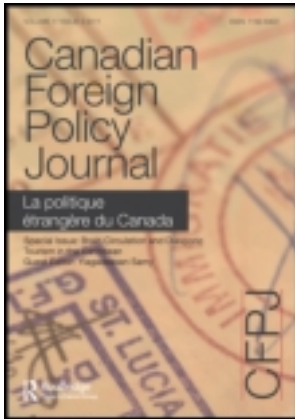


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Canadian Foreign Policy Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcfp20>

“Beyond Remittancing” : An investigation of the role of ICTs in facilitating and extending the diaspora's contribution to the Caribbean

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Available online: 16 Nov 2011

To cite this article: Indianna D. Minto-Coy (2011): “Beyond Remittancing” : An investigation of the role of ICTs in facilitating and extending the diaspora's contribution to the Caribbean, Canadian Foreign Policy Journal, 17:2, 129-141

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2011.607021>

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“Beyond Remittancing”: An investigation of the role of ICTs in facilitating and extending the diaspora’s contribution to the Caribbean

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Keywords: Telecoms; ICTs; diaspora; Remittancing

Introduction

Diasporas are increasingly recognized as important development partners for their countries of origin, with the term “diaspora option” (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 3; Ionescu 2005, p. 130) being used to capture this idea. Speaking of the Caribbean and Latin America, Orozco highlights ‘five Ts’ – areas in which diasporas have impacted the region. They are tourism, transportation, telecommunications, trade and the transmission of monetary remittances (2003). However, coverage of these areas has not been even with the mass of attention focusing on remittancing. This is understandable, since remittancing is one of the oldest and most visible forms of contribution. Among the least considered areas are telecommunications and more generally, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), though it has been accepted that important gains can be secured from increasing diasporic involvement in this area (Gueron and Spevacek, 2008 p. 7).

This article assesses the ways in which telecoms can facilitate and advance the Caribbean diaspora’s relationship with the region, with the term ‘telecoms-mediated diasporic engagement’ (TMDE) being used to capture this notion. It is proposed that telecoms be seen as a means and an end. That is, not only in helping to consolidate and extend more traditional forms of engagement (e.g., remittancing and welfare assistance) but also in advancing telecoms use, knowledge and infrastructure. This is important in helping to redress the ill effects of migration and moving the region towards a more constructive engagement based on brain circulation and brain gain.

An investigation of TMDE is timely given growing attention within the Caribbean, its international development partners and research community on ways in which the diaspora’s contribution can be diversified and extended. This is part of an ongoing search for development options (Minto-Coy 2010a, p. 2). The Caribbean has also had a sustained experience with migration,

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having long been integrated into world trade and migratory patterns through colonization, the sugar trade, and slavery. According to Foner, the region has been, 'more deeply and continuously affected by migration than any other region in the world' (1998, p. 47). Recent migratory patterns have also seen the Caribbean emerging with one of the highest rates of migration of its educated professionals – 82 per cent in Jamaica and 85 per cent for Guyana (Docquier and Marfouq 2004).

The diaspora's contribution has been largely economic, amply illustrated in the growing share of remittances compared to GDP. In 2007, remittances accounted for 15.7, 8 and 30 per cent of GDP for Jamaica, Dominica and Haiti and 24 per cent for Guyana in 2008 (UNDP 2009; Abrams 2010; Minto-Coy, 2010a). However, as the global financial crisis has demonstrated, while showing some resilience, remittances are susceptible to economic shocks (Alexander 2010, p. 18; Minto-Coy, 2010a). Moreover, Mishra contends that remittances do not cover losses from the migration of the most skilled (2006, p. 28). Thus, notwithstanding the benefits of remittances, future engagement between the Caribbean and its diaspora must involve some attempt to 'get beyond remittancing'. This is not a judgement about the significance of this form of engagement but about finding ways of adding value to remittances and diversifying the ways in which the region engages with its diaspora with TMDE being a vital part of this rethink. Indeed, other countries have acknowledged the potential here and have sought to convert this into reality (see, UNIFEM 2005; Barton 2010).

