

For a Caribbean Service Corps

Norman Girvan

Kamla controversy

Mrs Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, provoked a firestorm of controversy with her statement that her country would also have to benefit from whatever assistance its government provides to its storm-ravaged neighbours¹. The statement was widely regarded, both regionally and in Trinidad and Tobago itself, as having been inappropriate, insensitive and badly timed. A subsequent release², while clarifying the policy somewhat, hardly laid the controversy to rest. The Prime Minister has since offered an outright apology³. She is to be commended for this; although some believe that the damage has already been done.

Specifics of the controversy aside, it raises the question of appropriate modalities of disaster assistance; and what is, or ought to be, the Caricom policy in this regard. In one of the many commentaries⁴ on the Prime Minister's statement, for example, Dr. Patsy Lewis of SALISES at the University of the West Indies, has pointed to the need for a regional disaster fund. On the face of it this is a good idea, although the feasibility of such a fund has been questioned by another commentator⁵.

1 No Free Help, Trinidad and Tobago Express, 1/11/2010;

http://www.trinidadexpress.com/news/NO_FREE_HELP-106494413.html. For selected media commentaries, go to <http://www.normangirvan.info/epa-csme-la-media-watch/>

2 Lending a Helping Hand, by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Trinidad Express, 6/11/2010;

<http://www.trinidadexpress.com/commentaries/Lending-a-helping-hand-106809298.html>

³ 'I Apologise' – Kamla to Caricom on Tomas statement, Trinidad Express 17 November 2010; <http://www.trinidadexpress.com/news/ I Apologise -108575699.html>

4 <http://www.normangirvan.info/caricom-needs-a-meaningful-regional-disaster-strategy-patsy-lewis>

5 Mr Luis Carpio, former Director responsible for Natural Disasters in the Secretariat of the Association States. His comment is at

<http://www.normangirvan.info/caricom-needs-a-meaningful-regional-disaster-strategy-patsy-lewis/#comment-9813/>

Modalities of disaster assistance

We start by noting that cash donations, untied to donor country supplies, is in fact one of the modalities of response to humanitarian disasters. Hence, the statement that 'all countries tie their assistance' may be true, but not the whole truth (statements to this effect were frequently offered in defence of the Prime Minister). One difficulty encountered in examining this question is that many reports and pledges of relief assistance in response for humanitarian emergencies often fail to indicate the form in which aid will be provided. Another is that not everything that is pledged is actually delivered. Nonetheless, a cursory examination indicates that humanitarian assistance typically consist of a mixture of cash donations, direct provision of emergency supplies in kind, and pledges of long-term assistance (in which 'tied aid' probably predominates).

Cash donations are made directly to the governments concerned, or through international bodies such as UN agencies like UNICEF, The World Food Programme, the World Food Programme and the International Red Cross. In 2008 'non-DAC' (i.e. non-traditional) donors were estimated to make over \$900 million in cash donations for humanitarian assistance⁶, which was 77% of their total contributions. In response to the Haitian earthquake the EU reportedly pledged €122 million in humanitarian assistance 'to be distributed via UN agencies, international NGOs and the Red Cross'⁷. The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) pledged \$300 million in humanitarian assistance, of which \$100 million 'will be paid before the end' of 2010⁸. Venezuela's pledge at the Haiti donor conference in March included \$100 million through the ALBA Bank, and \$37.2 million through UNASUR⁹. Funds through the ALBA Bank are not, as far as I know, tied to Venezuelan goods and services¹⁰.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan in 2004, the government of Trinidad and Tobago announced cash donations for relief to several regional countries. In response to

⁶ Source: *Diversity in Donorship: Field Lessons*; edited by Adele Harmer and Ellen Martin; London: Overseas Development Institute; Humanitarian Policy Group, Report # 30; March 2010. <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/4802.pdf>; pages 2 and 11; accessed November 15, 2010. "Non-DAC" donors are non-members of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (O.E.C.D.), which consists mainly of the rich countries. The largest non-DAC donors were Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanitarian_response_to_the_2010_Haiti_earthquake

⁸ <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/haiti-quake-aid-acp.5ye>.

