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# STIMULATING DIASPORIC TOURISM AS A NICHE MARKET FOR CARIBBEAN TOURISM: THE CASE OF GUYANA AND TORONTO<sup>1</sup>

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**Sherma Roberts\***

University of West Indies, Barbados

**Abstract:** The global financial crisis has led the Caribbean tourism industry to search for new products and markets. Diaspora tourism presents an opportunity to explore a new market niche in the face of increasing global competition, and changing consumer psychographics. This study examines the workings of diaspora tourism as it emanates from the global city of Toronto and impacts on the diasporic homeland of Guyana.

**Keywords:** diaspora; diasporic tourism; sustainable tourism; Guyana; Toronto.

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## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the notion of sustainable tourism development one can reasonably argue provided a legitimate space for the discussion and analysis of diaspora tourism. With its emphasis on critiquing the negative impacts associated with mass tourism and a concomitant embrace of alternative forms of tourism which are said to be more economically, socially, culturally and environmentally sustainable, sustainable tourism sought to move the focus towards tourism development that is socially and culturally compatible with the destination, that spread the benefits of tourism that reduce leakages and that is more conscious of environmental stewardship. In other words, alternative forms of tourism is

regarded as being empowering to the community, financially beneficial, premised upon local lifestyles, identity and values, and fosters more meaningful relationships between hosts and guests (Brohman 1996; Scheyvens, 2002). These forms of tourism have manifested themselves in wine tourism, festival tourism, heritage tourism, ecotourism, sport tourism, adventure tourism, gastronomic tourism, ethnic tourism, etc. To date, no mention has been made of how diasporic communities (a stock of people born in a country and living in another country) can meaningfully be included under the umbrella of alternative tourism to deliver the suggested benefits discussed above. Given that the diaspora in large part remains connected to their homeland through various

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\*Corresponding author: The Department of Management Studies, University of West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados; e-mail: sherma.roberts@cavehill.uwi.edu

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kinship and other networks, are less vulnerable to changing trends and tastes (Scheyvens, 2007), are committed to cross-border collaboration through alumni associations, community groups, and other migrant networks (Schmid, n.d), are culturally in sync, and are often among the skilled and qualified professionals that left their birth countries—it would seem obvious that this should be a key target segment for Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs). With respect to the Caribbean diaspora's tourism and developmental potential, Springer (2008) notes that:

the [Caribbean] diaspora is intellectually rich and financially strong and has been only partially exploited by Caribbean marketers.....In New York City, the easily harvested "low lying fruit" includes Caribbean-Americans who have not been consistently courted except by a few destination...Caribbean-Americans have high disposable incomes, own their own homes and arguably spend more money "on island" than the mainstream American visitor....." (www.spiceislander.com)

Data estimates suggest that the net migration rate for the Caribbean is one of the highest in the world (United Nations 2003 cited in Schmid n.d)—upwards of over 5 million people. Among the countries with the highest migration losses are Guyana and Jamaica with 89% and 85%, respectively. The 2006 census data for Canada reveals that 191, 930 migrants from the Caribbean and Bermuda now reside in Canada with 91% residing in Toronto (www.statcan.ca). The significant movement of human capital from the Caribbean is compounded by the fact that 'it is not surplus or under-employed labour that is the main group of migrants. Instead it is the highly skilled and educated' (Nurse, 2004). Carrington and Detragiache (1998 cited in Nurse, 2004) estimate that the across the region migrants with tertiary education ranges from 22% to 47%—the latter being the case of Trinidad and Tobago.

For Guyana, the migration rate among the well-educated is approximately 77%. Not surprisingly, remittances from the Caribbean have been quite sizeable. In 2006, remittance flows from the Caribbean including Cuba and the Dominican Republic, excluding Guyana, Suriname and Belize—totalled US\$8.3 billion (ECLAC, 2008). The highest remittance receiving countries in the region are Dominican Republic: US\$2.4 billion, Jamaica: US\$1.5 billion, Haiti: US\$1.0 billion and Guyana: US\$0.1 billion (Kirton, 2006). Between 2001 and 2005, remittances accounted for 18.8% of Guyana's GDP and 26% of goods exports (ECLAC, 2008).

