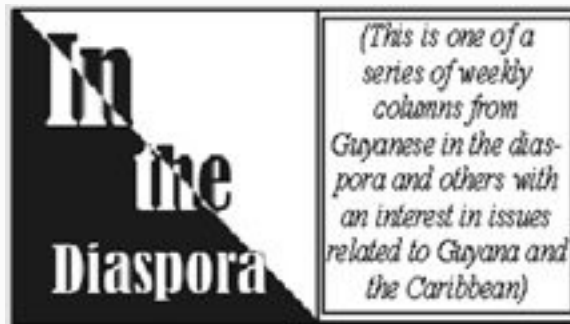




In The Diaspora

# What are the real issues confronting the Caribbean's Ageing Diaspora and Regional Governments?

By Staff Writer 15 h ago



By **Shamette Hepburn**

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Over several decades members of the Caribbean diaspora have observed the day to day happenings in their territories of origin. Spiraling crime rates, increased economic hardship and insecurity generally punctate the

news from back home. Yet they know that crime and violence are only a small part of Caribbean life. The rest is positive and fulfilling and Caribbean migrants remain tethered to their homelands. Members of the Caribbean diaspora have consistently travelled between North America, the United Kingdom and the Caribbean region in order to maintain their social ties. While the vast majority of Caribbean nationals are keen to

travel back and forth, some are committed to returning permanently to the Caribbean. It is this group that Caribbean governments are intent on re-incorporating into their respective national fabrics.

In order to facilitate this re-incorporation, governments appear to be focused on two things: how to leverage the social and economic capital that Caribbean nationals living abroad can repatriate to the region and second, how to convince this group that the home countries they left behind many years ago are still safe enough for them. It goes without saying that crime is a serious concern of Caribbean nationals. Several months ago, 63-year-old charity worker Delroy Walker was stabbed and killed in his home in Jamaica, allegedly by men hired to paint the house he was constructing in order to return to live on the island. Walker was a resident of Birmingham in the United Kingdom. His death followed that of the brutal killing of an elderly couple Gayle and Charlie Anderson, aged 71 and 74 who returned from Manchester in the United Kingdom to live in eastern Jamaica. Crime, potential loss of life and vulnerability factor in any decision to return to the region. Jamaica has reportedly had over 200 expatriate murders since the year 2000. Though the rate of violent crime varies from territory to territory, what appears to be consistent across countries is the perception that returning expatriates are wealthy. For that reason, they are often targets for persons with criminal intent.

When expatriates return to the region, they do so with the economic and social capital they have amassed. Governments know how valuable these forms of capital are to communities and have taken systematic measures

to engage with potential returnees in the hopes that they might invest in large scale development projects or contribute to local charitable causes. The rate of permanent return to the region has diminished since the 1990s. This fact is not lost on the Jamaican government. In response to the recent spate of violence committed against returnees, Jamaica's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced in July that it had established a task force aimed at addressing the safety concerns of returning residents who live and conduct business on the island. The task force, which is chaired by State Minister Pearnel Charles Jr., comprises members of the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF) and staff of the Diaspora Affairs Department of the ministry. In order to increase the safety of returning residents, the police also announced that a standard operating procedure will be devised to address the safety needs of this group.

These measures are indeed commendable and the Jamaican government should be congratulated for acknowledging the contributions that its nationals living abroad have made and continue to make to the social and economic development of the island. In 2017, Jamaicans living abroad remitted US\$2.3 billion to their families. This is a substantial figure when considering the island's 2016 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was approximately US\$14.6 billion. It is important that returnees have a stake in local community life through civic engagement given how much they contribute to the economy.

What remains unaddressed are the types of services and amenities this group would need should they return. This leads us to the fact that many returnees are at a stage of their lifecourse where they are now older adults. The recent Windrush scandal revealed not only atrocities committed against Caribbean migrants who had spent decades in the UK, only to be illegally removed, but the fact that there is an entire generation of Caribbean nationals who have entered old age while living abroad. Many would like to return to the Caribbean. We have also seen that the region is faced with increasing cohorts of older adults who would now

require support beyond protection from crime and violence. Regional economies which are already stretched in trying to provide for its local populations in terms of health care, social services and recreational activities, would have to consider specialized services for ageing returnee and local populations.

