“DOES SIZE MATTER?”

“In a small place, people cannot see themselves in a larger picture. They cannot see that they might be part of a chain of something, anything.”
Jamaica Kincaid, “A Small Place”, pg 52.

The transformation of the former British Eastern Caribbean colonies into independent nations has often times raised questions concerning the viability of these entities, because of the size. Indeed, the challenges confronting various “mini-states” of the world and potential remedies to ensure their survival are becoming an issue for international attention for several reasons:
(a) Small independent countries, regardless of size occupy a place in the fora of the world and exercise a numerical influence, if nothing, else to be wooed by larger countries;
(b) Smaller, economically unstable countries are very susceptible to the influence of internationally disruptive and destabilizing agencies using them as a base for infiltrating the larger countries;
(c) In a socially diminishing world, countries rich and small and their citizens individual and corporate are in increasing contact. Such interactions if not responsibly pursued run the risk of transporting hazards and threats of various kinds across international borders.
It is therefore in no one’s interest to have failed states emerge as centers of global instability and chaos.

Commentators on the subject have defined the subject of “size” using a variety of criteria, including the following:

- Geographical area;
- Natural resource endowment;
- Population size and capability;
- Volume and value of goods and services produced (GDP);
- Economic, financial and technological influence;
- Geo-political significance.

In terms of all of the above factors and more, the territories of the Eastern Caribbean would be described in both relative and absolute terms as “small”. The question then becomes, “Is the prospect of autonomous, self-sustaining and viable societies for such jurisdictions futile, and if not, how can the limitations of size be overcome in order to maintain them as responsible jurisdictions?”

This brief paper examines the significance of “size” in the struggle for national self-sufficiency, and the extent to which such initial definitions or
characterizations can be successfully addressed in the course of emerging developed societies within the Eastern Caribbean islands. While truly international comparisons and contrasts are always prone to misapplication because of unique conditions and experiences, one can nevertheless make tentative informed deductions from international cases of societies exhibiting various aspects of “smallness”, yet not being relegated to the bottom rung of the “development curve” or emerging as international pariahs.

It is possible to benefit from an examination of the reality of the so-called limiting factors of size, to identify obvious anomalies and to pose certain propositions which may be the basis for future policy action, despite those factors. Among these one would suggest the following:

- the structure of the national economy;
- the rate of capital formation;
- the role of foreign direct investment;
- educational levels, information and technology;
- functioning of internal institutions and organizations;
- the place of government in national life;
- attitudes, perceptions, traditions;

A survey of the Eastern Caribbean territories will reveal the following general characteristics, typical of Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

- Limited land area;
- natural resource poor;
- ecologically fragile;
- low population carrying capacity;
- non-competitive (agricultural) products;
- energy restricted (for low cost, large manufacturing);
- peripheral location for technological innovation and applications;
- low educational levels;
- low levels of social infrastructure;
- high cost and exposure of physical infrastructure;
- high rates of out-migration;
- low receptiveness to in-migration;
- intrusiveness of inter-personal relations.

Obviously, very few of these are intractable obstacles with no possible remedies, and it leaves only opportunities for those imaginative, disciplined and sufficiently motivated to find the avenues for circumventing or surmounting the more intimidating of these problems.

One may suggest at least four general processes at work today which if properly addressed can lever “small” jurisdictions into more dynamic and progressive states.
The first is the process of “Globalization” which allows the coming together of international forces whether by invitation in or by reaching out, so that the engines of growth can be shared. This broadening (and leveling) of the international landscape through access to technology, cross-border movements of capital, enterprise, expertise and labor potentially works to equal the competitive landscape and it is only for discerning jurisdictions to seek out niches of edge and advantage.

The second is the reality of “Geopolitical Opportunism” which smaller jurisdictions may possess and which can be levered individually or through combined action for their benefit. While “the earth may be shrinking”, and former distances of space and time are less and less obstacles to trade, travel, and power, many small jurisdictions off the coast of larger land masses are sensitive points of contact and intrusion, convenient staging areas for adverse forces, useful “entrepots” and listening; and, logical sites for exploiting either internationally common resources or national interests of foreign countries. All of these opportunities have trade-off values resulting in benefits to more deprived small jurisdictions, as may be applicable. But they need to be responsibly applied.

A third and more contentious option is the use, the responsible use of membership in “International Forums” to advance trade and commerce agreements, environmental management protocols, international sanctions and promotion of policies on a more equitable basis and to the benefit of smaller exposed and highly impacted states. It is true that the record in this area has not been signally attractive. On the one hand, disadvantaged countries have been well known to have “sold off their votes” in return for assistance packages from benefiting countries. On the other hand, more powerful, developed countries are on record as refusing to submit to international sanctions or directives and rulings wherever convenient for their purposes. Yet the fact remains, the era of internationalization of behavior is here, and it is in the interests of all to play by common rules.