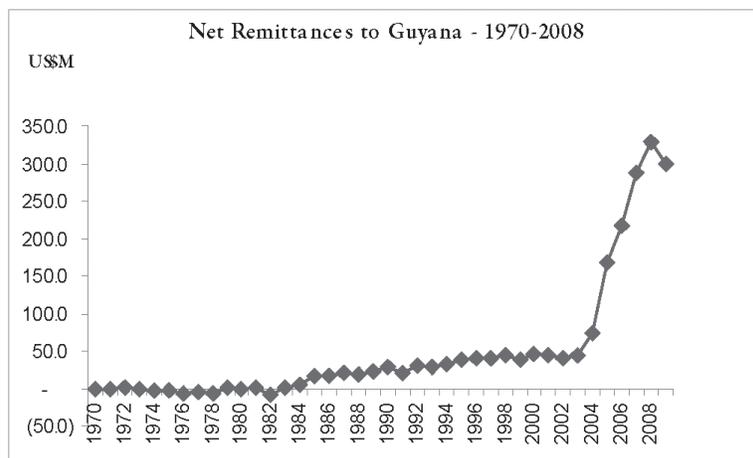
The social, cultural and economic ties that the diaspora maintains with the land of their birth either through return visits, donations of goods, information exchange, remittances, etc., alert us to the fact that this segment has the potential to be a primary vehicle for the socio-economic sustainability of their homeland and in this case Guyana. The current global economic crisis which has led to double-digit decline in arrival figures from traditional source markets of the United Kingdom and the United States and in some instances Canada, for many Caribbean countries, should also force DMOs to consider alternative segments, such as the diaspora and markets. While the Caribbean Tourism Organisation has sought to join forces and resources with Travel Span to develop and promote special packages geared towards the diaspora, a lot more needs to be done in terms of deliberate action by individual countries. This study therefore seeks to examine the current socio-economic sustainability contribution of travel and tourism as it relates to the Guyanese diaspora resident in Toronto, and the developmental impacts arising as a result of these movements. The paper also explores the mechanisms and policy environment that are required to increase the diaspora tourism contributions and developmental benefits.

### UNRAVELING THE MULTIPLIER BENEFITS OF THE DIASPORA SEGMENT—IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGIC POLICY DIRECTIONS

It is axiomatic that migration significantly reduces the human capital potential of many countries, particularly in small states and developing countries, such as the Caribbean countries where migrants tend to fall within the category of young, well-educated adults (Nurse, 2004; Williams, 2009). As noted earlier, some five Caribbean countries have suffered from emigration rates as high as 80%–90% of their university educated nationals, with Guyana topping the scale with 89% (Adams, 2003). This brain drain or ‘skill wastage’ as it is often referred to, is associated with inadequate career opportunities and remuneration and benefits; under-utilization of acquired skills; unfavourable working conditions, etc. In some instances, migration is connected with political or ethnic victimisation. Whatever the reason(s) for emigration, the ‘continued depletion of professionals deprives the region [Caribbean] of its desperately qualified staff whose education and training was

often a considerable expense to its taxpayers’. (Schmid n.d: 3)

Despite this evident loss to home country, the diaspora is often regarded as a valuable resource in facilitating their home country’s developmental agenda. The value of this community is not just in terms of capital flows but also knowledge transfer and networks, capacity building, fostering enterprise, technology transfer, image building, and reducing poverty. Pertinent to this study, is the current and potential capacity of the diaspora to contribute to diaspora tourism and development in the home country. Thus, Williams (2009) argues that the ‘brain drain’ phenomenon can be transformed into ‘brain gain’ given the immense pool of global human capital resident in the diaspora. Certainly for many countries remittances represent one of the largest contributions that the diaspora makes to their home country’s economic development. In the case of Guyana, for example, there was a sizeable percentage increase in net remittances from 1971 to 2009 (refer Figure 1 for net remittances to Guyana). Using money



**Figure 1** Net remittances to Guyana, 1970–2008

Source: Caribbean Development Bank, 2010

transfer services (Laparkan, Money Gram, Travelex, Western Union etc) Guyanese in the diaspora sent US\$286 million to their homeland in 2007. This figure may be a lot larger if informal channels are considered. In fact, it is reported that remittances now account for nearly twice as much as gold or sugar—two of Guyana's key commodity exports (Lucas, 2008) and between 2001 and 2005 accounted for 326.7% of foreign direct investment (FDI) (ECLAC, 2008). Thus, for Guyana, as other countries, remittances represent a valuable source of foreign currency and are crucial to the livelihoods of many families.

