

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

Crime is damaging Caribbean development

Over the last year, a number of studies have looked at the adverse effect that crime is having on Caribbean development.

They show that increasing levels of criminality have eroded confidence among investors, and have reduced international competitiveness by introducing much higher costs in the form of additional security or transactional costs.

Not only does crime cause human suffering but, as these reports demonstrate, it can cause capital flight, the loss of those with skills or education who prefer to work in a more certain environment, and changes for the worse in the perception of a nation's investment climate. Moreover, studies by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the University of the West Indies, and others show that crime also is having a negative effect on social development by diverting limited resources away from health and education to security, the control of crime and the provision of facilities necessary for the administration of justice.

All of which is to say nothing about how it is changing the quality of life for all, or how, according to the IDB, concern among citizens about crime and violence now far exceeds that about unemployment, healthcare and other issues across the whole Caribbean and Latin American region.

Crime's damaging effect on national development was spelt out recently by Jamaica's National Security Minister, Peter Bunting.

Speaking to the Jamaica Employers' Federation he said that crime and corruption remained the main obstacle to Jamaica's rapid growth and development. In his remarks, Mr Bunting, referred to research by University of the West Indies which showed that if, over the last forty years, Jamaica had had a normal crime rate, the country's economy would in terms of GDP growth have been between three and 10 times greater.

The Bahamas Prime Minister, Perry Christie, has also recently suggested that crime has become the most significant challenge to economic development that his country and the region have to address. Speaking at the opening of Caribbean Marketplace, the annual regional tourism exchange, Mr Christie noted that the effect of the escalation in criminal violence, robbery and theft across the region was being underestimated. While crimes against tourists were limited, the stigmatisation of entire nations was discouraging tourism and damaging regional development.

Similar remarks have also come in the last few months from the Prime Ministers of Trinidad and Belize who are facing their own challenges from international crime syndicates.

Regrettably for a still peaceful region, the last two and a half decades have seen murder, armed robbery, kidnapping, organised crime, narcotics trafficking, the sale and smuggling of arms, piracy, money laundering, people trafficking, extortion and corruption, in almost every nation in the Caribbean. More recently there have been indications that ruthless cartels that have no regard for human life are being displaced from or are intentionally moving south from Mexico and into the Caribbean.

Why levels of crime should have risen so rapidly is still a subject for debate, but primary among the causes is the manner in which the narcotics trafficking networks and those that support them have exploited urban deprivation and middle class greed.

The consequence is that not only has the Caribbean become a key transit point for a commodity that vastly exceeds in value the entire legal economy of the region, but such sums have made it increasingly possible to suborn youth at one end of the spectrum, to, at the other, judicial systems, police forces, politicians and legitimate business.

What is certain is that beyond those who suffer as victims, crime is in danger of becoming embedded in Caribbean society, changing the quality of Caribbean life and engendering a fear, albeit suppressed into a kind of silent complicity, that if allowed, will over time enable those involved to challenge legitimate economic growth and development.

An element of present problems revolves around seriously under resourced, under trained and sometimes corrupt individuals in police and security forces that are simply not equipped to address organised crime, and the growing range of crimes against nationals and foreigners that cause actual and reputational damage.

When he spoke recently about his commitment to reducing crime and increasing investor confidence, Mr Bunting vowed to continue the process that last year significantly reduced murders, shootings and other serious crimes in Jamaica. However, he also made clear just how high the cost of doing so will be. To achieve his objective, Jamaica will need, over the next five years, to recruit an additional 5,000 soldiers and police officers, improve their mobility, equip them and take other actions that will ensure a greater chance of arrest and conviction.

But policing is of course just a part of the problem. In some states, organised crime has been able to develop political influence and deliver social and other programmes in a manner that suggests the emergence of a state within a state.

This and the failure of Governments to find ways of isolating those engaged in criminal activity is changing the nature of the support offered by the region's external partners. So much so that for the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union and Canada, the nature of development assistance is now skewed towards security and related forms of co-operation.

There are few easy answers to the burgeoning problem of crime. Moreover, addressing these issues during an economic downturn and rising unemployment is far from easy. While those beyond the region have to do more to reduce demand for the narcotics trafficking that fuels criminality in the Caribbean, the only real long term answer lies in the public demonstration of moral leadership by those in politics, the church, the media and business and between citizens who can see the consequence of inaction.

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