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ENVIRONMENT IN CARIBBEAN DEVELOPMENT -
A REGIONAL VIEW

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The development problem

Caribbean economies are characterized by a high degree of openness i.e. a strong dependence on the external sector for trade in goods and services. The 1950's and 1960's witnessed the emergence of an export-oriented modern sector. While this was good for economic growth, it did not solve the problems of poverty and rising unemployment (St. Cyr 1983). The effect was that much of the economic growth in this sector took place by simply adding the modern sector to the economy without truly integrating it into the national economies (Demas, 1981). During the early seventies, a major development concern was to achieve a larger measure of local ownership and control, but in 1981 it was concluded that "Notwithstanding progress in some areas and because of the deterioration in the international economic situation, in many countries a number of structural problems inherited from the 1960's remained: growing unemployment and under-employment, lack of diversification and intersectoral linkages in the structure of production and a profound malaise in the agricultural sector, both for export crops and local food consumption".

From the mid-seventies onwards, the external environment has been unpredictable. These external shocks served to bring into sharp relief the deeper internal problems which are endemic in most Caribbean countries and have brought with them an awareness of the need to pursue new development policies in order to more productively utilize existing resources particularly human resources. The Fifth Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community observed "the intricacies of the development problem in the Caribbean need to be thoroughly understood. Although incomes per capita may appear to be high compared to some other developing countries, these rest on rather

fragile foundations. In the typical case, the economy is dependent on one or two staple activities for the bulk of its income, employment, government revenue and export earnings. The agricultural sector still retains historical legacies of highly uneven land distribution, low productivity and poor marketing. It needs improved skills and appropriate technology. Despite some progress in industrial development, the manufacturing sector has not yet developed strong linkages with the rest of the economy, local entrepreneurship is not broadly based, and the export capacity of the sector is still rudimentary. The productive sectors together are not yet in a position to provide sufficient employment opportunities for the growing labour force".

Development and economic growth in Caribbean countries are predicated upon a dynamic expansion of export earnings and adjustments need to be made in the productive apparatus in each of the islands in order to increase the output of tradeable goods and services. While there is a fairly general consensus with regard to these objectives the policy debate as to the most effective means, as well as a desire to minimize the short-term social cost of adjustment, is still going on and consequently has tended to delay action. The emphasis on accelerated development of the export sector may embody the danger that immediate exigencies like unemployment, foreign exchange shortages and public sector deficits will take precedence over medium and long-term concerns and that developments will be pursued which are not consistent with the region's resources and hence, are not environmentally sound or sustainable.

Issues of planning

In the small island states of the Caribbean the potential conflict between short-term growth and sustainable development is exacerbated by a number of factors:

(a) There is a concentration of human activities in the coastal zone. Activities like housing, agriculture, tourism, manufacture and infrastructure often compete for the same scarce resources and conflicts can and do frequently arise. To a certain extent such conflicts reflect a weak commitment to formal comprehensive planning.

(b) At the national or regional level this disenchantment with planning may be due to a lack of realism in terms of constraints and barriers to achieve stated goals. Also because many plans have been formulated by experts without much participation by other national economic and social agents, these do not reflect the aspirations of the larger community or even those of the political directorate. Consequently, many plans never go beyond the status of a mere technical document.

(c) This weak commitment also applies to the project level. This derives from a perception that at the project level, evaluation and/or control are restrictive rather than development oriented. This is especially true when impacts which are not easily translated in monetary terms need to be assessed.

(d) Even when there is a commitment to planning the choice between potentially conflicting uses of natural resources remains difficult. Although modern techniques may assist in the evaluation procedures, these techniques do not take sufficient cognizance of the serious constraints which face the small island countries of the Caribbean. In general, human, financial, technical and institutional resources are scarce and economic considerations make it impossible for each country to have and utilize full time the full scale of planning expertise necessary to carry out such evaluations.

(e) Environmental impact assessments may assist in such an evaluation procedure. A major drawback, however, is the often long time spent on the necessary background studies. While this may not be a serious constraint for assessments carried out 'ex-post' it is a more serious drawback for 'ex-ante' and private sector developments. In this respect, there is a need for rapid environmental assessments, techniques which can be quickly applied to the evaluation of a project.

(f) There is also the question to whom such studies are directed. All too often environmental impact assessments are addressed to those who are already quite aware of the need to incorporate the environmental dimension in development planning. In this respect, it is not so much the physical planner who needs to be addressed but rather the policy-makers, economic planners and the private sector for whom long-term environmental considerations are often less important when faced with the socio-economic problems as highlighted earlier.

Tourism environment

The promotion of tourism as a significant element of many Caribbean countries' development strategy was in part a conscious reaction to their structural imbalances, but mostly resulted from improved transportation and an increase of disposable incomes in the industrialized countries. From its emergence in the late fifties and early sixties in Puerto Rico, the Bahamas and Jamaica, the increased flow of tourists spread to other islands so that in 1986 tourism is a significant activity in almost all Caribbean islands. In fact most small island states can be characterized as tourism-dependent countries.

The predominant style of tourism in the region is that which is based almost exclusively on the attraction of the climate and of beaches. This style of tourism blurs the differences which exist among the various islands. All become similar and interchangeable.

In effect, each island competes worldwide with all the other destinations catering to the same type of tourism. Such "beach tourism" neglects other attractions or resources which may be present in the country, precisely because they are less relevant to the particular demands which this category of tourism style generates.

On the other hand tourism, as one of the fastest growing areas of international trade, provides a powerful tool for national development, particularly for small island states with limited development options. It is a sector which is growing not only in size, but also in complexity in order to cater to the increasingly more sophisticated international travellers, as well as to the mass market.

Perhaps in no other developmental activity is the link with environmental quality more obvious than in tourism, since the environment is itself a significant part of the product which an island has to offer. A successful tourism strategy will, therefore, seek to maximize the total benefits to development, while preserving the natural environment and improving the cultural milieu upon which it depends.

By its very nature tourism can have profound economic, socio-cultural and environmental impact although there are no 'a priori' reasons to indicate whether such effects will be positive or negative. However, concerted efforts are needed to maximize a country's benefits and reduce the costs.

Beach tourism can have a particularly significant impact on the coastal zones. Construction near the high water line eliminates coastal vegetation, which acts as a stabilizer for sand dunes, thereby accelerating coastal erosion. On occasion groynes are built and erosion may develop downdrift as a result. Sewage disposal is a serious problem throughout the islands particularly where the scale of the project is such that the local capacity for handling it is

insufficient. The result is pollution of the very beaches on which tourism depends. Large new developments may provide a stimulus by justifying infrastructure and facilities for locals which might not otherwise have been possible.

High room densities may cause a loss of balance between demand and the capacity to manage. The lack of alternatives to beach front tourism, however, creates pressures in the utilization of the coastal zone. Such pressures force many governments to make difficult choices with respect to long-term optimal balance and resource utilization versus short-term problems like unemployment and public sector account deficits.

The lack of commitment towards planning has had its consequences on tourism planning as well as its integration with national development environmental protection and cultural development. The lack of policy directives makes it difficult to plan the development of the sector in an effective manner taking into account national needs and national resources.

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