Despite its contributions to national economies, remittances are also regarded as a double-edged sword in that it has the potential to serve as a disincentive to work and entrepreneurship, thereby lowering production levels. Using the case of Guyana, Khemraj (2009:2) argues that remittances cannot compensate for loss of human capital for 'while remittances may ease short-term foreign exchange constraints, the country is hurt at greater levels in the long-term by the dearth of entrepreneurs, innovators, researchers and administrators. In other words, the talents are not there to even optimally utilize the remittances'. The call is, therefore, for the Guyanese government to craft a comprehensive plan to engage the diaspora; this plan would include knowledge transfer, inward investments, diaspora products and diaspora tourism. Critical to the success of any such strategies is the building and maintaining of bonds, networks and patriotic sentiments among migrants—as transnational engagement such as diaspora tourism—are highly dependent on emotional ties and a shared sense of the homeland.

While governments are critical in ensuring the best socio-economic advantage

is gained for the home country through strategic diaspora engagement, a lot of work is being done by diaspora organizations and associations that is significantly impacting upon long-term sustainability goals. For instance, Orozco et al. (2005) highlight the role of trade in nostalgic and home country products, the role of the hometown associations in building institutional and human capacity and alleviating poverty in their communities and school alumni. Other authors allude to the business networks that are common among the diaspora, the 'social remittances' that may help reorient perspectives particularly among young women, and the philanthropic endeavours of many diasporic groups—all of which add value to the overall development of the home country (Newland and Patrick, 2004).

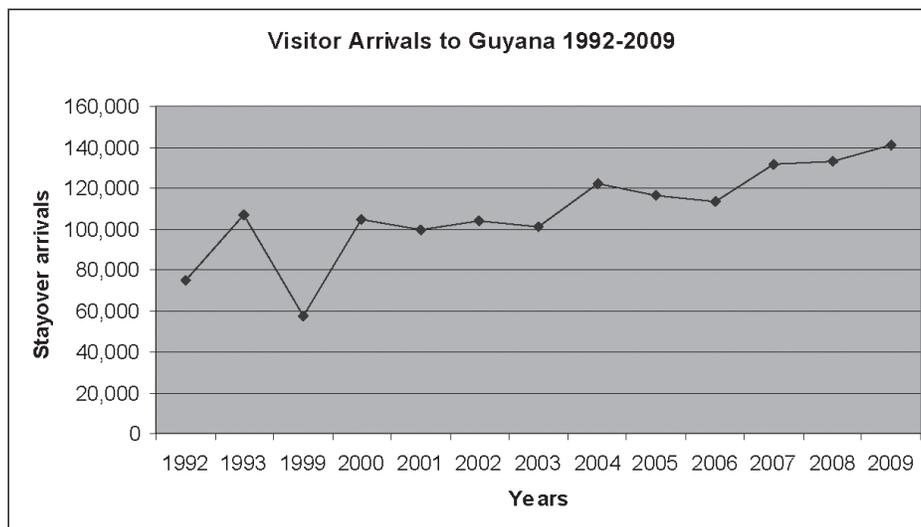
What is striking in all the discussions about the diaspora contributions is that the link to tourism is omitted. In many instances, these home town associations, community organisations or individual business people visit their homeland in groups or alone, and are thus counted as part of the tourism arrival figures. Thus, one can argue that Moreover, that diaspora migrants returning for whatever purpose to the country of their birth provide benefits way beyond the injection of tourist-related expenditure. In his case study on Ghanaian national returning for holidays, Asieudu (2005) points to how the diaspora strengthens the social fabric of their villages by contributing 'donations, cash, drugs, materials, equipment.....migrant funds have therefore aided poverty alleviation in the recipient regions' (Asieudu, 2005, p.9). Thus unlike the "Northerner' who visits the destination to sample its climate, culinary and cultural offerings and leaves with a 'tan, memories and photos' the diaspora invest significant funds to build up the social infrastructure of his homeland. Similar

findings have been noted in the case of the Samoan diaspora visiting their homeland where donations including money, furniture, equipment and household items were made to individuals and organizations (Scheyvens, 2007).