One of the arguments being made is that diaspora exchange and the circulation of resources between the Caribbean and its diaspora is not only about the physical movement of people to (or from) the region but about the exchange of resources and the diaspora's ability to contribute where they are. Here telecoms and ICTs have a distance-reducing effect, mitigating the need for physical (re)location. Telecoms and the services that it has given rise to, facilitate communication, information sharing and networking across groups, time, space and sectors. Through telecoms the diaspora has the potential to extend knowledge sharing, reduce the digital divide, encourage new forms of interaction, while advancing its developmental impact across the Caribbean. Telecoms is also a tradable commodity offering the region and its diaspora opportunities for earnings and the distribution and collection of such earnings. There is, therefore, need for an investigation of the ways in which telecoms can more generally, act as a tool for more active and entrepreneurial engagement across the Caribbean and its diaspora.

The work is largely exploratory with information coming mainly from field study visits and elite interviews in the United Kingdom, Canada, Barbados and Jamaica. Semi-structured interviews were particularly useful given that while material on ICTs and development (e.g., Dunn and Minto-Coy 2010, 2011) and diasporas and development (Nurse, 2004; Minto, 2009a; Abrams, 2010; Minto-Coy, 2010a) is burgeoning, that which intersects the two areas is much sparser for the Caribbean. Questions were tailored to the different audiences based on knowledge of telecoms and ICTs and sought to identify the general patterns and uses of telecoms in the diaspora, the state of engagement and the ways in which the diaspora featured in telecoms. Interview questions were open-ended to allow flexibility, fuller articulation of thoughts and in-depth responses in what is a largely uncharted area. Some countries and diaspora groups feature more than others (e.g., Jamaica and Dominica). True to the nature of the study, the telephone and the Internet offered significant means of accessing and capturing the views of a more diverse audience (e.g., entrepreneurs, diaspora organizations, and companies utilizing telecoms in their businesses). Interviews, follow-up sessions and networking took place through these sources, reducing the overall cost of travel. Primary methods were bolstered by desk research.

The discussion next reflects on past telecoms-diaspora links, then reviews the state of telecoms in the Caribbean, laying the foundation for a presentation of the current state of TMDE. The latter relies largely on information gathered from the interviews. Challenges to effecting greater TMDE and ways of overcoming these are then assessed. The article ends with a brief conclusion.

Telecoms Mediated Diasporic Engagement (TMDE): A historical perspective

Telecoms has been an enabler and facilitator of the Caribbean's transnational relationships from as early as 1878 with the establishment of the West India Telegraph and Telephone Company (later, Cable and Wireless – C&W). The diaspora has historically had a presence in this development. For example, most of C&W's profits in the 1980s came from the international segment of the market, thanks to revenues from international carriers for calls terminating in the region (Minto 2009b, pp. 39, 54). C&W's income helped to make the region the most profitable in the transnational company's empire with its Jamaican arm becoming the firm with the largest annual turnover in the region, the largest corporate tax payer, a major foreign exchange earner, and top employer (Deane 1998; Dunn and Gooden 1998; Minto 2009b). While tourism accounted for some of this traffic, the diaspora has some responsibility here (Brown 2003, p. 49) with calls coming largely from the main diaspora markets (United States, Canada and the United Kingdom) (Dunn and Gooden 1998, pp. 36–37).

Beyond this less considered avenue of engagement is the reality that the diaspora has helped to modernize and improve access to ICTs. In some communities, introduction to the telephone or a computer has been facilitated by the diaspora sending the device or funds to acquire such technology. In this way the diaspora has acted as vectors of innovation, introducing and easing access to technology available in host countries.

Thus, the diaspora has historically been a silent partner (Minto, 2009c) to the region, playing a critical, yet largely unseen role in the sector. Through telecoms it has directly or indirectly contributed to regional economies through trade, foreign exchange, job creation, social pricing and increased access to telecoms.

Current state of telecommunications in the Caribbean

Since the start of 2000 many of the communications markets in the Caribbean have been liberalized, with competition being introduced in most areas. The result has been greater choice and a shift in the status quo. Age old monopolies and liberal licence terms, which provided little incentives to innovate, increase efficiency, or advance infrastructure (Payton 2003, p. 101; Minto 2009b) have been uprooted.

Access has increased significantly, thanks largely to the growth of mobile telephony. Waiting lists for fixed telephone lines have since reduced while the rural–urban and regional telecoms divide have also improved. Access to mobile technologies, such as smart phones has also increased and operators such as Digicel now offer 4G services. Cable and Wireless (now Lime) has since 2010 also introduced mobile television in Jamaica.

