrined in law and empowered by a clear list of duties gazette for all to clearly understand the role of this Department.

The immediate task of this Department will be to develop a programmatic response, (the rules, the regulations and so on) and start delivering on its commitment to fostering this relationship between the Locals and the Diaspora for human development.

Reference to a case study

I want to reference two case study that I came across while preparing this paper.

- One from the African Diaspora Policy Centre labeled “Diaspora Organisations as Strategic Agents of Development” and which can be found here - <http://www.diaspora-centre.org/DOCS/EADPD/24022014EADPD-Report-def.pdf>
- The Association for Higher Education and Development titled “Enabling Diaspora Engagement in Africa: Resources, Mechanisms and Gaps – a case study of Ethiopia” and can be found here - http://www.aigaforum.com/Enabling_Diaspora_Engagement_in_Africa_Case_Study_Ethiopia_May2007.pdf

CONCLUSION

I was specifically asked not expand this into a full conference paper. However, this contribution seeks to examine how we can use the best practices from around the world to better construct a framework for collaboration between the Diaspora and the Locals by establishing clear ground rules on how the Diaspora can play a more integrated but non-intrusive growth-related role in Guyana's human development.

Essentially it seeks to answer the strategic questions:

- Where do we want to go with this relationship?
- What constraints exist in this relationships?
- What opportunities can be leverage from this relationship?

With those questions, I bequeath this presentation to you for further deliberations.

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