The interconnectedness between all the activities of diaspora communities and developments in their home country should not go unacknowledged. Critically, many of these activities require travel to the homeland either in groups or individually. Given that the length of stay for many Caribbean persons would be more than twentyfourhours,wouldconstitutetourism. The data suggests that these visitors contribute much more than income to tourism related businesses and therefore their initial tourist spend. In this regard, there needs to greater recognition of the value of the diasporic communities to tourism development in their countries of origin; and the requisite marketing efforts to draw this segment.

### TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN GUYANA

For tourism dependent economies like the Caribbean, tapping into new and viable source markets and visitor segments cannot be underestimated. In 2009, most Caribbean countries recorded double digit declines in their visitor numbers and visitor spend. For example, Antigua and Barbuda witnessed a decline in stop over arrivals of about -12.3% and the Bahamas -13.5%. These declines have had deleterious effects such as hotel closures, employee lay offs and on government revenues. Unlike many of the Caribbean Community member states, Guyana's tourism industry has been very robust throughout the global financial crisis revealing growth of 11.5% in 2009 in stayover visitors (CTO Statistics, 2009). In fact, between 2000 and 2009 Guyana has managed to maintain and grow its tourism arrivals (Figure 2). Official website data attributes this growth to the success of aggressive marketing initiatives, increased access and infrastructural development. However, the



**Figure 2** Visitor arrivals to Guyana 1992–2009

Source: Caribbean Tourism Organisation, 2009: Visitor arrivals by country

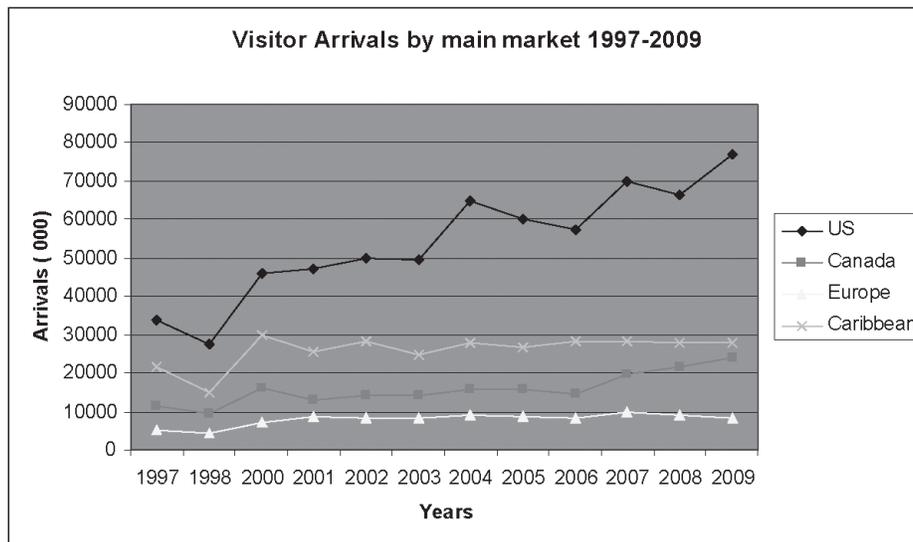
growth in numbers has not been concomitant to increases in tourism receipts.

While the data sourced to date does not provide a comprehensive year on year picture of the purpose of visit of travelers to Guyana, there is high likelihood that the majority of travel to Guyana includes the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) segment that may be from the diaspora. Data from the Caribbean Tourism Organisation (2010) show that in 2009, of the 88,549 Guyanese that visited Guyana, 66% were holiday makers and 16% made up the VFR segment. Interestingly, visitors who were not born in Guyana accounted for 13% of the visitor arrivals in that same year. One can perhaps infer that this segment comprises friends and second generation Guyanese who were born overseas.

With respect to accommodation preferences, data in 2004 and 2006 reveal that in both years about 85.2% of visitors to Guyana

stay in private accommodation while only 14% stay in hotels, suggesting a big VFR market coming from Guyana's key markets. Figure 3 shows that the United States is by far Guyana's largest source market, followed by the Caribbean and then Canada.

