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National Development Programme - Constraints to the development of Guyana

By Kenneth King

I was impressed by several circumstances during the course of the preparation of the **National Development Strategy** (NDS). Those that moved me most, however, were, first, the fact that nearly two hundred Guyanese of different hues, races, religions and political persuasions were able to work together over a period of eighteen months in a common endeavour. Despite the many difficulties which they faced, they persisted in their tasks because they were all convinced that the exercise in which they were engaged could make a small contribution to the development of their country. If the NDS does nothing else but instill in Guyanese the certainty that they are capable of cooperating with each other, it would have justified the considerable amount of effort that was put into it.

The second factor which gave me much gratification was the conviction that was shared by all participants that Guyana, with sound policies and efficient management, could be revitalized in such a way that all its citizens could earn comfortable livelihoods, and enjoy acceptable standards of living.

Those who shared in the formulation of the NDS were neither starry-eyed nor naive. All the drafters of the document thoroughly understood the difficulties that were inherent in managing a country such as Guyana, and were acutely aware of the current constraints to the country's development. Indeed, they identified a number of problems which had to be solved before Guyana could even begin to be transformed into a viable economy.

First, as has been touched upon in the last article in this series, is the inadequacy of the transport infrastructure. Guyana has one of the lowest road densities in the entire world. Moreover, the few roads which it possesses are mainly concentrated on its narrow coastal belt. Not surprisingly, therefore, its hinterland, in which lies its forest and mineral wealth, remains largely untapped. There is no natural deep-water harbour and the mouths of the country's major rivers have continuously to be desilted. As a result, only ships of shallow draught can enter its ports, and only when the tides are high. The costs of producing most of our raw material are, therefore, inordinately high. Indeed, most of our products are either uncompetitive or yield relatively low margins of profit.

Second is the state of our utilities. Although the telephonic sector has improved somewhat in recent years, its coverage of the country is still relatively sparse. It would be difficult, therefore, fully to grasp the opportunities that are becoming available in

Information Technology, if steps are not quickly taken to restructure and modernise it. The difficulties of the telephonic system pale into significance when compared to the inadequacies of the country's electricity supplies. Because the cost of electricity is extremely high, and because its supply is erratic, our fledging industries are made less competitive than they might otherwise have been.

The fact that the coastal agricultural belt of the country is below sea level contributes to the third set of constraints, because a relatively high proportion of the government's revenue has to be spent on the construction and maintenance of sea defence structures and elaborate drainage systems. This means, of course, that sufficient government financial resources are often not available for expenditure on many aspects of our social development, such as health and education.

Fourth, is the obsolescent nature of many of our institutions: a land tenure system which could be used as a model in a university to illustrate what principles and practices should be avoided in the modern world; a public service which has not been seriously reformed since colonial times and is now incapable, as currently structured and staffed, of creating an environment in which the private sector might flourish; a public service which is deficient in the skills of policy reform and policy analysis; and a judicial system that is not only unsupported by modern technology, but which also does not seem to appreciate that one of the reasons for the permanent underdevelopment of poor countries such as ours has been their failure to ensure that the basic legal framework of liberalised economies are provided. As the NDS document clearly states: "The vigour of the market place depends in large part on the establishment of an environment in which legal rights, especially property and contractual rights, are enforced and protected."

Fifth, Guyana does not possess a critical mass of professionals, specialists, craftspersons and entrepreneurs in virtually any sector of its economy. The problem is particularly severe in respect of teachers of all grades of training and education, scientists, technologists, and information technology experts. The country is particularly short, also, of policy analysts and personnel with the capacity to negotiate agreements with the multinationals and other financiers.

These are just a sample of the constraints to our development, which have been identified by the framers of the National Development Strategy. They are put together here not to alarm and depress, but to emphasise that they have been unflinchingly addressed in the document.

Indeed, strategies have been presented in the NDS for overcoming all the obstacles to economic development which have been adumbrated here. These strategies will be described in future articles of this series. The NDS team acknowledged, however, that it would be impossible to attain the goals and objectives it had established if the country remained divided into two opposing camps; if its political leaders failed to understand that the cleavages in our society were essentially racial, and not class-based in origin; and unless the leaders of our society, by some fortunate quirk of nature, could be released

from the high states of denial that they now seem to experience, and unabashedly confront and attempt to solve the problems which pervade our several communities.

The NDS asserts that the strategy "has been informed by two basic considerations: First, that we could considerably assist in removing the scourge of racism from our land, if we developed and put into practice inclusive systems of governance in which all would feel that they have a stake, in which all would know that they are involved, and in which there were established both procedures and penalties to ensure transparency and accountability. Second, that a considerable amount of harmony would prevail in our country, if we were able to formulate and implement social and economic policies which would lead not only to significant economic growth, but also to the wide distribution of the benefits of such growth among the population, no matter in what district they are located and to what racial group they belong.

In order to achieve the goals of the NDS, the constraints to our development that are occasioned by the racial imbalances which exist in our society, and which manifest themselves at every election, when the spoils of power are being competed for, must be removed. This is not a fanciful proposal born of the tension which now exists in Guyana. Serious analyses of the development of poor countries, conducted over the past fifteen years, have clearly demonstrated, among other things, that no country that is ethnically or racially divided seems able to remove itself from its poverty-stricken status, unless it consciously and successfully puts in place laws and institutions that reduce the opportunities for racial conflict. Mere exhortations to citizens to mend their ways have not been effective. It is worth repeating that those racially/ethnically divided countries, which have been able to develop socially and economically, have deliberately enacted laws and changed their constitutions in order to achieve equity among their different racial and ethnic groups. They have established institutions to enforce the laws.

It is equally evident that the Westminster model has not worked in any multi-ethnic or multi-racial society where it has been allowed to persist in an unmodified manner. Such countries have either remained, or have become poor, or cannot sustain the rare episodes of growth which they sometimes experience. Such countries, moreover, tend to have much more than their normal share of unrest, demonstrations and violence. This is not to deny that there are certain fundamentals which it is now generally acknowledged should be enshrined in all constitutions. However, the constitutions of all successful nation states have evolved, and have been changed, over time. The constitution of the United States of America is an obvious example of this categorical imperative to change. The amendments which the Americans have made to their constitution, ever since its first signing, taken together with the varying interpretations which have been made by its Supreme Court of identical articles, is a reflection of that country's profound appreciation of the necessity to mould its laws to the nation's socio-economic conditions.

It is for these reasons that the NDS calls for a continuous review of our constitution, especially by civil society, with a view to attaining that degree of racial harmony which all agree is a precondition for investment and which, in turn, is a necessity if we are to remove poverty from our midst.