Investments have also risen with telecoms making a notable contribution to the GDPs of many countries (Figure 1). Haiti stands out here, with the mobile operator Digicel investing over US\$370 million, from 2005 to 2010. Digicel's contribution to overall GDP was estimated at 20 per cent between 2005 and 2007, representing 1.12 per cent of a 5.6 per cent GDP growth over the same period. The Company's arrival has been viewed as the 'single most important foreign direct investment in the country's history' (Barberousse et al. 2010, p. 27). The sector also accounts for close to 1000 direct and 60,000 indirect jobs in 2008 (Barberousse et al. 2010, p. 27).

The motivation for reform has been both internal and external (see, Lodge and Stirton 2002; Minto 2009b). More recently, the Economic Partnership Agreement between the European Union and Cariforum has provided a further push for liberalization. Indeed, this point is significant as it demonstrates the important role that multilateral agreements and international development partners (here, the diaspora and their networks, e.g., private sector and governments, in the host country) can play in helping the Caribbean to introduce reforms that may not otherwise have been undertaken.

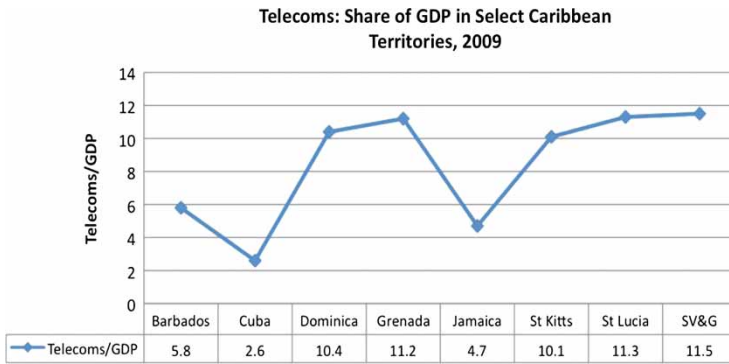


Figure 1. Telecoms: Share of GDP in select Caribbean territories, 2009

The uses of telecoms and ICTs have also diversified, with e- and mobile banking, and e-government now changing (though not yet revolutionizing) the ways in which customers interact with business and government. Other interesting intersections include the still emerging use of telecommunications in risk managing natural disasters.

This is not to suggest that all is well with telecoms in the Caribbean. While gains have been made, the market remains underdeveloped. The region has still fully to take advantage of the benefits of regulatory reform and liberalization as it relates to assisting in economic diversification, reducing informalism, the cost of doing business and travel to and within the region and the potential for increasing government revenues (e.g., collecting taxes from absentee land owners in the diaspora). While some government policies have emerged, implementation has been slow. Cost also remains relatively high, in turn affecting access and use (Barberousse et al. 2010, p. 27). Broadband capacity also remains low and the import-intensive nature of the industry suggests the need to advance the production and export of local infrastructure and content. Further, entrepreneurship at the local level remains weak and largely unsupported as the market continues to be dominated by a few large international players.

Current state of TMDE

While the previous section indicated some problems in the current state of telecoms, the overall improvements suggest that the Caribbean is at a phase where it is more open to investments and renewed engagement with more partners, including its diaspora around telecoms and ICTs. Even as the shortcomings may prove a problem to this form of engagement they nonetheless offer areas where the region can liaise with the diaspora in seeking solutions. Furthermore, the benefits of liberalization and regulatory reform have been felt by the diaspora as both beneficiaries and contributors to these improvements via a reduction in costs and increased ways for communicating with the region. Important too is the increased ability of those at home to make direct calls to the diaspora, whereas in former years direct dialling was either prohibited or required special codes to be purchased from C&W.

Several themes came out from the interviews and research as key areas which typify the current state of TMDE. These are (social) communication, disaster management/humanitarian assistance, the facilitation of knowledge networks, investments and services, and governance (e.g., social and political).

Social communication

By far, the most obvious impact of developments in telecoms on the interface between the Caribbean and its diaspora has been via the distance-reducing role of telecoms. The diaspora

is now able to access the region in ways not available to early migrants. Whereas the latter used letters and messages sent with the few who travelled infrequently to and from the Caribbean, the quality and frequency of contact between the region and its migrants has improved with the availability of cheaper, more efficient telecoms. To this end, social communication was noted by interviewees as the most definitive feature of TMDE.

