Connectivity in the Greater Caribbean



Long before the Genoese navigator Cristóbal Colón or Christopher Columbus as we know him, stumbled upon the region in his Spanish-sponsored expedition to Asia, transportation and by extension trade was a flourishing endeavour between the peoples of the Greater Caribbean. With the Caribbean Sea only 350 miles wide, navigation of the region by boat was hardly a foreign concept. The first peoples, the Tainos and the Caribs, had networks running southward from Bahamas through the islands, and northward from what is now Guyana and Venezuela. Trade was an integral part of their culture facilitating not only the exchange of commodities such as pottery, gold and women, but also the creation of alliances.

The trip by Columbus in 1492, and the subsequent development of the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas, changed the scope and nature of transportation throughout the region and indeed the world. The region during this period became a critical transportation hub within the context of the global trade arena, and through continuous port development has remained relevant well into the 20th century.

The issue of connectivity has thus, through the periods of colonialism, independence, and more recently regionalism, continued to be a critical facet of the regional landscape. Underpinned by the ideal of regional cooperation, transport has become a main pillar of the Association of Caribbean States, where it provides a space for the facilitation of trade, investment, and the movement of people between traditionally isolated countries.

The experiences with respect to transportation across the Greater Caribbean are, however, marked by a degree of divergence. In the first instance, there are the islands of the Caribbean, joined by the commonality of colonial heritage, small populations, and in many cases a common language, English, but separated by sea. These economies rely on imports from North America and Asia, and are also heavily dependent on services, such as tourism and off-shore banking for their economic output. Consequently, airlift accessibility into and throughout the region is of prime importance, but admittedly a costly endeavour due to the structural constraint of small size. This reality of ‘smallness’ is then juxtaposed against the larger Hispanophone countries that form the bulk of the 240 million people of the Greater Caribbean. Similarly joined by a common tongue and lying on a contiguous land mass albeit with topographical differences, the large size of the countries in Central and South America has allowed for easier movement of persons and goods through the establishment of viable low cost air transportation links within and between the countries.

Notwithstanding the strict regulatory environment in which they operate and restriction of competition, the nature of the market has led to the agglomeration of Latin American airlines into groups than can benefit from economies of scale and drive down the cost of providing access. The development of Avianca-Taca Group, COPA Group, and LAN Group bear testament to this.

Island governments have taken a different approach. Considering that the economic structure and geography of the islands demand effective service many governments have chosen to maintain publicly owned carriers in an attempt to preserve airlift into their territories, in support of tourism.

Resultantly, with the exception of the recent marriage of Caribbean Airlines and Air Jamaica, airlines that serve the intra-regional and largely island market have remained as separate entities with very little co-operation occurring within the market.

Marine transportation similarly encounters its own set of challenges that are distinct from the issues affecting air transportation in the region. The Caribbean's dependence on maritime transportation for trade is logical given its heritage and the common space of the Caribbean Sea. During the period of colonial rule, regional ports were developed to facilitate the export of bulk commodities to the colonial metropole and the receipt of goods supplied. The changing dynamic of world trade has now revealed that existing port infrastructure will not be able to keep apace with a market that requires bigger and deeper ports to accommodate the new class of vessel which will soon be transiting the Panama Canal. The expansion of the Panama Canal brings with it much interest but also some concerns. Nevertheless, the Greater Caribbean represents a significant potential for additional volumes and trans-shipment activities.

Considering that over 90% of world trade currently travels by sea, some regional states have invested heavily in port infrastructure in a strategic attempt to capitalize on their geographic location by offering their services as global trans-shipment hub port, and sub-regional hub ports. The rest effectively operate as service ports catering to domestic economic needs.

Notwithstanding the concerns that have been raised regarding transportation linkages, Member States of the ACS have recognised the critical relationship between connectivity and development. The outcome of regional cooperation has led to the ACS, embarking on a number of initiatives designed to address some of these vexing transport issues. One of these initiatives, the establishment of an air transport agreement, provides the legal framework in which member countries can enter into negotiations with each other to provide more air service options with a reduction of costs and prices, as well as the provision of more routes This co-operation agreement is expected to complement other tools available such as the CARICOM Multilateral Air Services Agreement (MASA) and the Multilateral Agreement on the Liberation of International Air Transportation (MALIAT).

In the arena of maritime transport, projects such as Maps of Maritime Routes in the Greater Caribbean, seek to provide information on players in the shipping industry and facilitate trade linkages between the countries, while the Caribbean Maritime and Port Strategy seeks to provide a comprehensive strategy for the development of ports across the region. Further projects being addressed by the ACS seek to deal with the issue of marine pollution, and also hope to explore regional maritime passenger services.

Nearly six centuries after Columbus' trip, the region still faces challenges with respect to the future of their economies in the context of global trade. Travel, and by extension trade, within the region is still hampered by a lack of effective and affordable transportation linkages. It must be recognised that without improvement of these services, functional cooperation and by extension the move toward regionalism is certain to falter. The goal of connectivity within the countries of the Greater Caribbean must be addressed as a matter of urgency lest we find our fortunes wash up on the sandy shores of the Caribbean Sea.