

Reflections on the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful. Margaret J. Wheatley

The Covid-19 pandemic is being described as fighting a war against an invisible enemy. The war is lethal in terms of lives lost; and is having a severe impact on the economies. After each battle, it is necessary to debrief, to undertake an assessment of the status quo in preparation for the next battle.

The pandemic continues and is destroying both lives and livelihood. In 2020, incomes were drastically reduced and are likely to be further reduced in 2021 with the associated elevated unemployment and poverty. With over sixty [60] Covid related deaths and the rapid spread of the virus to over two thousand, six hundred [2,600] persons within one month, both lives and livelihood are being lost. It is therefore necessary to address both lives and livelihood simultaneously. They cannot be separated.

Following the initial phase of the Covid-19 battle, there was adequate time to reflect and prepare for the onslaught of the next phase. While attention is now placed on aggressively protecting lives and livelihood, there must be an element of reflection as a basis for charting the way forward. The following is extracted, in part, from a previously published article entitled 'Reflections from the Covid-19 Global Crisis'. This is applicable in addressing the current phase of the pandemic while charting the way forward. On reflection it is obvious that:

Globalization is not only a concept; it is real. The integration of the economies through trade, investment, and travel (TIT) was vividly manifested. All aspects of the impact of Covid-19 were transmitted globally. This was further facilitated by instant electronic communication. Electronic communication platforms allowed for the real time transmission of information which required the synchronization of information sharing. This proved to be an impossible task.

Regional integration was left wanting when it was most needed. Regional integration arrangements were established as early as 1965, with the Caribbean Free Trade Agreement (CARIFTA), to assist small Caribbean economies to be competitive through trade facilitation.

The integration process was further strengthened in 1973 with the establishment of CARICOM to support the development of its member countries. Recognizing their extreme vulnerability, the OECS Economic Union was established in 2010 for the harmonization of policies and the free movement of labour and capital in the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union.

The principles of regional integration were not practiced during the crisis. This was manifested in the absence of a coherent and common approach for treating with the Covid-19 crisis. It was visible in the different approaches adopted by countries to tourism, and in particular, the cruise ship industry. The resolving of the issues between Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago on the treatment of travelling Trinidad and Tobago nationals; and the exchanges between Grenada and St Vincent and the Grenadines on trading in the Grenadines during the crisis are instructive. Regionalism may have worked with respect to procurement of health supplies and with regional testing to some extent but overall, a lot more is desired.

Significant shortcomings in the present economic models of development have emerged. A major indictment of this model is the proportion of the population without savings to sustain them for short periods without income, coupled with their lack of access to social security benefits, inadequate health services and substandard housing and other living conditions. The economic models of development need to be revisited. In the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union (ECCU), the economies are heavily dependent on tourism, which is known to be vulnerable to external shocks. The other main sectors or sources of financial inflows are financial services and citizenship by investment or the sale of passport. Construction activity is also related to these financial inflows. The economies are therefore severely impacted by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

While this recession is unique, it highlights the need to strike a balance between inward and outward looking strategies; and to carefully scrutinize policies of trade liberalization and other internationally synchronized policies.

The informal sector landed in “no man’s land”. In all the economies of the ECCU, there is an important, informal sector whose contribution to national output is unknown. Many of the numerous players in this informal sector are not registered in the institutional system such as the financial institutions, national insurance schemes, private insurance, and/or government departments or agencies. They fall through a wide crack when addressing the impact of the crisis. Other vulnerable groups, though not included in the informal sector, are the poor, elderly, and the physically and mentally challenged who are also falling into the crack.

Inclusiveness in nation building needs to be more than pronouncements. The pillars of good governance seem to be shaky. Institutional arrangements for inclusiveness in times of a national crisis appeared to be either non-existent, non-operational, or ad hoc. It is critical that genuine concern for each citizen be displayed during normal times, and this will make it easier for citizens to bind together during crisis.

Preparedness for disasters ought to be enhanced. The countries of the ECCU are frequently impacted by tropical storms and hurricanes which have resulted in the destruction of economic and social assets, and loss of lives. International and regional agencies are working with Member States in preparing national disaster plans and the establishment of disaster response agencies. The focus of these plans has been on climate related disasters. Epidemics, although occurring frequently, are generally excluded. The scope of disaster planning and preparedness must be broadened, incorporating an all-hazard strategy.

It is important for technological advancement to be accompanied with deeper technological penetration. The current widespread use of electronic communication for all aspects of life has essentially excluded members of the population without such access. This has implications for their participation in, among other things, commerce, and education.

It is undoubtable that a new economy is in the making. A reflection on the experiences will inform the path to the transformation of the economies of the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union (ECCU) and Grenada in particular.

Knowledge is power and experience is the greatest teacher.

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