⁹ Venezuelan Pledge Statement at the Haiti donor conference, retrieved 13 April, 2010 from <<http://www.haiticonference.org/pledges-statements.html>>

¹⁰ For example, in June 2009 the government of St Kitts and Nevis announced approval of a \$50 million loan from the ALBA Bank, of which \$10 million was for 'immediate disbursement'.

the Haitian earthquake, the governments of Trinidad and Tobago and of Guyana both announced relief contributions of US\$1 million; the assumptions at the time being that these were to be in cash¹¹. It was precisely in order to differentiate her government's 'new' policy from this previous practice, that t Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago made the statement that proved so controversial¹².

Cuban disaster aid

Another observation relates to the form of Cuban assistance, since it is often said that Cuba is one of the countries that 'ties' its disaster relief to own-country goods and services. Again, such a statement can be misleading, insofar as it overlooks issues of form and of capacity. Here, one may introduce a distinction between 'tied aid' and *in-kind assistance*. Tied aid generally refers to the allocation of a sum of money by the donor government, which is available only for the purchase of goods and services sourced from the donor country. The purchase may be made by a relief agency in the donor country, or an agency—government or NGO--in the recipient country. Such aid directly benefits businesses in the donor country, as well as—in theory--providing the recipient country with needed supplies of goods and services. This is the model which Trinidad and Tobago is now proposing to adopt; and which Caricom has apparently embraced vis-a-vis Haiti (I take up this point below).

In-kind assistance, on the other hand, may involve transactions of a non-commercial nature; and this is where Cuban assistance tends to predominate. Such assistance is often characterised as 'solidarity' and responds to an ethic of international humanitarianism. In the case of Haiti, Cuban doctors and health care workers had been working in Haiti already for 12 years at the time of the earthquake; currently there are reportedly 800 Cuban health care professionals working in that country. It is not known what portion, if any, of the costs are borne by the Haitian government; but given the parlous state of its public finances it is unlikely that this could be more than a token amount, and certainly not the full cost. At the March Donor Conference on Haiti, Cuba announced its programme for building (not rebuilding) the entire Haitian health care system at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The primary level will include 101 clinics, the

¹¹See http://www.caricom.org/jsp/communications/caricom_support_haiti/relief_efforts.jsp. The same source reported that Caribbean Development Bank would provide US\$200,000 for portable water, food, medicines and temporary shelter and US\$500,000 towards the restoration of critical facilities and services

¹² Further details of the policy were provided in [Lending a Helping Hand](#), by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Trinidad Express, 6/11/2010

secondary level will be provided through 30 community hospitals; and the tertiary level through the Haitian Specialties Hospital, staffed by 80 Cuban specialists¹³.

A key feature is that sustainability of the system is built into its design, by means of the provision of 312 additional medical scholarships for Haitian students to study in Cuba. Furthermore, the programme is to be executed in cooperation with the Haitian authorities (an example of how this works in practice is given by the account of the Argentine doctor working with the Cuban Medical Brigade¹⁴). The Cuban estimate the value of this assistance over a ten-year period at \$690.5 million—using 50 percent of international prices for services of this kind. In a separate calculation, I reckoned that in relation to their respective GNP/GDPs, the Cuban pledge is 152 times that of the United States.

The other matter to take into account is the capacity to give assistance in different forms. Leading the capacity to donate in cash (i.e. hard currency) are the developed countries, of course, since their national currencies are almost always convertible; and the energy-exporting countries, which have huge currency reserves. This is not, clearly, the case with Cuba, which has suffered the crippling effects of a US embargo on its hard currency earnings for the past 48 years. The embargo has cost the Cuban economy, even by the most conservative estimates, over \$100 billion in current prices, which is the equivalent of 179 percent of the annual Cuban GNP. Cuba, however, has a substantial human resource capacity in the provision of health and education services (how much is actually 'surplus' to domestic needs is itself a matter of debate within the country). The Cuban model of disaster assistance, then, evidently responds to the mix of its domestic human resource capacities.