The Canadian market represents an area where Guyana can grow its diasporic tourism segment. Given that travel and tourism contributes 8.3% to Guyana's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with international tourism receipts of US\$50 million ([www.statisticsguyana.gov.gy](http://www.statisticsguyana.gov.gy)) a lot more can be done to attract this segment, a high percentage of whom may be diaspora peoples. From a marketing perspective, what requires further investigation is the motivation for returning home and the activities of the Guyanese diaspora once in the homeland. This intelligence can assist tourism policy makers and industry practitioners to create or improve the current tourism product of Guyana, so that the diaspora spend are maximised.



**Figure 3** Arrivals to Guyana by generating markets

Source: Caribbean Tourism Organisation, 2009

In terms of institutional arrangements, the Guyana Tourism Authority (GTA) was established by an Act of Parliament in 2002 and has been given the responsibility *inter alia* to market and promote Guyana as tourism destination (Guyana Tourism Authority Act, 2002). The GTA is headed by the Ministry of Tourism, Industry and Commerce. The National Development Strategy 2001–2010 has recognised the benefits of pursuing tourism as a development strategy and has identified the niche products that Guyana's industry should focus on including nature, adventure, heritage, cruise ship eco-tourism, eco-tourism and so. What is striking is that there seems to be a dissonance between this policy directive and the key reasons why persons visit Guyana. The development strategy has also outlined a number of objectives and strategies that should be implemented to ensure that the objectives are met—one of them being the establishment of the Guyana Tourism Authority. To date, however, there is no cohesive tourism policy that drives tourism development in Guyana. The other major stakeholder involved in tourism is the Tourism and Hotel Association of Guyana (THAG) which is a voluntary organization that works in close collaboration with the Ministry and the GTA to promote Guyana and maintain standards within the industry (THAG: [www.exploreGuyana.org](http://www.exploreGuyana.org)).

One can argue that like Trinidad and Tobago which has a buoyant oil and gas sector, Guyana's involvement in tourism has been minimal given the relative success of its other productive export sectors such as gold, sugar, rice, bauxite, and remittances. In contrast to the other Caribbean countries (except Grenada and Dominica) which record double digits in tourism contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from 2002 to 2006, Guyana's tourism sector contribution was 2.2% (ECLAC, 2008). In one sense, this minimal dependence is laudable.

However, it is argued that the figures can be improved if Guyana takes a more strategic and active approach in developing its key market segments, and in particular, its 'hidden gold' the diaspora market.

### **PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

Against the foregoing discussion, this study offers the following observations regarding the current socio-economic sustainability contribution of travel and tourism as it relates to the Guyanese diaspora resident in Toronto, and the developmental impacts arising as a result of these movements.

#### **I. Segmenting the Diaspora Tourist to Guyana**

Qualitative data suggests that the diaspora visitor to Guyana still belongs to the first generation segment, although there is growing interest among the second generation—particularly those born in Canada. Second generation migrants, born in Guyana, but who were taken to Canada as children, present a more complex picture. One perspective suggests that because most of their immediate family is resident in Canada, they feel no compunction to return to Guyana but would rather choose to visit other destinations. Another view is that their fond childhood memories serve as motivator for several return visits. The primary motivator identified by interviewees is the desire by the diaspora to reconnect with family. Diaspora tourism was also recognised as 'the backbone of the product...while we say that we are an eco-destination the diaspora has demonstrated that they are Guyana's greatest asset'. With respect to booking preferences, the majority still book their travel through the traditional travel agent; although it is suspected that the younger generation would take advantage of on-line booking engines.