The use of the telephone by the diaspora has been largely via the use of calling cards or special calling plans with operators such as British Telecom (United Kingdom) or Rogers (Canada). This has not only resulted from reforms at home, but also through improvements in host countries. Included here is the emergence of calling card operators and the emergence of a global diaspora telecommunications market (DTM). In the case of the United Kingdom, this occurrence has seen the competition regulator becoming more aware of the need to monitor this market to reduce abuse (Synovate 2010). Nonetheless, cheaper options – such as Skype – remain under-utilized, partly due to the low usage of the Internet and advanced applications.

Disaster management

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the value of telecoms is expanding beyond social communication with the telephone playing an increasingly important role in disaster preparedness and management, and the coordination of post-disaster efforts. As the frequency and volatility of natural disasters increases, telecoms and ICTs allow the diaspora to monitor such events, connect with family, assess needs and coordinate relief. The January 2010 earthquake in Haiti is one of the most poignant examples of this. Mobile phones not only allowed those trapped and injured to get help but for the diaspora in centres such as Montreal to check on loved ones, to communicate Haiti's needs more swiftly and to mobilize humanitarian support. Telephone conversations, phone images and the public information role of the diaspora were particularly important given limited physical travel into Haiti. Thus, telecoms allowed the world to 'travel', through the diaspora, to witness the full extent of devastation on the island.

Knowledge networks

One of the main areas of research in the first decade of the twenty-first century has been on diaspora Knowledge Networks (e.g., Stone 2003; Meyer and Wattiaux 2006). For the Caribbean, the coordinating, networking and info-gathering function of telecoms and ICTs is obvious in the networks and various online diaspora communities that have emerged during this period. These have been organized around specific issues or sectors (e.g., philanthropic networks and health groups) with ICTs being the medium for organizing and planning. As in the case of the EC-UN funded Jamaican diaspora Web Portal, ICTs is both the medium for organizing and the issue around which the diaspora is organized.

Diaspora networks have been shown to be involved in informing Caribbean society and governments of practices and experiences elsewhere, as a barometer for assessing affairs at home. The Dominica Academy of Arts and Sciences (DAAS) is a forerunner in this regard, using the Internet and telephone as the medium for organizing across Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and as far as China. Interviews with senior DAAS representatives in Canada and the United Kingdom revealed that the telephone and Internet, not only offer the means for linking skills and experiences (and opinions) between the home and diaspora but also among the diaspora in a specific country, and across several countries. Networking here is not only with the intent of organizing philanthropic initiatives, but to produce policy-relevant research (independently and government commissioned) and infuse local debate with new ideas.

Governments in countries such as Barbados have also sought to encourage the promotion of such networks via efforts to map the variety of skills and resources among its diaspora. Some efforts have been affected by a lack of trust and concerns about privacy, with some of interviewees noting an unwillingness among some of the diaspora to disclose information out of fear of being targeted by the unscrupulous (and scrupulous!), as in Jamaica and Dominica. The Barbados initiative has sought to overcome some of these challenges by incentivizing cooperation (e.g. chance to win free air travel to the country).

The creation of networks has not only been at the national but also at the regional level. For instance, one of the commissioners on the Caricom Competition Commission currently resides in the United Kingdom, bringing to the region years of experience gained in similar roles in that country. TMDE here allows the diaspora to contribute constructively to the development of relevant institutional and technical capacity, while the region is able to access knowledge in a virtually reconfigured geographical space, which extends well beyond the Caribbean Sea. To this end, teleconferencing allows for a reduction in the cost and need for travel to the region.

Traditionally, the nature of voluntary return migration has been largely that of retired Caribbean nationals or temporary workers returning to the region at the expiration of their work permits or visas. However, TMDE has given the diaspora and the region the space to make connections with individuals and institutions in order to extend local knowledge and opportunities without the need for physical return. As demonstrated here, the exchange implicit in brain gain and brain circulation need not take place at the point of retirement or physical return to the region.