Caricom policy

Information on the content and extent of Caricom's post-earthquake assistance to Haiti is at best fragmentary, consisting of newspaper reports and terse official announcements. Shortly after the quake, Caricom established a presence at the district of Leogane, which was a base of emergency medical assistance provided by Caricom doctors. However, it was reported that there was a problem in financing the continuation of this service beyond the end of March; as the member states could not--or would not--come up with the necessary funds. At the March Haiti Donor Conference, Caricom announced that, in response to a request from the

¹³ more details at <http://www.normangirvan.info/selective-commendation-indignation-cuba-kirks-girvan/>

¹⁴ <http://www.normangirvan.info/whats-happening-in-haiti-emiliano-mariscal/>

Preval Administration, it would switch the form of its assistance to direct budgetary support for the Haitian government. The Leogane facility was therefore closed. There have been no reports as to how much, if any, of the promised budgetary support, was actually paid over.

The change in policy by the Trinidad and Tobago government, whereby its contribution to the Haitian relief effort would now take the form of goods and services supplied by local businesses, came shortly after the election of late May 2010. At the time, I remember a prominent spokesperson of the Trinidad and Tobago private sector defending the new policy on TV on the grounds that “other donor countries do it, so why shouldn’t we?” It was evident that there was a strong private sector lobby behind the change in policy. The context of this is that the Trinidad and Tobago economy was in recession, the country’s exports to the Caricom market had plunged as a result of the impact of the global crisis on other Caricom economies; and the construction sector was on a downturn, as the government had imposed a freeze on the payment of bills. The new policy, therefore, made domestic economic and political sense. Nonetheless, the political implications of shifting from untied to tied assistance—from humanitarianism and solidarity to seeking commercial opportunities as the underlying principle, so to speak—seem not to have been taken into account. There is a sense in which the new policy came uncomfortably close to profiting from the distress of the Haitian people. One can now see that it contained the seeds of the present controversy; in that the same principle was announced while the reports and images of devastation in Barbados, St. Lucia and St. Vincent were still trickling out.

In any case, shortly after the new policy was announced, the local media reported that P.J. Patterson, Caricom’s specially appointed Ambassador for Haitian affairs attended a Caricom-sponsored meeting in Trinidad and Tobago with representatives of the private sector; whose purpose was to identify ways in which Caricom businesses could participate in Haitian reconstruction efforts. I recall that mention was made of securing a specific quota of the billions of dollars to be spent in the reconstruction effort. Patterson further elaborated on this strategy in an extended presentation to the Caricom Heads of Government at their summit in Montego Bay in July 2010; and in his Eric Williams Memorial Lecture delivered in Miami in October¹⁵. By design or default, therefore, this appears to be a central plank, if not *the* central plank--of Caricom’s post-earthquake Haiti policy. In effect the two objectives--using Caricom assistance as a tool of commercial policy and securing a slice of the much bigger (\$10 billion) reconstruction pie for Caricom businesses—have melded, with a common underlying principle.

¹⁵ Andy Johnson, [Helping Haiti, Helping Ourselves](#), Trinidad Express, 15/07/2010); and again in Patterson’s Eric Williams Memorial Lecture delivered in Florida in October 2010 ;(<http://www.normangirvan.info/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/pj-patterson-the-renaissance-of-haiti.htm>).

To be sure, the policy has been presented as part of a larger goal of supporting a 'Haitian Renaissance; one which is led by the Haitian government and people themselves. This is a lofty objective which doubtless has the support of everyone. The marrying of commercial policy with humanitarian and social reconstruction objectives is at best an uneasy one, however. One contradiction is that the policy calls for business alliances with a local elite that is widely perceived to be predatory and cares nothing for the mass of the Haitian people. In other words, it raises the wider question of the social agents *within* Haitian society which are the most appropriate partners for the Caricom assistance effort; and the criteria by which this selection should be made. Here one is reminded of a *Statement by the coordinating committee of progressive organizations* in Haiti issued shortly after the earthquake, calling for "the emergence of international brigades working together with our organizations in the struggle to carry out agrarian reform and an integrated urban land reform program, the struggle against illiteracy and for reforestation, and for the construction of new modern, decentralized and universal systems of education and public health"¹⁶.

