

Panel Presentation by David Yhann to the ACEO AGM, Jamaica, 7 & 8 November 2008

Theme: Stakeholders in the Electoral Process: the Role of Civil Society, Political Parties and the Media to Support Electoral Management Bodies

The assumption has been made that the “ambiguous authority and often amorphous role of civil society in elections often puts their credibility to the test,” which suggests that there may be some scepticism about the usefulness of civil society involvement. I believe the focus should be on citizen participation, and, therefore, on civil society organisations as conduits through which citizens can become involved in the democratic process.

I think we can all agree that an alienated citizenry is the Achilles’ heel of a functional democracy.

As we have witnessed in the just concluded US elections – especially in the Obama campaign, citizen involvement can invigorate the society and be a platform for broad based participation in the democratic process.

Democracy, by definition, is “government by the people.” The objective is to make “the common people ... the primary source of political power.

If indeed we are to give meaningful expression to this ideal, all of us, especially those who exercise state authority, must make space for our people to participate in and shape our political systems and processes. Citizens, wherever they are located in our societies, must be made to feel welcome to participate in the processes that affect and impact their lives; they must be encouraged to become custodians of the democratic process.

In such an undertaking, all of us who see ourselves as representatives of the principle stakeholders need to reflect on how we view our own role and whether we recognise our citizens as the primary stakeholder – the question is: do we accept that it is all about them?

For this reason, I was pleased to hear Prime Minister Golding say this morning that “the real owners are the people.”

In this regard, it would be useful and strategic to see ourselves as facilitators. Under such a dispensation citizen outreach might become a key strategy, the objective of which is to make democracy ever more accessible to the most marginalised within our societies, so that no one can perceive that the system is designed to deny them an opportunity to plug in to their own development or to have a voice in shaping their society and their future.

The question might well be asked, “What has this got to do with us? We are only technocrats or we have strictly prescribed mandates.”

I would venture to say that, if we really hold the elections process to be a corner stone of democracy, we must begin here. Job one is to erase any doubt that exists about whether elections belong to the people. While it is important to maintain the integrity of the process, I believe that innovative strategies can be devised to enlist grassroots support and participation at every stage and at every level of the decision-making process.

I may be bordering on the presumptuous, but permit me to say that when elections organisations, whether state or civil society, operate in an exclusive manner and exercise tight control over every aspect of the process and fail to realise that success is built not only on ensuring technical quality but also on the positive perceptions held by citizens, our democracy is weakened at the root. I dare say that without public trust and confidence in the democratic process, quality assurance measures hold little hope of guaranteeing political stability.

In passing, I make reference to the critical issue of the relationship between the widespread acceptance of the political system by citizens and their buy-in for elections. If the vast majority across the political and social spectrum do not find favour with the system of government, that in itself can undermine and possibly derail the electoral process.

Speaking from my own experience, my sense is that electoral authorities don't quite know what to do about local civil society organisations which seek to monitor and observe the electoral process. Often, it appears that the decision to grant them status is made by default. Truth be told, I honestly believe that electoral authorities view local observer groups as more of a humbug and an additional drain on their resources than as assets. In the case of international observers, they are the "price" governments pay for maintaining good standing within the community of nations.

I have no doubt that if state agencies and political parties change the dynamic in their relationship with civil society organisations and make them partners in the process, it would make the job much easier - become proactive rather than reactive; where weaknesses exist within these organisations, seek to engage them, encourage reform and facilitate capacity building.

A key benefit that can be derived from working with citizens groups is that it can provide opportunities for electoral authorities to work with the electorate to optimise electoral systems and procedures. This is not to say that I am proposing that the integrity of the elections management and accountability systems be compromised. A look at the way the result of the US presidential election is announced illustrates the point I am trying to make. It would seem that a protocol has been established between the candidates and the media by which results are called before the final count has been tallied or officially declared. The losing candidate concedes and then the winning candidate gives his victory speech. By all appearances, the American people are comfortable with this, even though one can raise technical or legal questions. Likewise, In the Caribbean, citizens' involvement can help to develop our own traditions which meet the needs of our circumstances and which the electorate and the stakeholders will be comfortable with.

Stakeholders in the electoral process share a common objective to make the best possible contribution towards strengthening democracy and promoting citizenship. Ultimately, we have to look for ways by which to integrate elections into what I will call the 'total governance approach'. If we can bring people to a better understanding of the relationship between the various links in the democratic chain, and, ultimately, the

relationship with their quality of life, then I think we can count on earning the trust and confidence of our citizens.

In closing, I wish to pose three questions:

1. Are our organisations as open to our citizens as they can be?
2. What more can we do to enlist citizens' support and involvement?
3. What are others in the region or further afield doing to stimulate citizen action?