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## NJAC Viewpoint

### Govt needs people's input

In our last column, NJAC discussed the need for national dialogue and its importance to national development. In today's column NJAC will explore this theme further, looking at certain situations within the country to which the concept of national dialogue is relevant, especially in seeking solutions. The issue of the aluminum smelter plant and the people of Chatham is one such issue.

A decision was taken to build an aluminum smelter plant in Chatham, but it is a decision which was taken without any discussion with the people of the area. In fact, whatever they knew about the issue was through hearing about it or reading about it in the media. This, to NJAC, is a recipe for problems to develop. A major problem is that there are a number of concerns which are shared by residents of the area in relation to the plant.

Residents believe that they will suffer the loss of their homes, some of which have been in existence for over forty years and that there will be adverse consequences to the health of whatever remains of their community, to the health of persons living in areas adjacent to the plant and to the environment. However, there has not been much information to assist in clarifying these concerns, which has only made the residents more worried. None has come from the government and the company concerned has only done a little PR job, as should be expected.

Here we are speaking of the land, the legacy, the homes, the very lives of the people which are at stake. It is NJAC's observation (and something that we believe is well known), that in developing countries, companies do not take the precautions that they would take in the more advanced countries. In those countries, there are standards to be met. There are laws which are enforced. There are groupings which are alive to issues and which are galvanized into action. There is a lot of discussion and debate and the media is involved, whether through investigative reporting or stimulating discussion and debate. Governments are called to account.

In developing countries, the opposite obtains. Governments are happy for the "investments" and foreign companies are given free rein. Governments are mum on issues involved, just as the people of Chatham can hear nothing from the authorities. Indeed, NJAC views this as a classic case in point. No dialogue, no consultation, no debate. And life goes on.

NJAC is advising the people of Chatham to seek as much information as possible and make themselves alive to all issues involved. Groupings must speak on the matter. It is not right that they stay silent on a matter like this. The media must ensure that there is a flow of information on the issues. Government must see it as a responsibility to clarify issues for the people involved. There must be dialogue.

Likewise, NJAC sees the situation involving the reported plans to relocate the people of East Port-of-Spain, as another issue highlighting the need for and importance of national dialogue. What is instructive about the process involved in the move towards

developing Port-of-Spain, is the manner in which it has been conducted. A decision was taken at the top to undertake “Eastbridge”, as the development plan for Port-of-Spain is called.

Pronouncements were made at different forums, news items were carried in the media and the people of the area were left to wonder about their fate. There was no information, no consultation, no clarification. As the Guardian of Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> April noted, it was a “policy move about which the general public has remained largely in the dark” and which “had been secretly concocted inside the Housing Ministry, allegedly in their interest, *but certainly not with their input*”. Naturally, the people began to grumble and to voice their concerns and fears. What would be the fate of the residents, some of them there for over 60 years? How would they cope with life in a new environment where there would be the additional costs and the stresses of transportation? Would their movement be temporary or permanent? And so on.

In the face of the disgruntlement of the people, a move was made to speak with some of the residents, consultation, if you want to call it that, after the fact and full page ads were in the newspapers with the heading “Addressing your concerns”. NJAC asks, how in heaven’s name will this deal with the fears and anxieties of the people of East Port-of-Spain? How many of them will see or read those ads? This is definitely no way to go about such a crucial matter, which was approached very badly from the very beginning.

In NJAC’s opinion, each and every one should be concerned with what is happening in East Port-of-Spain, just as they should be concerned with what is taking place in Chatham. NJAC sees these situations as lessons in how the lack of consultation and information can impact on people’s lives. These issues underscore the need for the participation of the people in the decision making process and for the sensitising of the national community to substantial issues in national life. NJAC believes that these principles must become part of our national life. In this way, we can avoid unpleasant scenarios like those in Chatham and East Port-of-Spain and instead create positive and healthy relationships and environments, which can see our communities and our nation blossom.