Services and investments

Several services and investment opportunities have also emerged around TMDE. In so doing, telecoms has helped to extend traditional forms of engagement between the Caribbean and its diaspora especially in the area of remittancing. This is most noticeable in the increased reliability, efficiency and formalization of remittancing. Telecoms and ICTs have helped in the speedier disbursement of remittances. Recipients are also able to communicate needs to remitters more quickly and track delivery.

Companies such as Jamaica National Building Society (JN), a telecom- and ICT-enabled business, demonstrate the gains that have been made in this area. The company has for instance, registered significant improvements in the time it takes for deposits made from bank accounts in the diaspora to be credited to accounts held locally, moving from months to three days, thanks to improvements in ICTs. Its products and services have also evolved to include a partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) resulting in the creation of a money transfer card which allows remittances to be credited instantly to the recipient in Jamaica. JN has also partnered with local telecoms providers to send text messages to recipients, alerting them to the arrival of funds. Demonstrated here is the use of strategic partnerships involving development agencies, telecoms operators and businesses in the diaspora market to develop new tools and applications to improve the quality of existing products and services. Greater efficiency thanks to ICTs also means that governments have been able to track and monitor the flow of remittances.

The activities of JN also demonstrate the linkages which can be forged across sectors with ICTs as the mediator and facilitator, and the diaspora and home as beneficiaries. For example, an interview with a JN executive revealed that the company had in early 2010 introduced a vacation savings account which allows the diaspora to save towards a vacation in Jamaica. Accounts are then accessible to the diaspora when they arrive in Jamaica via a banking card which also provides the holder with discounts at tourist attractions and accommodation. Importantly, this initiative has been geared at encouraging the support and development of

small hotels and guesthouses in Jamaica. Here TMDE and ICTs are presented as tools for advancing and diversifying traditional forms of engagement and adding value to two of the major industries in the region: tourism and finance. Through its activities in the diaspora JN has become a net exporter for Jamaica.

A growing market has also emerged with the region's mobile phone operators partnering with businesses in host countries to allow the diaspora to top-up mobile phones in the Caribbean. Partners have included Caribbean-based transnational firms or diaspora owned businesses such as Swift Cash in the United Kingdom. Swift Cash also offers remittancing, bill payment for major utilities in Jamaica and opportunities for paying mortgages, school fees and taxes directly to government. Such services help to overcome some of the challenges attached to remittancing namely, the difficulty which remitters sometimes face in ensuring that funds are being used as intended. The diaspora is also allowed more control over the management of their funds and affairs locally. This is important since remittances are not always for maintaining families but to fulfill savings and investment obligations at home. Caribbean governments also stand to benefit from the increased tax income.

Nevertheless, roaming charges remain high. High costs reduce the extent to which local phones are used overseas and to which telecoms can feature in brain circulation. Companies (such as Telsur in Suriname) have however emerged to address this issue by offering a (dual) SIM card that has a phone number for Suriname and another for the Netherlands. Thanks to this service no roaming fees are charged for using the Dutch number in Suriname (van de Roer 2010, p. 22). Such businesses contribute to the local economy via jobs, increased access and choice for customers and more seamless movement between home and abroad. Innovative businesses such as MyVirtualOffices.com can also help to address the problem of high roaming fees. This company allows individuals in the region or the diaspora to set up a company virtually and run the business from any location in the world, through the help of virtual receptionists. The company offers mail forwarding, answering and fax services as well as voice over Internet phone services. Such businesses allow those in the diaspora to invest in the region without having to relocate physically, making 'return' virtual and more flexible.

While there has been some success in the development of telecoms related businesses by the diaspora, these remain on a small scale. As it relates to efforts to increase ICT capacity and infrastructure in the region, what little evidence there is suggests that some of the diaspora's early enthusiasm up to the early 2000s was dampened by the embeddedness of regional incumbents. Relatedly, efforts to invest directly in telecoms start-ups at home have faced challenges similar to those of small and medium sized start-ups (e.g. access to capital). Where contacts have been made between the host and home countries via the diaspora for investment purposes, these have sometimes been aborted or fizzled out due to lack of follow-up from relevant agencies and government departments at home.

Additionally, while C&W has begun offering mobile TV locally, this offering has yet to reach the diaspora market. This is so even while the distance between home and abroad and the growth of ICTs have increased the appetite for indigenous art, music and cultural material. As yet, both the region and its diaspora have invested seriously in creating a market around its cultural industries. The reality, however, is that the diaspora remains a potential market, marketer and co-creator of locally developed content. Greater investments here could also help to redress the trade imbalance in the sector.