This cursory review has dealt only with Caricom's official policy. It has not been possible to review the many other non-governmental initiatives which sprung up in Caricom countries, more or less simultaneously, to provide assistance to victims of the Haitian disaster. No central clearing house of information on these initiatives exists. Apart from many fund-raising efforts and transport of emergency supplies, mention may be made of the programme of the University of the West Indies for support of the (re) building of the Haitian tertiary education sector, and in the area of architectural and engineering services for the design of earthquake-proof structures¹⁷.

To summarise, Caricom's official policy has morphed from (i) direct relief in kind to (ii) cash contribution for budgetary support to (iii) 'tied aid' with the two-fold aim of helping Haiti rebuild and helping the Caricom private sector, and in particular that of Trinidad and Tobago, out of its present difficulties, and well as (iv) securing a share of the Haitian reconstruction business as a whole. As such, it appears to have evolved in a relatively ad hoc manner, which has responded as much to financial constraints and to domestic economic and political pressures as to Haitian needs.

¹⁶ Cited in Beverly Bell, "Beyond Disaster Aid to Solidarity", <http://www.commondreams.org/print/52822>

¹⁷ E. Nigel Harris, "Haiti, CARICOM and the UWI: Rising to the Challenge", <http://www.normangirvan.info/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/harris-haiti-caricom-uwi.pdf>

For a Caribbean Service Corps

In the final section of this commentary I want to suggest a form of support for Haiti that (i) reaches the Haitian people where it will make a tangible difference; (ii) will have a 'reverse educational' effect on young Caribbean people, and (iii) could be relatively low-cost. The modality I am thinking of is **the mobilisation of young volunteer Caribbeans—including especially Creole speaking young people from St Lucia and Dominica—to help rebuild the Haitian primary and secondary education system.**

This suggested modality responds to the appeal from Haitian progressive organisations cited above. It has its precedents in the Cuban model of assistance for the Haitian health care system, and in the philosophy underlying the U.S. Peace Corps initiated by President Kennedy. It is also inspired by a suggestion advanced in 2007 by Havelock Brewster, in a paper appropriately titled "Time to Take in the Begging Bowl"¹⁸.

It could be a relatively economical way to help—the young people would not have to stay in 5 star hotels, but they would need safe, sanitary accommodation--it would reach ordinary Haitians. It would have the added advantage of giving the Caribbean volunteers people a 'Haitian' experience that would aid enhanced mutual understanding between Haiti and the rest of Caricom—even if over the long-term. (Many former U.S Peace Corps volunteers went on to occupy influential policy-making positions in the government; just as Caribbeans trained in Cuba now form an important group aiding understanding and solidarity with Cuba.)

It will be said that the majority of young people of the present generation would likely be averse to such volunteerism; being of an individualistic and consumerist orientation. But such programmes have always relied on the conscious, idealistic few who are motivated, and who often go on to assume leadership roles in their home societies. In any case, it would not be necessary to start with more than a small number, as there will be a 'learning period' (and learning curve) of any endeavour of this kind.

There are of course, several organisational and financial issues that would need to be addressed. It would probably be best for such an initiative to be organised by one, or perhaps a number, of non-state service organisations; and seeking to capitalise on fund of goodwill and feeling of solidarity for Haiti that resides among a

¹⁸Available at <http://www.normangirvan.info/understanding-development-challenges-in-the-caribbean>

significant section of the Caricom population. Surely some financing could be found from among the various funds raised for Haiti and from private sector and other sources. The initiative could possibly be organised as an adjunct to the UWI programme, which is directed to the tertiary education sector. It would not, therefore, have to rely on the Caricom bureaucracy for its implementation. But it would almost certainly count on official Caricom endorsement; since it would help to give a human face to the interaction with Haiti.

And finally, such a Caribbean Service Corps might well serve as a model for assistance for similar disasters affecting other members of the Caricom family—and these disasters are certain to occur with increasing frequency in the future.

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