UNIVERSITIES AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE GREATER CARIBBEAN

The Association of Caribbean States (ACS) has established among its priorities, to serve as a space for dialogue to create networks of researchers of different Caribbean nationalities, linked to universities, for the purpose of sharing studies and experiences to produce solutions to the major problems suffered by our economy, our society and our culture in general.

There is no doubt that the teaching and research carried out by universities play a pivotal role in the development of the region. It is a well-known fact that the Caribbean faces serious problems, in the midst of a general situation of crisis, which affects some countries more severely than others. With an economy recording alarming debt ratios, with an extremely high vulnerability to situations of disasters stemming from natural phenomena and with pressing needs to diversify their economies, promoting agriculture and achieving acceptable percentages of capital investment in the production sector is imperative.

In view of the complexity of the problems that currently exists, the Caribbean must be capable of studying its own social reality and discovering creative responses. One of the best ways of accomplishing this is by promoting high level studies and research at its universities. We invest large sums of money in higher education institutions, we have a very distinguished body of professors and researchers associated with them and we train a large group of brilliant professionals, however, for strange reasons, much of that capacity is lost in individual work, in light of the absence of regional dialogue.

Let’s take just the island Caribbean as an example. How many universities are there within CARICOM? I recall that when this question was asked barely 15 years ago, as the Colombian Ambassador in Jamaica, the invariable response was that beyond the University of the West Indies, there were a very small number of private universities. Two or three were mentioned at most.

Without delving deeply into their attributes, within CARICOM there are approximately 25 higher education institutions. Besides providing professionalising education, what do they do? Do they invest in research? How many of them have focussed their research on systematic studies on the Caribbean reality in its numerous aspects? With what budget do they work and who are their allies? Beyond worrying their researchers about the publication of a piece in North American and European magazines - a piece that is almost never read by Caribbean decision makers – what more do they do?

I do not doubt that despite the little circulating capital available for research, there are very good studies in each national domain. There are magnificent Jamaican researchers working on Jamaican issues or Trinidadians working on Trinidadian issues and the same in the other islands, but I am certain that among the small group dedicated to national issues, very few are seeking out practical solutions to our problems.

Let's not talk, then, about regional perspectives. That is to say, of glimpses beyond CARICOM that cover the Greater Caribbean, with its islands of varying origins and its continental coasts. For example, if diabetes, hypertension or juvenile asthma are grave problems throughout the Caribbean with their own characteristics, why do we not have researchers from different Caribbean countries sharing their studies in the quest for greater understanding and solutions of scale? Or, in terms of natural disasters, which severely impact the development of Caribbean countries and provoke enormous humanitarian tragedies, why not join efforts? Or simply, study among them all, how to make sustainable tourism more efficient and productive, as a key source of our economy.

In addition to the universities in the CARICOM countries, in the Greater Caribbean we have universities in Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Cuba, the French Overseas Departments and throughout Central America, with world-class researchers studying similar problems, immersed also in their national issues, with whom the members of CARICOM could team up and collaborate on comparative works of tremendous value in order to formulate more complete solutions.

The ACS is of the view that it is necessary to promote networks of Greater Caribbean researchers based on regional dialogue that would promote the building of knowledge for the economic, social and cultural progress of its countries. Along that vein, it facilitated the recent meeting held in August, of the Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, Professor E. Nigel Harris, with rectors of the universities in Colombia, in the framework of the 11th International Seminar on Caribbean Studies. During the course of said meeting, it was presented as an initial task, the assembling in Jamaica, of researchers from the West Indies and from Colombian universities. It would be ideal if this activity could be undertaken with the remaining countries of the Greater Caribbean.

How to promote productivity through capital investment, diversify our economy, defend ourselves

against natural disasters, consolidate sustainable tourism and improve health conditions, are just a few of the issues on which the networks of researchers can share experiences and provide valuable knowledge for the sound performance of our nations. Our cultural expressions, so similar and so rich in creativity, are vitally important for the economy of the Caribbean islands, based, almost all of them, on tourism. They are equally important for our identity as Caribbean peoples. This is another area in which we can benefit from the collective dialogue of researchers, scholars of the cultures of the Greater Caribbean.