

The Quality of Life in Dominica:  
Paper Presented at Re-Union 2008 Conference,  
21<sup>st</sup> October 2008.

By  
William Para Riviere

First, let me thank the organizers of this panel for the invitation extended to me to make a small contribution to the event this morning. And I want to congratulate the organizers of this Re-Union Conference for deciding to stage an intellectual forum in the midst of activities which, without more, are generally perceived to represent our culture. The holding of this discourse is for me and, I imagine, for the organizers a silent, yet necessary, recognition that people's ideas, their thoughts, their beliefs, are, in fact, the essence, the soul, the kernel of their culture. And their music, song, dance, art, folklore, cuisine and so on are really the external manifestations of their ideas, thoughts and beliefs. It is written somewhere: "Tell me what you think and I will predict how you will act."

This presentation attempts to throw some light on four main questions:

1. What do we mean by quality of life?
2. Has the quality of life of our people advanced over the past decade?
3. How is our quality of life at this historical moment to be explained?
4. What needs to be done to improve the quality of life of our people?

What is meant by “quality of life”? Without wishing to anticipate what my colleagues might soon state, let me say this. A country’s G.D.P (Gross Domestic Product) or per capita income are not measures of the quality of life of its nationals. Neither is the extent of a country’s infrastructural development. Nor, for that matter, is the size of a country’s budget.

What, then, measures quality of life? It has long been accepted that material well-being cannot by itself constitute a measure of one’s quality of life. It is now universally agreed that quality of life embraces material well-being, an objective factor, and life satisfaction, a subjective consideration. Hence, quality of life is a reflection of the development of the human person, the all-round, total development

1. Spiritually, in terms of beliefs, values and one’s inner peace.
2. Socially, in terms of relations one with another.
3. Politically, in terms of participation in the evolution of self and community.
4. Economically, in terms of the capacity to meet, first, one’s needs and, then one’s aspirations.

Let me also say this: A person’s material well-being has long been perceived to be the determinant of his or her quality of life. Further, the normal measure of such well being is income.

Neither statement is free of controversy. There is a school of thought which posits that it is man's spirituality, not his or her economic status, which drives one's quality of life.

Further, it is well known that in underdeveloped, mainly agricultural economies with huge informal sectors, like ours, a substantial proportion of the income of the working population is not captured in the official records. As a result, the perception differs from the reality. In the event, small farmers may well be in a higher income bracket than the middle public officer and may, therefore, enjoy a better quality of life.

Now, what of the non-economic, subjective components of one's quality of life? As to the political dimension, it is widely accepted that the measure of one's participation in the evolution of self and community is the extent to which institutions are in place to enable that person to make an effective input into the community's decision-making. But how is "effective input" itself to be measured?

More than this. What yardsticks are to be used to determine the comparative "goodness" of one's person's beliefs, values and inner peace as against those of another?

These questions, to which answers cannot be readily found, point to the methodological uncertainty and, therefore, the controversy as to the usefulness of the broad category, "quality of life," as an index of human development. This has sounded a call for the deconstruction of the

broad category into its more easily measurable components. The UNDP's Human Development Index (H.D.I) has since 1990 taken center stage. It measures three variables:

1. Life expectancy.
2. Adult literacy and enrolment at the primary, secondary and tertiary level, and
3. Income.

And a multiplicity of other indices with focus on human "wellness" and "happiness" have emerged.

What all this points to is the need for development economists here in Dominica to be more creative. A need for them to rely less on indices of human development fashioned elsewhere, and to formulate an index much more appropriate to the specific conditionalities of our country and the Caribbean region. You have my support and, needless to say, my sympathies and blessings on this assignment.

So, rather than pay attention to the broad and evidently nebulous category, "Quality of life in Dominica", the rest of my presentation will share some summary thoughts on the more measurable economic aspect of the category, that is to say, the material well-being of our people. We set out to provoke you as to how well the greater majority of our population has been able to live off their earnings, how well off they have been, bearing in mind the costs of necessities and secondary needs. And our focus will be on the past eight years.

The question, then, is: Between 2000 and now has the majority of the population been better able to meet their basic needs and the needs of their family, including for food, housing, clothing, health, education and recreation? Wage-earners, public officers, small farmers, fishermen, the business persons, small and medium, consumers, young people, parents, senior citizens and the Kalinago community: all these sections of the population will answer with a resounding “No! They will tell you, further, that in 1998 and 1999 there was much money in circulation and needs could be met.

