

Towards 'one common intention'... A passenger ferry for regional transport?



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One race (de Caribbean man)

From de same place (de Caribbean man)

Dat make de same trip (de Caribbean man)

On de same ship (de Caribbean man)

So we must push one common intention

Is for a better life in de region

Black Stalin in his calypso, 'Caribbean Unity', poetically implores of the region, a steadfast singleness in its quest for development. A type of integration so seamless, that in its simplest form de Caribbean man, unimpeded by barriers, can enjoy an early morning swim at Maracas Bay, midday flying fish on Accra Beach and jerk chicken at Negril for dinner.

The focus of integration has par excellence been on economic convergence: a single economy and a single market for goods and services.

Facilitating the free movement of persons has long remained however, an underexplored dimension of regional policy. In the case of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), such social interchange involves movement of the combined 28 Member States' population of 280 million inhabitants, 44 million of which live in the insular Caribbean. Regional demand for sea

transportation is currently dominated by the movement of goods while air transport still remains the de facto mode of transport for the movement of people. According to the Latin American and Caribbean Air Transport Association (ALTA), the number of passengers moving around the Caribbean space via air totalled 49,598,923 up to May 2014, a 6.6% increase when compared with 46,543,080 in 2013 for the corresponding period. These figures validate the claim that the demand certainly exists to initiate a passenger ferry service that will operate either on a regional or sub-regional basis realising the vision of linking the Greater Caribbean by sea.

It is a common lament that regional maritime connectivity has seen better times. In days gone by, the Black Star Line, operated by Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, was born out of a consolidated sense of black pride and a longstanding desire for a black nation. Albeit for a short time (1919-1922), it was his vision that the shipping line would foster black trade and transport passengers between America, the Caribbean, and Africa. In more recent times, the company Windward Ferries operated a 58m-combination carrier lift-on/lift-off passenger ferry for 250 passengers and 350 tons cargo for the period 1999-2000. This ferry operated between Saint Lucia, Barbados, St Vincent, Trinidad, the Margarita Islands and Puerto La Cruz in Venezuela. To draw reference to existing services, Express des Iles is currently operated out of the French Caribbean territories and offers inter-island ferry services between Saint Lucia, Martinique, Dominica and Guadeloupe. Average ticket prices range from USD\$102 for a one-way ticket to USD\$150 for a return. Trinidad and Tobago also operates a regular fast ferry service permitting travellers to go between the two islands at a reasonable cost of USD\$15.

Transport in the Caribbean is a cross-cutting issue with direct implications for trade and tourism. ECLAC data for the year 2013 reveals that service exports in ACS Member Countries represented a total of US\$ 68,875 million while imports totalled US\$ 81,156 million, much of which is concentrated in the tourism sector. In 2013, the total contribution of travel and tourism to regional GDP was USD49.0 billion or 14%. Where the contribution of tourism is measured by both direct and indirect value-added, the sector undeniably stands as a key driver of regional economic development. Many Caribbean governments depend on tourism and tourism-related activities as sources of direct and indirect tax revenues. With respect to job creation, travel and tourism generated 607,000 jobs directly in 2013 (3.6% of total employment) and this is expected to grow by 2.9% in 2014 to 624,000 (3.7% of total employment). Further, leisure travel spending (inbound and domestic) generated 91% of direct Travel & Tourism GDP in 2013 (USD34.1bn).

Given these gains, taking advantage of multi-destination tourism has now become the talk of the day as a means of preserving the Caribbean's destination market share in extra-regional markets and increasing intra-regional tourist flows. Regional tourism offerings are diverse and plentiful, ranging from festivals such as Trinidad and Tobago Carnival to Tobago Jazz Festival, Jamaican Jazz and Blues Festival, Reggae Sumfest, Barbados Cropover, sporting and sailing events, such as Antigua Sailing Week, and the Caribbean Rally Championships, as well as nature and adventure based tours promoted by regional companies like Island Routes to mention but a few. The question of multi-destination tourism cannot be wholly realised however until there is dialogue and more importantly coherent regional action pertaining to connectivity.