Fourthly, and with especial significance to the Eastern Caribbean, is the prospect of “Regionalization” of interests, resources, expertise and influence as a means of overcoming limitations of size. This opportunity has been embarked upon within a restricted context and with limited success through the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OES), Caribbean Common Market area (CARICOM) and the many special purpose institutions and arrangements in and out of these associations. But there continues to be a strategic disconnect between the extremes of “singularity” (each territory being mired in and committed to its own interests), and “unification” (all territories submerging individual interests for the sake of a combined community of interests). The limitations of size will be correspondingly eliminated depending upon where along this continuum, our island
jurisdictions decide to hitch and halt their wagons. For clearly, the more we remain attached to the process of co-operation through singularity, we can best hope for a result through addition of efforts. In contrast, integration through unification holds the promise of a multiplicative effect, so much more rewarding than the former.

Some hopeful examples of this possible new collaboration and the strength that might flow from it are:

- A regionally negotiated Air Access agreement with international carriers and an integrated in-region air carrier owned by member countries;
- Promotion, planning and facilitation of Tourism and international recreation facilities and services on an integrated regional basis;
- Co-ordination and regulation of International Financial Services within a common regime;
- A common approach to accommodation of Offshore Tertiary Educational Institutions within the regional area, while securing the maximum possible domestic spin-offs;
- Combined and shared development of specialized international marketing of niche products such as brand beverages, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals;
- Development of specialized competencies in year-round Sports and Performance Enhancing Training, injury treatment and rehabilitation and counseling;
- Quality Health and Wellness Services including surgical procedures and post-operative recuperation.
- Establishment of Regional Centers of Excellence in Research and Development with shared regional expertise, applications and commercialization of results;
- Management of “regional commons” particularly the resources of land, sea and air on a regional basis.

Regionalization might also be the means of addressing those factors and influences which would otherwise frustrate the size transformation of these societies. Some examples may be relevant:

- Restoration to regional control and ownership of critical domestic resources such as major land parcels, utilities such as water and power supply, financial institutions and telecommunications;
- Need to upgrade social and community systems and services including, education and training, health and sanitation, and administrative services;
- Need to address and counter offshore cultural penetration and domination by radio and television, newspapers, magazines and professional journals, and through the internet;
• Need to define local/regional security concerns and to address them in the light of international responsibilities and in accordance with local/regional capacities—terrorist, pandemics, money-laundering, human trafficking, crime syndication and cross-border interdiction.

In recent years, some commentators on national development processes and policies have come to regard the issue of size within the context of technological sophistication, modernity and complexity. In so doing, they embrace a philosophy of “smallness” as an appropriate framework for responsiveness to ecological and environmental consciousness, social responsibility and economic frugality. Under the themes of “Small is Possible” and “Small is Beautiful”, they promote a position that “small” is not a disqualification or disincentive to productive effort and efficiency. But more pointedly, this “movement” is a challenge to larger, modern, developed societies to re-examine their agenda of “growth at any cost” and to exercise prudence, caution even, in responding to their development imperative. Thus for both small and large countries, the challenge is to seek out alternative, sustainable development paths. This is especially relevant for small jurisdictions considering projects and programs whose impacts are spatially extensive, of long duration, and are not easily ameliorated.

Choices and decisions towards small-appropriate solutions may indeed be initially high cost but should also be capable of yielding more than compensating extended long term benefits.

So, does size matter? Yes, it does, but size as a limiting factor can be overcome or its constraints can be reduced by thoughtful planning and purposeful action. Economic space and resources for development can be created and expanded by education and training, selective activity, prioritization, and various forms of association, substitution, and recombination. Small can be enhanced!

Small societies can take advantage of their endowments and build on them. They can assess their unique attributes in relation to the mass production, distribution and consumption system of their large neighbors. They should attempt to identify rigidities and the edge opportunities created by inflexible or unresponsive large systems. They should use these structural and functional defects of others to their advantage. The only real limitation of small societies like those of the Eastern Caribbean is their imagination, preparedness and resolve—all else is circumstantial, to be manipulated and accommodated in their growth and development strategies. They have to look beyond the present. They have to see themselves as a part of a bigger picture and visualize a place for themselves in the unfolding universe. They need to conceive a world of their own making and aggressively design the path to inherit it.