Foreword

Family Community Relations: Social Institutions Under Threat

The development process in several countries in the Caribbean region has not proceeded at the pace, nor to the extent anticipated by most persons at the policy-making and decision-making levels, as well as the level of the ordinary citizen. Until now the discovery of strategies that can effectively bring about growth with equity has eluded these countries. The reasons for this are multiple, and must include factors related to events and circumstances in the global political economy, and policy decisions and behaviours at the local and national levels. The resources – human, financial, physical, economic, or otherwise – of the society are obviously also critical considerations. Historically, the explanations of the developmental dilemmas and of the possible prescriptions for their solutions have focussed most attention on issues at the macro level. Although most agree that that many of the problems have to do with the capacity and capability of the countries, not a great deal of attention has been given to the more specific deficiencies in the areas of social and cultural capacity, and therefore to the extent to which these could impede and stymie the development process. From time to time, there have been statements about the role of values, cultural orientations, beliefs, and tastes; but there has been very little real or systematic examination of the possible relationship between, for example, specific social institutional arrangements on the one hand, and the actual behaviours and decisions that could take the developmental process forward, on the other. Not only social stability, but also change and movement forward does after all, require some social consensus, or accommodation, and some integrity in the society’s social institutional base. Boxill [1998] also takes a similar view about the debilitating effects of the conflict model that has, up until recently, been popular in certain academic and policy circles in the Caribbean. These institutions provide glue, framework, support, rationale, and stimulus for any given social activity and/or behaviour; their decay will therefore have inevitable and perhaps predictable consequences.

The material and analyses that are presented in this series on family and community relations represent an attempt to refocus some attention on, and stimulate discussion of, the social institutional question. The central thesis that underlies the presentation of these papers is

that if the basic social institutions of a society are under threat or in a state of disintegration then the social and economic capacity of that society to engage in productive and developmental activities is seriously compromised.

In a recently completed study of the relationships between family and gender relations, socio-economic position and reproductive health, it became clear that a major problem area resided in that complex of factors related to the quality of gender relations within the household as well as in the society as a whole, and to the changing characteristics of the family unit. In this series of papers, we have sought to specifically draw out those data and analyses that throw some light on the growing gap between the ideals of family and family life, and the harsh realities of everyday life; on parenting and socialisation practices; on the gender roles, relationships, and identities that have become crystallised; and on some of the imperatives and consequences of the partnering process. These papers have also sought to show how institutional fragility and decay can, together with the harshness of the constant struggle to economically survive, help to explain the inability of individuals to pursue some of the behaviours and activities desired and expected of them. In this instance health behaviour is used as an illustration. Additionally, the papers discuss how the very adaptations can further undermine the social order.

The study was conducted in three countries – Jamaica, Barbados and Dominica. The choice of countries was based on the fact that while all three had similarities based on their common economic, social and political histories as plantation slave economies, there were nonetheless significant differences – especially in terms of varying levels of development, and the colonial relationships. The methodology utilised was qualitative. Focus group discussions were held with a total of 20 groups of individuals aged 8-20 years. There were two basic cohorts: prepubescent – 8 to 11 years; and post-pubertal – 14 to 20 years. The prepubescent groups were school-based and were further subdivided into two age cohorts, viz: 8-9 years, and 10-11 years. These age cohorts were selected in order to find persons at different phases of the value and developmental process. It was anticipated that among the older age groups would be persons just entering adulthood and therefore beginning to come to grips with the kinds of roles and responsibilities expected of them at this stage.

The younger groups were also categorised according to whether they attended public or private schools; and all groups were divided on the basis of rural or urban residence. A matrix of groups which was divided according to age, school type and residence was then developed. The non-school groups were drawn from the communities surrounding the schools from which the younger children had been recruited. In Jamaica and Barbados, all groups but one were single sex groups with the remaining ones mixed. Single sex groups were moderated by a researcher of the same sex. Mixed groups were jointly moderated. Each group comprised between 8-10 individuals and the group discussion lasted a minimum of 45 minutes. Recruitment was done in collaboration with teachers and community-based workers – using in all instances a specific and common set of guidelines. Similarly, the group discussions were conducted on the basis of protocols developed for each age cohort. There was a common set of issues and topics, but the range of topics varied slightly so as to take into account the differences in ages. Thus for example,
discussions with the younger age groups did not cover topics such as multiple partnering, and the economic survival strategies of men and women.

As far as possible we have sought to tell the story through the words of the respondents themselves. Adjustments have had to be made so as to ensure the readability of the language used. Some of the flavour is inevitably lost, but as far as was feasible we sought to retain and transmit the sentiments expressed. All six papers in this series can be read independently, but in many ways they are closely interlinked. The first four papers, three of which are in Vol. 4, No. 1, speak to some of the more general issues of family relationships, gender role identities and relationships, socialisation and partnering. In two of the remaining papers, which are in Vol. 4, No. 2, we highlight some of the socio-cultural adaptations or consequences of what we have called the “environmental incivilities” with which many must continually cope. The situations are clearly not identical in the different countries, and it is possible to argue that in some countries - such as Jamaica - the process of institutional deterioration is more advanced. It would therefore seem useful and necessary, to consider the extent to which they provide lessons about the likely consequences of a given sequence of events and behaviours.

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