At the regional level, CARICOM released a draft policy on ICTs for Development in 2010 which accords the diaspora various roles. These include membership in a virtual community, increasing the capacity, effectiveness and value of ICTs in the region, as well as in developing tradable content and services. Much is needed in converting these ambitions into tangible initiatives.

TMDE and Governance

The virtual relocation of the diaspora in the Caribbean has also brought attention to the political and governance roles that this group can play. With liberalization, the diaspora has been able to utilize equipment such as lap-jacks and other voice-over-Internet-protocol software to make calls to the region. Together with the increased availability of online newspapers and radio programmes, the diaspora has been afforded opportunities for participating in local governance via online talk shows and radio call-in programmes. As an example, radio stations in Dominica have responded to the increased participation of the diaspora in local debate by designating special telephone lines for this group, allowing them to call-in to radio programmes (Interview with a member of DAAS). Through this the diaspora has been allowed a 'voice' in politics and civil society, influencing and informing public opinion. While the intentions of the diaspora will feature here, this nonetheless marks an important avenue for participation in Caribbean society, particularly given the inability to vote in local elections.

Distance and isolation have thus been reduced, even as such forms of engagement allows the sustained contact which can help to inform the diaspora of the ways in which it can contribute to home. The impact of such groups in raising transparency and accountability via advocacy is not to be underestimated, even as telecoms helps to sustain contact which can facilitate a smoother transition, should members of the diaspora choose to return physically.

Telecommunications is also allowing the diaspora the opportunity to take part in the governance of businesses in the region. JN has been a front-runner in this regard having allowed its shareholders in the diaspora to participate in annual general meetings via live streaming over the Internet since 2009. Twitter has also facilitated more interaction and participation from the diaspora at such events.

In summary, the presentation so far has demonstrated some scenarios and ways in which telecoms have been a tool for activating and extending the relationship between the Caribbean and its diaspora. As demonstrated, telecoms and more generally ICTs offer the diaspora the potential to relocate themselves – virtually – in the Caribbean with local and international reforms in telecoms improving the quality and variety of TMDE. Telecoms have offered the means for consciousness raising, information sharing, self-organization, consensus-building, communication, and for collectivizing resources, as in the case of disaster relief efforts. The region has, through its diaspora accessed expertise beyond its borders, as shown in the existence of knowledge and entrepreneurial networks, while investment opportunities and services have emerged. Of note here is the use of strategic partnerships between institutions of aid and advice and regional bodies (both private and public) to forge more opportunities for deepening TMDE.

The above presentation also suggests that the benefits of increased TMDE in the Caribbean have been both direct and indirect with the categories of TMDE being mutually reinforcing. For instance, increased offering of telecoms-facilitated services has an impact on investments, while investment in infrastructure affects the extent to which telecoms features as a disaster response tool. The current state of TMDE also suggests the potential to increase the rate of tax collection, given the low compliance and high levels of national debt of many Caribbean states. Such developments are affected by the extent of e-government in the region with implications for reducing corruption, overcoming red tape and informalism, and increasing transparency.

There is still some way to go for TMDE in the Caribbean. Indeed, much of the evidence and findings presented are largely isolated experiences, marking the interest among a few players as opposed to strategic moves on the part of governments, diaspora or host countries. The bottom line is that the region's ability to enter the brain chain and benefit more actively from TMDE requires further advancement in the use of telecoms and ICTs, particularly in facilitating the creation of information societies across the region.

Challenges to expanding and scaling up TMDE in the Caribbean

The reality is that there remain challenges in the way of the region further activating the potential of telecoms in advancing the diaspora/home relationship. These challenges relate to the diaspora and conditions in the home and host countries.

