



The Caribbean: realities, challenges and the future

Martín Torrijos Espino, President of the Republic of Panama

The momentum of regional consciousness has been forged by the efforts of the ACS at integration since its inception

The Caribbean has been one of the geographic zones of greatest importance in the history of the American continent.

This truth does not require much effort to be proved. It is enough to take a look at the history of the continent over the past five centuries.

In this interior sea of the so-called 'New World' the first attempts at exploration, conquest and colonisation were made, and its waters served as the stage for intense efforts, contradictions and struggles that ended up weaving the histories of Europe, Africa, Asia and America.

The Caribbean allowed for the understanding of the universal dimension of the known world in 1492, when contact with the totality of the inhabited land masses culminated.

A sea to extend the conquering and colonising European power, the route for gold and silver towards the metropolis, an arrival and distribution centre for the trafficking of

African slaves, a stage for pirate and privateer actions, the Caribbean was also the theatre for the first independence revolutionaries and for their astonishing victories.

Columbus' ships anchored in the Caribbean; on its largest islands the first European settlers planned and carried out the conquest and colonisation; and from there departed the first liberators, with the slave-led Haitian Revolution (in 1804) and the liberating reflections of Bolívar from Jamaica (in 1815).

Nowadays, with all the technological and scientific advances, the increase in the world population and economic integration on a global scale, the importance of this area requires the special attention of those who see the Caribbean not only as a sea and archipelago, but also as a community of nations with a common destiny.

Due to this, this geographical space has become a political notion, the Greater Caribbean, a watershed that connects an extensive archipelago of nations with their sisters on the continental banks, understood as a space for the development and wellbeing of the peoples that inhabit it.

Without a doubt, the momentum of regional consciousness has been forged by the existence of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) and its efforts at integration since its inception.

However, this process of integration and rapprochement has not been an easy path nor has it been exempt from misunderstandings. The concept of Antillean nations preceded that of Caribbean countries and distanced island peoples from their continental brothers and sisters.

Creating a regional identity

The Colonial period constituted a mosaic of separated nations, both on the mainland and in island societies. The political, economic, cultural, social and linguistic differences made this reality more obvious, but precisely this diversity allowed for the amalgamation of Francophone, Anglophone, Hispanic and Dutch speaking countries.

The ruins of Old Panama, sacked by British privateer Captain Henry Morgan in 1671





Today we have the obligation of creating a way in which, without erasing who we are, we can produce a new reality more in tune with the interests of the countries and peoples that form the Greater Caribbean.

As we know, the ACS was the result of a proposal developed by the West Indies Commission, to which the Heads of State and Governments of the Caribbean Community delegated the task of designing a strategy for the deepening and widening of the Community in face of the challenges presented by the process of globalisation.

The concerns of then are still valid today.

Their Action Plan, as adopted since its inception, prioritised the development of trade and external economic relations, promoting commercial closeness and including the liberalisation of bilateral and multilateral trade activities within the Member States and Associate Members of the ACS.

In order to carry these activities forward Special Committees were created in the various regions, these organisms have some similarities with the Action Committees that operated in the Latin American Economic System (SELA).

Since the Second Summit of Heads of State and Government of the ACS (Santo Domingo, April 1999) the main priorities in the area of trade, transport and tourism were laid out, and the subject of natural disasters was added.

The interests and just aspirations of the ACS revolve around these axes, which intend to successfully resolve the diverse challenges that are presented to each one of the countries that make up the Association.

Overcoming inequalities

The historic, economic, political and social development of the Member States and Associate Members of the ACS, in the great majority of cases, shows a community of states based in the Caribbean Basin or that are a part of the geopolitical dynamics of the region.

But our countries demonstrate a greater level of similarity in regards to the principal geographic, demographic and economic indicators. Also, they possess an important cultural heritage that encompasses Spanish, French, English and Dutch speaking countries.

