Caribbean Rail Transport: Not Lost and Not Forgotten

Last train to San Fernando

Last train to San Fernando

And if you miss this one

You'll never get another one

Is the last train to San Fernando

(The Mighty Spitfire, 1940s)

Just south of the Greater Caribbean region, a feasibility study is being conducted for the possible construction of a 5,300-kilometre long interoceanic railway through Peru and Brazil, mirroring albeit at a much grander scale, a transportation system that has enjoyed a long history in the Caribbean. While not much attention has been placed on rail transport systems, the development of the industry can be of significant importance to the region, particularly for the larger mainland countries of the Greater Caribbean, in reducing maritime transport costs, enhancing hinterland-to-port access, and boosting efficiency.

Rail transport first arose in the Insular Caribbean region in the 17th century, largely as a result of the colonial sugar trade. Given the high sugar production rates across the region, with Barbados, Jamaica and the Leeward Islands experiencing a general sugar boom in the 18th century, a commercial land-based transport system that was more modernised than horse-drawn transportation was deemed necessary to facilitate export efficiency between the numerous sugar plantations and ports. Further agricultural developments continued to fuel the construction of rail systems, leading to their eventual use for passenger transport particularly in larger islands such as Cuba, Jamaica,

and Trinidad. Nevertheless, as the Mighty Spitfire describes in his 1940s calypso “Last Train to San Fernando,” the majority of rail transportation services in the Insular Caribbean were terminated as the sugar industry went into decline, with the exception of a few island states like Cuba, which continues to enjoy an established passenger metro system in La Habana, the Dominican Republic with its Santo Domingo Metro network, and Jamaica, whose service now exclusively facilitates the national bauxite industry.

The cultivation and export of other important crops such as bananas and coffee in the 19th century and early 20th century, together with the 1848 California Gold Rush, also led to the construction of railways in the mainland countries of the Caribbean region. 1855 saw the opening of the Panama Railroad crossing the Isthmus of Panama in what was then Colombia, for the transportation of passengers, gold and other materials, while 1877 heralded the opening of a railway between Puerto San José and Escuintla in Guatemala for transporting bananas. A 410-km long railway was also opened around the same time in Mexico, connecting Mexico City to Port Veracruz on the Pacific Coast for trade, while the US-based United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit Company led other railway projects in Belize and Honduras in the early 1900s.

Recent studies conducted by the Association of Caribbean States and the Inter-American Development Bank examining freight transport and regional port and maritime strategies recommend the improvement of hinterland transport connections so that principal gateway ports may better attend to growing economies located in rural areas, and consequentially reduce trading costs. As “the most important facilitator of the [Latin American and Caribbean] region’s participation in the global market,” according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), maritime transport is responsible for around 90% of international freight traffic. The Greater Caribbean region, which comprises numerous sea-locked nations, is home to 100 ports and over 165 maritime services, with 69 shipping lines and over 640 ships traversing its basin, carrying an annual total in excess of 2 million TEU. With maritime traffic expected to increase following the imminent completion of the Panama Canal expansion, the current construction of the Nicaragua Grand Canal, and several regional port development projects, emphasis has been placed on enhancing regional port competitiveness by improving connections between ports and inland areas. The improvement of such transport linkages would therefore benefit Caribbean maritime trade in economic terms by facilitating the development of the regional logistics chain as well as the global value chain of which ports and the clients that they serve are a key part.

Recognising the need for better hinterland-to-port access, larger mainland countries of the Greater Caribbean with major port hubs are thus using railways as a complement to advancing shipping efficiency and regional competitiveness in sea trade alongside the Nicaragua and Panama Canal developments, through the construction of “dry” canals housing both rail and road transport structures. Colombia’s national coal industry, for example, with an approximate annual output rate of 90 million tonnes, is dependent on rail connections given the distance between ports and inland production sites. Similarly, Honduras is currently investing US $10 billion in building an interoceanic rail line comprising ten railways spanning 600km between the country’s Pacific and Atlantic coasts, with a view to increase freight-handling capacity between two deep-water ports (Isla del Tigre and Puerto Castilla) which will be able to accommodate post-Panamax vessels upon completion in 2030. Guatemala has also embarked on a similar project to construct an interoceanic corridor that will include two freight rail lines alongside a 372-km long highway, connecting two planned ports: San Luis on the Pacific coast and San Jorge on the Atlantic coast. This venture will additionally establish “transfer zones” that would interlink with markets in surrounding countries

such as El Salvador. Likewise, Costa Rica is presently in the process of developing a major transhipment port in the area of Moin, to be later followed by a dry canal housing a high-capacity container railway connecting the port to others on the country's Pacific and Atlantic coasts.

Notwithstanding the fairly short distances to cover in Caribbean island nations, together with significant competition from the trucking industry, railways can help improve port performance by enhancing the links between production sites and ports for trade, particularly in the larger island states, consequently improving hinterland access, reducing shipping time and thus increasing the cost efficiency of port services. Despite its decline in the insular region, rail transport undoubtedly continues to be an important complement to the Greater Caribbean's transport network, whether on a national level or a regional level, acting as a passageway through which extra-regional territories can engage with Caribbean countries and providing a means for intra-regional economic linkages. While the establishment of rail systems may be concentrated in the mainland territories of the Greater Caribbean, and although the extent of regional rail transport systems may not compare to the magnitude of the regional maritime shipping network, the Caribbean rail has not been lost and it has not been forgotten. It is now essential for regional transport stakeholders to understand the role that rail can potentially play in promoting development, both in economic and environmental terms, to secure the Caribbean's future.

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