Statistics from the Caribbean Tourism Organisation (CTO) for 2013 highlight that of the 25.1 million visitors to the region an estimated 23 million came from extra-regional markets. The United States

remained the most important supplier of tourists to the region as its share of total arrivals averaged 50% over the last five years. In looking closer to home, data reveals that a mere 1.6 million Caribbean residents visited neighbouring destinations. Moreover, the Commonwealth Countries experienced a decrease in visits from Caribbean nationals of 0.5%. The OECS which benefits from significant intra-Caribbean tourism (accounting for 20-50% of total market share across countries), showed a 3.4 % contraction in arrivals. Current trends dictate that a large share of the population of the Greater Caribbean frequent North America and Europe more readily than they do their own neighbours, citing high cost as the most prohibitive factor. As the buoyancy of the regional tourism sector is affected by high elasticity of demand, price sensitivity and competition from alternative destinations, price competitiveness of the tourism products in the region is largely determined by transport efficiency. Given the high cost of entry to market of air transport, the demand for a cost effective regional transportation solution points to the provision of a sea transport service amongst the island chains.

Neatly packaged rhetoric aside, the feasibility of a passenger ferry service can then only be fully ascertained when a number of items are considered. Foremost among these, is the issue of taxation, which if not properly treated, elevates ticket prices beyond cost recovery as the cost is passed on to consumers. In addition, a feasibility analysis would have to take into account the appropriate vessel type, feasible routes, frequency of service, pricing, the need for provision of passenger terminals at the various ports, and the operation's impact on existing services. With respect to ownership, policy options that revolve around government ownership are no doubt impeded by limited fiscal resources and the long understood reality that governments do not and should not be service providers but instead provide and maintain the policy and regulatory framework that affords private capital the opportunity to make a reasonable return on investment, while allowing for decent service levels and a safe operating environment.

The issue of hassle-free movement must simultaneously be addressed. Various agreements of CARICOM point to the intent of governments to facilitate movement of Caribbean persons, largely to facilitate tourism activity and to foster exploration of the island by their Caribbean brothers and sisters. Despite the emergence of a CARICOM passport, and with the exception of the OECS countries, this remains a largely unrealised goal. Further harmonisation of visa regimes with third countries would serve to advance regional tourism interests even further. The Single Domestic Space (SDS) instated during the 2007 Cricket World Cup in 10 CARICOM Member States, provides a ready example of the ease of transit warranted if regional transportation is to be fully effective. It afforded freedom of movement for all domestic travellers and a Special Visa stamped at the first port of entry for travellers from outside the Region to allow hassle free movement among the participating SDS States.

Similarly, the Schengen Agreements of 1985 and 1990 were a major breakthrough for traffic in Europe, as it abolished border controls in an attempt to achieve critical mass. This type of arrangement has been implemented in Central America since 2006, albeit not without some difficulty. The Central America-4 (CA-4) Border Control Agreement permits citizens of the four signatory nations, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras & Nicaragua, free movement between the countries without restrictions or checks. The Agreement also harmonises visa regulations across the area, permitting eligible foreign nationals to travel through the four countries for a total period of up to 90 days without completing entry and exit formalities at border immigration checkpoints

The Directorate of Transport of the ACS is expressly mandated through its work programme to unite the Caribbean by air and sea. This squarely places on the organisation the responsibility to collaborate on initiatives related to air and maritime transport, as well as to implement and enhance instruments, mechanisms and conditions for improving the efficiency of the transport sector. Following the V Summit of Heads of States and/or Government, this mandate is further reinforced by the recognition that such actions would “contribute to strengthening the unification of the nations of the Greater Caribbean.” This statement carries with it the weight of the understanding that realising transportation linkages is a powerful tool in ensuring the economic advancement of the region.

Vision and political will remain the cornerstones to regarding the Caribbean Sea as a bridge rather than a barrier to regional integration. The establishment of both a functional and profitable regional passenger ferry service is not beyond the realm of possibility; however, the challenge remains to go beyond rhetoric to produce concrete action that will bring about connectivity. Reflecting on the words of Black Stalin, embracing Caribbean regionalism in its truest sense implies above all fostering a sense of oneness and unity. Improving transport linkages lies at the heart of these efforts as it bespeaks an integration that is relevant in the eyes of citizens of the region.

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