## 2. Facilitating Environment for Courting the Diaspora

While the GTA admits that its greatest share of arrivals over the years has come from the diaspora—with Canada being its third largest market—there has been no deliberate marketing strategy geared towards the diaspora segment. Arguably, one of the reasons for this is the relatively small budget that the GTA operates with. In fact, unlike many of its Caribbean counterparts, GTA has no overseas marketing offices that liaise with tour operators, travel agencies and other vendors. Much of this type of work, on a more minimal basis, is done through the Guyana Consulate in Toronto, who has no personnel that is skilled or dedicated to marketing efforts. What has tended to happen in terms of reaching the diaspora market is that the GTA has had to work closely with its overseas offices using specific events such as Caribana and Last Lap Lime. The urgent need for a more substantial marketing budget was made by one respondent:

we need to spend about US\$100,000–200,000. on marketing. Why couldn't we get the US\$1 million that went to Haiti to market Guyana? We need the funds to place Guyana on the map. Companies like us can't piggy back on destination awareness. Put GY\$1 million into marketing. The government seems to be expecting someone else to do it (Captain Gerald Gouveia, 2010).

The internet is also being used by the GTA as an intermediary for information sharing with the diaspora. In 2010, this use of the electronic media is very rudimentary as destination sites are moving towards more integrated marketing systems where products can be bought by the 'e-booker'. Perhaps, in acknowledgement that tourism is growing in importance in Guyana, the president in 2009 summoned all heads of missions to Guyana to a retreat with the specific aim of promoting

Guyana overseas. While this effort is laudable, the generally steady increase in tourism arrivals and expenditure should signal to the government that more needs to be done in terms of reaching its overseas diaspora for tourism and other purposes.

Unlike the other tourism-dependent Caribbean island states that make a point of having a separate line item in their budgets for tourism receipts, in Guyana tourism receipts is subsumed under services. As such, agencies such as the GTA and the THAG are hard pressed to make a strong case to the central government for an increase in their operational and marketing budgets. Moreover, the evidence suggests that the GTA operates without a written marketing plan. In a global tourism space where destinations are becoming increasingly sophisticated in data collection, data mining and strategic marketing— all geared to increase their market share—the GTA is undermining its success by failing to craft a marketing plan. This is also critical failing as according to the vice-president of THAG 'the diaspora has continued to show an interest in Guyana....especially the second generation, who wants to know where they came from, and more about the food, culture and people of their parents'.

Access to Guyana is also a major hindrance in increasing this key market segment for Guyana. Visitors to Guyana from all of their major markets must transit via Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. This situation worsened after 2001 when Guyana Airways was declared insolvent in 2001 and its successor Guyana Air in 2003. While Guyanese travelers have been the recipients and subjects of unkind remarks and high airfares, it does not seem that the transport links between Guyana and its source markets would change anytime soon. One reason for this is the heavy fines that are imposed on airline by the receiving country once drugs and

other related substances are found on board a national carrier.

### **3. Accommodation Patterns and Activities of the Diaspora**

The GTA indicates that about 20% of the diaspora market stays in hotel accommodation. This is particularly so when they have been away for a long time and when they are accompanied by their families. It is also suggested that these persons tend to stay in accommodation within or close to Georgetown. The THAG respondent notes that with the exception of Roirama Tours, who have a presence in the Toronto market, the accommodation providers have not been packaging for the diaspora market. It seems that the potential for increasing diaspora business is definitely present but that the hoteliers may lack the know-how to tap into this very lucrative segment. The majority of Guyanese though, choose to stay with families so that they can utilize their funds to rent cars and minivans and spend in the local markets and offer financial support while they are in Guyana. According to one respondent 'we need to get the message to them [the diaspora] that the hotels are offering value for money'.

Militating against increased use of paid accommodation by the diaspora is the issue of standards. For Guyana which has many eco-lodges, small hotels in rural areas, bread and breakfasts operating across the rural and urban regions, the question of standards is most critical in managing risk and safety and ensuring a positive visitor experience. Many of the smaller providers operate with no or low standards; for example, no proper entrance or exit, fire alarms, etc.—all of which are unacceptable to a very exposed diaspora. The Government of Guyana recently enacted legislation governing standards for all accommodation, resorts in the interior and tour guides and tour operators.

The THAG has been asked by the GTA to act as the monitoring agency for the successful implementation of the standards. To date, very little has been done in terms of implementation as there is a cost factor for accommodation providers.

The activities that the diaspora engages in while in the home country centre around heritage tours and family outings. Visiting migrants, especially those with families, will visit the museums around Georgetown and go on short trail tours, river tours around Georgetown and soft adventure tours that are no more than an hour and a half. The hard adventure tours that go into the interior of Guyana do not seem to be attractive to Guyanese returning home on holidays either because of the expense and/or the distance and experience. Two migrant Guyanese also suggested that while they would like to visit Kaieteur Falls the infrastructure—transport and general access is unreliable and the price prohibitive, especially for a family of four.

