

# Guest Editorial: Citizen Participation – An Important Pre-requisite for Sustainable Living in Trinidad and Tobago

We the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, over the last two to three decades, have adopted a unique approach to life and living in these twin islands, merely 5130 km<sup>2</sup> in area with associated ocean space, a country inhabited by 1.4 million humans and trillions of plants and animals. Each citizen appears to have expertise and opinions on every subject; we criticize everything and everyone, blame the government or others for every ill, real or imagined, but are hardly willing to take individual or collective *action* to correct the problems we identify. Any objective scan of the over 20 local radio frequencies, 10 local TV channels, the multi-faceted local print media and social networking sites, is likely to support this perception.

*Instructively, inaction has not been our historical reality.* Advocacy and community contributions within most developmental sectors; from childcare, through nutrition support, care for the poor, for orphans and care for the environment; had been demonstrated freely by countless citizens whose principal aims were never to seek financial rewards or other forms of personal benefits. Indeed, informal social systems such as *len-hand*, *gayap*, *sou-sou*, community social work, faith-based social involvement, mid-wives and special interest groups all contributed towards enhancing the quality of life for others and especially for less fortunate citizens.

How has the environment fared in this changed social development scenario? Not good at all! *As a nation, most of us do not understand the richness of our natural heritage.* Thus, when either formally sanctioned or informal violence is done to our forests, our waterways, coastal environments, our fisheries, game mammals, or to the last remaining vestiges of arable land, *we are unable to internalize the implications on our lives of such losses.* Ignorance, in its original connotation, is responsible for this attitude. So anything that moves must be killed, any area of natural vegetation in communities is 'bush' and must be cleared, trees are messy as fallen leaves are a nuisance, birds are noisy and leave excreta around homes and worst of all, forests burn spontaneously – *sulphur stones!* Hedges, fruit trees, flower and vegetable gardens around homes are things of the past. We are now modern, so yards must be tiled or concreted and even biologically uninteresting lawns are sometimes too much trouble to manage. Garbage will disappear when rains wash it away and life would be unbearable without chemical spraying for mosquitoes and agricultural pests!

Except for a few examples among twelve to maybe twenty *active* environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organisations on both islands, taking tangible concrete action on issues ranging from wetlands and waterfowl, to forest birds, coral reefs, marine turtles, forest rehabilitation, sustainable hunting, ecotourism,

floriculture, endangered species and wildlife rescue, many significant gaps in addressing environmental ills continue to threaten the sustainability of our twin islands. *Foremost among these is our national ambivalence towards sustainable land use and the integrated planning strategies that must underpin this important developmental goal.*

*Such ambivalence may have already compromised our ability as a country, to meet effectively, several of our basic needs for fostering quality human existence and welfare.* These include the provision of clean air, pure water, soils conserved for efficient food production and maintenance of natural aesthetics for emotional well-being. Nature provides all of these resources and attributes through cycling of water, minerals and other nutrients within forest, wetland, marine and other ecosystems. *Safeguarding these relationships of nature requires the consensus of the majority of the country's 1.4 million people, to ensure that efficient planning informs the establishment of human settlements, agricultural, community, commercial, transportation, recreational and industrial spaces.* This is especially critical in small landmasses such as ours where space is a limitation and where *land-use planning mistakes can be irreversible.*

*Thus, creating awareness, sharing knowledge and fostering understanding of nature and its relationship to human life, must become the mantra of developmental planning in every sector of our society.* This strategic approach must never become merely, an 'afterthought', to decisions of planners and leaders in *ALL* sectors of national development. Planning for environment and sustainable development is not sectoral, left principally to so-called *environmentalists*, as many politicians and several of the titans of business and industry still scathingly describe environmental NGO advocacy in Trinidad and Tobago. Regrettably, some environmental activists have themselves to blame as radical politicization of issues is the recent tendency and has thus become counter productive.

It is essential to note that where environmental advocacy has worked effectively, this has been underpinned by efforts towards genuine capacity building to increase the awareness, knowledge and understanding of affected communities and others in the population. Good examples exist in Trinidad and Tobago such as marine turtle conservation, which has been successful for almost twenty-five years because of involvement by and benefits to empowered communities. Transformation of recent behaviours can and must be facilitated. It will require less talk and more action by concerned, committed and enlightened citizens. *Will you stand up and be counted?!*

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