Capacity in the diaspora

A vital consideration in this debate is the extent to which the diaspora is itself willing, ready and able to use telecoms and ICTs. This can be an indication of the extent to which TMDE can be effected for regional growth and development. In a related study of Latin American migrants in the United States, it was found that only 20 per cent of Latin Americans, “actively use various technologies in their daily lives” (in Burgess and Ascoli 2010, p. 5). Of those surveyed only 40 per cent used the Internet. While access to mobile phone was high (92 per cent), use of advanced applications was low, largely because these features were not active and only 51 per cent sent SMS text messages. In spite of the proliferation of Internet-based remittance companies, usage of this service was still at 2 per cent with the majority preferring to remit via cash to cash transfers (92 per cent), informal means (5 per cent) and through banks (3 per cent). The findings suggest the need for greater awareness of options not only for remitting funds but particularly on the role of telecoms in increasing the ease of such activity, a point that can also be made for the Caribbean’s diaspora population.

The take up of technology within the diaspora, and hence their ability to assist the Caribbean will also depend on the age, skill level and location (e.g., rural/urban; middle class; senior or junior management) of the diaspora in the host country. The issues here are even more complex than first appears, with factors such as the period of migration and the location (rural or urban) from which the migrant originated in the home country having relevance in a consideration of the extent to which TMDE can be activated.

As suggested in the third section, the momentum for reform or for redesigning the status quo in telecoms can come from the confluence of internal and external pressure. However, the extent to which the optimism expressed by Marcelle (2004, p. 10) as to the diaspora’s role as part of this transnational or external community in influencing the development of information societies in the Caribbean remains to be seen. To this end more effort may be needed towards mapping the capacity of the diaspora in this and other sectors.

Conditions at home

The capacity for TMDE will also be influenced by factors at home. This relates to the rate of ICT adoption, levels of ICT literacy, investment, technology transfer and infusion. Already, it has been recognized that the region has yet to take greater advantage of advancements in telecoms and ICTs. Some of the indicators are also more generally related to the legislation and regulations governing business and investment at home and more specifically those relating to ICTs. At the moment the regulatory framework across the region needs to be updated to allow greater access and competition. For instance, the Telecommunications Act in Jamaica passed in 2001, still privileges the incumbent’s network by disallowing bypass. Such rules have implications not only for businesses that operate strictly in the telecoms market but also for those that depend on telecoms (e.g., financial services) who are at risk of losing out on efficiencies by not being able to utilize modern communications technologies to reduce overheads. The reality is that archaic legislation mainly protects incumbents and large players, acting as a disincentive for smaller investors in the diaspora and locally.

Maximizing the region’s capacity to benefit from TMDE will require greater effort at modernizing infrastructure. This includes speedier advancement towards achieving digital switch-over

to ensure greater compatibility between infrastructure at home and in the diaspora markets and improving broadband capacity. This will also increase the ease of transferring content from the region, a development which can facilitate the creation of an online market around the region's cultural heritage and more opportunities for mobile work. Other challenges relate to the level of protection and enforcement of intellectual property rights and the ability of entrepreneurs to recover earnings.

While the activities of the diaspora have progressed with little intervention from government, there is a greater role for policy in creating an enabling role for TMDE. Policy is also important for encouraging strategic partnerships between investors and entrepreneurs at home and in the diaspora to ensure that TMDE complements national agendas and that there is compatibility between the infrastructure supplied by the diaspora and the needs at home.

Governments in the region also need to scale up support for quality ICT training and education. Migration has been a feature of Caribbean life and given the region's inability to meet the needs of all its citizens and the demand for skills elsewhere, migration looks set to continue. It stands to reason that the region will benefit more from having an educated workforce in a context of sustained migration. Lessons can be learned from the Indian and Chinese experience where diasporic contribution in ICTs have been due to specific attention to advancing training in science and technology, thereby increasing the ability of migrants to be placed in key industries and locations in the global marketplace.

Host country policies

As noted earlier the benefits from TMDE also accrue to the host country. Investments and jobs have for instance resulted from the creation of a DTM. The extent to which TMDE evolves is also dependent on the policies of the host country given that these will have some effect on the choices and ability of migrants to access employment, resources (including investment capital), training and support. Where this is the case, opportunities for, and arguably the quality and variety of TMDE and other forms of diasporic engagement with the home country may be affected by the opportunities available in the host country. Already, the need for regulatory oversight in preventing abuse in the DTM has been demonstrated in the United Kingdom.