### **4. Foreign Direct Investment**

The Guyana government works through Go Invest (Guyanese Invest)—an export promotion company—to facilitate FDI. The major functions of Go Invest are to assist with information and intelligence on the behalf of potential investors, to liaise with agencies for the investor, to provide fiscal waivers, to service micro enterprises and to match buyers and sellers. The agency recognizes the economic advantage and market potential of Guyanese huge diaspora and has strategically gone about using the Consulates and Missions across North America to increase awareness in the diaspora of local products and services. Chief Executive Officer of Go Invest states that 'the strategy was to go to these expos as a group and build presence among Guyanese in the diaspora as well as build a bigger market presence in the main

markets. We also addressed Guyanese wishing to do business back home'. So that, in 2007, FDI generated by Guyanese-Canadians amounted to US\$25,125 (Go Invest, 2008). This was across a number of sectors but with leading investments in the mining and agricultural sectors. The direct employment created as a result of these jobs was about 268 placements (Go Invest, 2008).

the Guyanese diaspora has been investing in Guyana over the last three years; this is because the political situation has settled. In 2002, the overseas Guyanese projects that we worked with were fifteen. In 2009, we have 83 projects. Note that not all companies go through Go Invest so that the numbers of diaspora investments may be even larger. (CEO, Go Invest)

One of the challenges identified in maximizing foreign investment through diaspora channels is the race tension that exists between Afro and Indo Guyanese and that is transposed on their migrant environments. Emerging out of a National Competitiveness Strategy a Diaspora Unit was set up in Guyana to facilitate increased business opportunities for the diaspora in the Guyana. However, this Unit disintegrated and one of the reasons given was that the initiative was somehow 'owned' by the Indian-Guyanese diaspora to the exclusion of the blacks. The Chairman of the Private Sector Commission (PVC) pointed out that 'the diaspora in Canada is divided along the lines of race and class, so that when I go to Toronto and all present at the business meeting are Indian, it does not make sense....'

### **5. Diaspora Engagement through Alumni Associations**

Where the diaspora contribution to socio-economic sustainability appears to be strongest are in the areas of home town and alumni associations. Contributions

from alumni include book and furniture donations, building or refurbishing science laboratories, establishing computer labs in schools and providing on-going internet access. Most of these alumni association have chapters in the major cities, including Toronto. Elaborating on the contribution of the Toronto Chapter, the secretary of the Bishop's High School Old Students Association states 'the Toronto chapter.... they have given the computer lab and computers. They also pay for security service at the lab on a monthly basis. They pay the ADSL fees to allow students to have internet access at the school'.

Alumni associations appear to be the backbone of many schools in Guyana, and their support is crucial to the development and continuation of many of the schools programme. Among many migrants there is a strong desire to give back and the alumni is perhaps one of the key mechanisms to contribute in a transparent and accountable manner. The data also reveals that the alumni associations often serve as fertile ground for the development of other social and business networks that can stimulate significant investment in the country of origin. Pertinently, also is that many of these home town associations host reunions whether bi-annual or tri-annual in their home country and these events are associated with sizeable multiplier effects (Braunlich and Nadkarni, 1995).

### **CONCLUSION**

The thrust towards tourism premised upon sustainability principles carries with it benefits for the destination such as increased local employment, ownership of the tourism superstructure, entrepreneurial opportunities, the empowerment of women and marginalized groups, valorization of indigenous culture, preservation of local norms and values, etc. Diaspora tourism with its

emotional, cultural, economic and social links to the homeland has the potential to deliver many of these benefits. The data has shown that Guyana is well-placed to maximize this niche in the Canadian market place given the continuous growth in arrivals that has been shown. Additionally, a lot of work is being undertaken by various groups within the Guyanese diaspora in Toronto that have implications for sustained socio-economic development. The government of Guyana needs to recognize the interconnections in these various transnational activities and be deliberate in crafting a diaspora strategy that aims at cohesion but also at exploiting the comparative advantages that these circulatory activities contain.

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