If the truth be told, this comparatively free circulation of money was made possible by a huge accumulation of debt which led to a crisis in our borrowing. The IMF intervened. Our economy was put under a regime of austerity, including cuts in government spending, increased taxation, freeze on job creation in the public sector, and outsourcing of jobs there. And poverty came to Dominica as it had never done before.

In 2002, 29 percent of all households in the country and 39 percent of the population as a whole lived in poverty. About 10 percent of households and 15 percent of the population as a whole were indigent, that is to say, very poor. Three quarters of poor households are in the rural areas, while 24 percent are in the towns of Roseau and Portsmouth. And poverty among our Kalinago community was much higher. Seventy percent were poor and half of this number were indigent. You are poor if, as an adult you make \$3,400 or less a year, that is to say, less than \$10 a day. And you are indigent if you make

\$2000 or less a year, that is to say, less than \$6 a day. The minimum wage at this time is \$34 per 8-hour day.

Since then, there has been no indication whatsoever that the percentage of indigent and poor has decreased. On the contrary, the situation has been compounded by the intervention of two main factors:

1. The escalation in cost of living brought about by rising world oil prices, and
2. The failure of our government, unlike its regional counterparts, to implement measures to effectively enable consumers to cushion the shock of these rising costs.

The country's G.D.P bottomed out in 2003 and rose marginally thereafter. A recent IMF Report stated that it fell in 2006-2007 and is unlikely to improve in the near future. Quite probably, poverty and indigence increased since 2002.

How do we explain the unprecedented level of poverty and indigence faced by the greater number of our people? Let me preface the answer to this by saying that the corrective measures put in place by the Pierre Charles regime, though comparatively severe, were necessary for our creditors to regain faith in our capacity to meet our debts. First, restore fiscal sanity. Then, grow the economy.

The Skerrit Administration's development agenda did neither.

1. It has turned its back on fiscal discipline.
2. It has not even considered to grow the economy.

3. Its development agenda is aimed principally at attracting grant funding for ad hoc handing out to chosen individuals and favoured communities, rather than at the creation of new wealth from optimum use of native resources and the provision of jobs to the working population.
4. It has abandoned economic planning as an instrument of national development.
5. It has totally excluded the people of Dominica from participating in the decision-making processes in respect of their personal development and that of their country.

Sisters and brothers: We did not and still do not have to be so low down on the ladder of economic development. We are not only blessed with natural resources envied by many: Our unspoilt green ecology and eco-tourist resources. Our many rivers and springs. Our hydro and thermal, wind and solar energy potential. Our underwater dive sites. Our fertile soil. Our herbs. Our pumice.

As well, our human resources, at work in the proper environment, have proven to be equal to any. And our resilience is legendary.

What, then, is to be done? At the center of our present predicament is a failed political leadership. Our present leadership does not

comprehend the dynamics of development. And it has no interest in trying to do so. So, it lacks the vision required to move our country forward. Such a vision must rest on five basic principles:

1. People are the beginning and the end of the development process and must, therefore, be fully involved at all levels and in all stages of that process.
2. To fully involve people in the development process their social consciousness must be lifted to a level where they have a working understanding of the development process, their role in that process, and the sacrifices they will be called upon to make in the nation-building effort.
3. Overseas begging and hand-outs at home will not do.
4. The road to improvement of living standards is the provision of jobs and jobs and jobs to our working population.
5. The route to provision of jobs is the creation of new wealth by offering incentives to local entrepreneurs to enable them to transform the natural resources mentioned above into value-added activities in which a competitive advantage can be gained.

These are the principles. What of the action founded upon these principles. Two strategies are envisaged.

1. A one-year emergency strategy that takes account of the material deprivation experienced since 2002 by the overwhelming majority of our people and is aimed at bringing immediate relief to the more vulnerable sections of the working population, including the Kalinago people, the youth of our country, small businesses and consumers on the whole. This strategy is intended to take our country back to pre-crisis economic and social levels.
  
2. A 20-year strategy seeking the following:
  - (1) To put the best interest of Dominicans first.
  - (2) To unite all our people at home and in the diaspora across lines of political party.
  - (3) To unite them not through empty calls for national unity unassisted by a specific methodology, but on the basis of a comprehensive plan for national development that
    - i. Ensures that ownership of our major resources remain in the hands of the State and nationals;
    - ii. Creates new wealth through optimal exploitation of our resources; and
    - iii. Manages that wealth in a manner that provides opportunity for all our people.
  - (4) To place this agenda for our country's development in the charge of leadership that is committed, knowledgeable, hard-working and honest.

That is the outline. The details constitute the subject-matter of another discussion. Once again, let me thank you for inviting me to share this panel. And, sisters and brothers, thanks for your patience.