Beyond this, the region's diaspora and TMDE are potentially useful to host countries. This can be the case in the ongoing reconfiguration of their relationships with the Caribbean (seen for example in the renegotiation of trade relations by the EU and ongoing discussions around a Canada–Caribbean free-trade agreement). Proposals are already being proffered to international development partners, including the Government of Canada on ways in which it can facilitate the creation of support mechanisms in which the diaspora can be “encouraged and coordinated to maximize its development impact” (Minto 2009a, p. 5). Following the earthquake in Haiti, this has included a recommendation for the creation of diaspora Communications Centres in Ottawa and Montreal and Haiti to utilize the diaspora more proactively in the reconstruction efforts in that country (Meharg 2010, p. 16). In such cases, telecoms can allow the diaspora to help in increasing corporative relations between host and home countries (see for example, Turner et al. 2003). Such measures can be helpful in mobilizing and channelling diasporic and host country resources and aid initiatives more strategically.

Policies relating to investing and doing business in the host country also matter for the success of TMDE. These can pose a barrier, particularly where they do not include incentives for the diaspora to establish businesses that span home–host country markets. Indeed, such arrangements can feature into the developmental and trade arrangements between host countries and the Caribbean. Again, the Canada–Caribbean trade negotiations offer an opportunity to work out such arrangements in a practical way. The emphasis on investment and mutual gain

between the diaspora and the Caribbean is particularly relevant in the case of North America and Canada given the relative distance between the two regions and the linkages that already exist. To this extent there remains an untapped potential especially for Canadian firms to invest in telecoms and telecoms-facilitated business ventures, which can add value to existing linkages in banking and financial services. Opportunities exist in data processing and the management of other back office tasks in the Caribbean. This would require greater investment in telecoms and ICTs. It is no coincidence that countries such as Ireland saw the need to improve telecoms infrastructure and rules, and reduce cost as a corollary to advancing investments in the financial, pharmaceutical, and software industries (see Burnham 2003).

Finally, the discussion to this point suggests that TMDE is inherently a positive thing. However, partnering with government (whether host or home) has inherent risks for the diaspora and its ability to contribute to brain circulation. While institutionalization and greater engagement at the state level (or even with the private sector) may help to increase the profile, influence and reach of the diaspora, collaboration can also lead to capture. In this case, the dominant or most consolidated organizational form (here, government or private sector) can compromise the independence and co-opt the agenda and ethos of what is at present small disparate diaspora groups. For instance, concerns have emerged among some diaspora groups (e.g., Dominica and Jamaica) that government intervention has seen the latter trying to define the terms of engagement and activities of a movement, which for the most part, evolved without much government support. Some diaspora groups have subsequently refrained from seeking membership in large government-organized umbrella movements (see e.g., Jamaica Gleaner 2011). Conversely, failure to engage with the state and private sector could see the effectiveness of TMDE being compromised given the inability to scale up activities for the sustainable advancement of the home country.

Furthermore, increasing networking across home and host countries is not without complications. While the attempt to inform policy and advance knowledge have been recognized as important functions of diaspora networks, the existence of transnational criminal networks cannot be ignored. In light of the present discussion, issues such as cyber crime and the use of telecoms to organize and carry out criminal activities also require attention. The reality is that such networks have also benefitted from advancements in telecoms. Therefore, while policy needs to respond to the positive aspects of diaspora circulation there is also need to acknowledge the unintended or ironic consequences of TMDE. This is as much a concern for the home as much as it is for the host country, as effects are not contained at home (Minto-Coy 2009a).

Conclusion

This study has investigated one of the least examined areas in which diasporas have contributed to the development of their home countries – telecommunications – in the context of the Caribbean diaspora. This has been conducted through the notion of a TMDE. The argument here is that extending interaction and exchange through telecoms and ICTs more generally, has the potential to assist the region in adding value, while diversifying relations with the diaspora beyond remittancing. This is via efforts to exploit the full potential of telecoms and ICTs as a tool and facilitator for regional development. Specific mention is made of investments, the creation of services and knowledge networks, disaster management and local governance, as areas in which TMDE has already been effected.

The reality however, is that while there is evidence of a variety of TMDE, the value of telecoms has been felt largely at the level of social communication. Even where TMDE services and investment opportunities have emerged, the potential has yet to be fully realized. Ultimately, the extent to which the Caribbean is able to effect brain circulation or brain gain in telecoms and advance

its current relationship beyond remittancing will be dependent on the extent to which all aspects of TMDE can be activated.

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