Given that ageing populations are on the rise worldwide, the Caribbean will also experience such population shifts. According to the Planning Institute of Jamaica (PIOJ), changes in the population due to reduced fertility, mortality and migration have resulted in Jamaica now regarded as consisting increasingly of an ageing population. The funding of programmes and supports may not be sustainable from a government context. Where then could funding come from? What considerations could there be for the development or expansion of care services from a market perspective? Many returnees have a desire for culturally appropriate care services which they are unable to access in places of settlement overseas. Through institutional racism and inappropriate care provisions, many Caribbean nationals living overseas are isolated and as they get older, they would benefit from a more age affirming cultural space. Through their entitlements such as government and occupational pensions, many could afford care and support in the Caribbean where they would be able to maximize the monetary value of these entitlements.

Countries such as Costa Rica, Bahamas, Turks and Caicos and Panama, have already distinguished themselves as excellent retirement destinations. It would be prudent for countries within the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) to engage experts, researchers, investors, communities and diasporic representatives, on the development of a regional ageing strategy that addresses issues of ageing, support, civic engagement and investment across territories. A regional approach within the CARICOM machinery would give both governments and community stakeholders vital structural support and accountability mechanisms to

stakeholders vital structural support and accountability mechanisms to guarantee success of the regional ageing strategy and its initiatives.

One could also ask, what if the region could create structures that could re-absorb its ageing returnees in a manner that is sustainable and that recognize their health, social and recreational needs, as well as their acquired tastes and preferences? It is possible to look at investments in specialized or value-added services for this population. The region could benefit from the development of specialized care and support services for ageing populations both from a health system perspective as well as from a market perspective through the development of services, and workforce capacity. In September, Jamaica's National Council on Senior Citizens announced that it is moving to establish a national registry of senior citizens as part of a national agenda to support ageing citizens.

Retirement and lifestyle planning, intergenerational programming as well as training seniors on use of technology are several initiatives being undertaken. As programmes develop, they will prove beneficial not only to returnees the end of their migration journey but also for those seniors who never migrated.

In my recent visual ethnographic study on Jamaican Canadian older adults, I considered how they make residential decisions after retiring in Canada. Many had lived in Canada for almost 50 years. I considered questions such as: Do they decide to stay in Canada, move back and forth between Canada and Jamaica or do they decide to return to permanently to Jamaica? The study revealed they largely move back and forth between both countries and eventually they choose to stay in Canada as they get even older. One may ask what is behind all this later-life mobility? The answer lies in the fact that there is tremendous inequality, uncertainty and insecurity at both ends of the migration endeavor. They are ill at ease in both Canada and Jamaica. When they travel, they cannot remain in one country for too long or they could see a loss of entitlements such as healthcare benefits. Increased mobility between Jamaica, their country of origin, and Canada, their country of settlement, appears to be a buffer

against all those factors that could create an unpleasant and poverty-stricken old age.

So now we are thinking beyond issues of crime and violence which we know that governments must address swiftly. Violence remains a significant barrier to the return of older Caribbean nationals. However, the lack of services and amenities in the region remains a key concern for them. Health and social service systems need to be developed to support ageing populations. More so, they also need to be developed to support the needs of internationally mobile populations. This can mean local health care and social service providers leveraging technology in order to work in concert with their overseas counterparts such as social workers and geriatricians in providing wrap-around services to transnationally mobile seniors.

My study's participants were preoccupied with the need to have a secure old age. Many acknowledged that crime was a concern, but they were also keen on what services they would be able to access given that they are accustomed to high quality care, support and recreational services in countries of settlement. For them, what was missing in their countries of settlement is the validation that the Caribbean provides as a counter to the racism and dehumanization they have suffered and continue to suffer overseas. Essentially, they are concerned with how they could be supported by governments and communities in their efforts to live well in old age. For now, protection from crime is just one piece of the puzzle. Governments and communities across the Caribbean have much more to consider in their efforts to re-absorb their ageing returnees.



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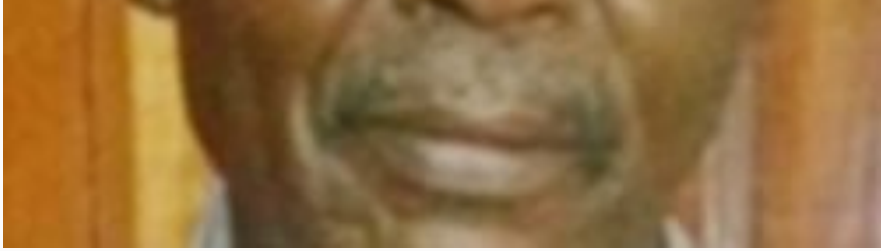
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