On the other hand, the high degree of income per capita in the region is usually accompanied by, in the majority of cases, equally high levels of education, as measured in terms of literacy rates.

A similar tendency can also be observed in the member countries of the Central American Common

Market, where the lowest levels of income per capita are associated with the highest proportions of illiteracy in the population. Therefore, we share the same challenges and aspirations.

The poverty of a high percentage of our populations, the limited development of the production forces, the narrowness of our domestic markets, the unequal distribution of wealth and the limited access to technology, create asymmetries and inequalities that must be overcome with partnership, political will and a permanent engagement with the development and wellbeing of our societies.

Added to the diversity of geography, economy and culture is a complex and diverse, multidimensional and wide-ranging panorama of integration.

Presenting a united front

Since its inception in 1994, the Member States and the Associate Members of the ACS have been able to count on important natural, productive and localised resources, which have been used to insert ourselves into the principal world markets, without achieving a similar intensification of relations amongst member countries.

The majority of the countries of the region have had to confront diverse and adverse external shocks, while many have also suffered from natural disasters.

Panama, who on this occasion warmly welcomes the members of the ACS as host and fellow member,

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Container port serving the Colon Free Zone at the Caribbean entrance of the Panama Canal





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would like to highlight its vocation as a centre for the promotion of hemispheric agreements, whilst at the same time recognising the ACS as the ideal organism for the Community of the Greater Caribbean to achieve the high objectives of regional integration that its efforts call for.

We understand that it is paramount to establish a trade information mechanism that serves the interests of the businessmen of the region, together with policies that promote the liberalisation of trade and the further development of activities geared to the promotion of exports.

Still pending are the activities related to state modernisation, the building of strong and trustworthy institutions, making stability and governability an objective of the present and the reduction of the levels of poverty, exclusion and social marginality.

On the other hand, it is important to point out that access to markets is not enough to reinforce trade within the Member States and the Associate Members of the ACS and that it is important to create a complementary business culture.

The Business Forum of the Greater Caribbean is the ideal tool for this challenge, together with the Forum of

the Trade Promotion Organisations of the ACS.

We must centre efforts and coordinate positions in the various international forums, thus presenting a unified position through the Regional Negotiating Machinery and assuring that the favourable treatments received by the countries of the Greater Caribbean at present are not diluted.

This mechanism is unique in the hemisphere and it is a very important tool for attaining better results in commercial negotiations with third parties.

The creation of a Sustainable Tourism Zone (STZ), is tied to the need for modernising and reorganising the regional hotel and transport infrastructure (both air and maritime) in order to step up the position of the Caribbean Basin at the global level and to increase employment.

Panama is committed to the Common Air Policy of the ACS which will establish the framework for the development of civil aviation in the region. International transport in all its forms will occupy a central role in the economic activities of the countries of the ACS, due to the impact that this activity has on the commerce of the region.

In order to address the mentioned difficulties, the ACS established the programme “Uniting the Caribbean by Land and Sea”. The specifics of this programme must crystallise in the possibility of a real leap forward for our peoples in the future.

With this objective in mind, Panama possesses the route of entrance to the Pacific, via the inter-oceanic channel which is in the process of enlargement and modernisation, and is the door to the Asian markets for a community that will have to broaden, in the not too distant future, its sphere of interest and the destinations for its products and services.

Since the Panama Summit in 1995 we have steadily moved forward and we must redouble our efforts to achieve an active presence in the international concert of nations.

Panama is especially pleased to point out that it has carried out the ratification of all the legal instruments of the ACS, and we are encouraged by the fact that in the past year the other Member States and Associate Members have significantly advanced towards putting in force said instruments. The Greater Caribbean, during its time of projection as an area of convergence of legitimate interests and efforts for sustainable development, faces greater challenges.

Today we are closer to achieving our goals. We can achieve them and, above all, it depends on us. ■

Panama's Tucumen International Airport acts as a regional air passenger transport hub

