



RESPONSIBILITY AND CHALLENGES FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF ARUBA

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Congratulating Aruba and all of you, distinguished audience, with 15 years of life of the University of Aruba, provides a welcome opportunity for an assessment of its past and present role in the light of the challenges ahead. No vision of the future can discard the teachings of the past.

“A university,” as has been said in the Caribbean, “is a living organism that draws its nutrients from the society it serves”. Knowledge derived from social reality should, therefore, be the cornerstone for problem solving, policy making and development. No therapy is possible without diagnosis, no diagnosis without analysis, no analysis without data. Knowledge derived from society should be returned to society. That is the prime task of a university. The question to start with is therefore: What is the state of the art of research and knowledge on Aruban reality?

Researchers, professionals and policy makers have typically faced a grave lack of data and knowledge in vital areas to understand the Aruban society. As a consequence, the degree of speculation has been unacceptably high in matters concerning our development, our future and our social and political stability. With the years, our ministers and their advisers have become experts in planning without data. Without a fair knowledge of the own reality, no society can be administered in a proper way and no effective strategy can be designed to pursue development, stability or progress.

The absence of a national research center and a national research policy in Aruba is reflected in the lack of a coherent and coordinated research program that could address the priority issues and needs of our society. Scientific research in Aruba was typically motivated by the specific interests of PhD or Masters’ theses or triggered by urgent problems and crisis. Continuity could not be guaranteed and lots of valuable data and research findings disappeared in dark archives. The research infrastructure of the country could not be built systematically, and no significant research methodology was developed for the requirements of our own society.

The absence of a systematic inventory and study of critical developmental issues produced knowledge gaps that pose serious risks to our future. One of the most critical issues, the social evolution of Aruba, has yet to be addressed. No one can tell what exactly happened to this country in the last 25 years. We experienced a change in the political status of Aruba and an economic transformation, with a giant leap from refinery to five star hotels, from oil tankers to mega cruise ships. Significant transformations in the field of population growth, culture, education, housing, security and political stability demanded their quote of problems. While each one of these dynamic social changes are visible for the untrained eye, nobody can provide an

integral view or overall understanding of such a critical matter as the social evolution of our society in the last decades, and we can only guess what is still in store for us, because the society was not properly mapped.

Without a clear understanding how the present was shaped and where we stand at this point in history, no successful development strategy can ever be designed. This casts all footlights on the only institution in this small country that is capable of responding to this vital challenge in an impartial way, our university. What, then, is the role and responsibility of the University of Aruba?

A university is not a training center, but a center of learning, discovery and creation. Autonomous research of the own reality and independent thought is a prerequisite for any meaningful training endeavor of the university. The University of Aruba, can, therefore, be assigned the following minimum tasks.

First, at the heart of the training efforts of the university stands the goal of breeding a new generation of critical scholars, professionals and leaders, able to embark on a creative project for our own future. No degree is offered, unless supported by a fusion of knowledge and skills, combining social thought with research capabilities, in order to deliver creative and independent professionals and scholars.

Second, the University of Aruba assumes the role of *national research center* that pools and mobilizes all available expertise on Aruban reality. To do so, it creates a research environment that incorporates, motivates, invites and supports researchers and professionals, while closely cooperating with all relevant institutions from the government, the private sector and the NGOs.

Third, the University of Aruba assumes a coordinating task in designing a *national research policy* based on policy-relevant, problem solving, development oriented and strategy designing research, that can put all research initiatives and undertakings on the island to the test.

Fourth, the University of Aruba coordinates a comprehensive research project to map the social evolution of Aruba of the last 25 years, geared towards the design of a data-based development strategy. It will include all relevant national issues and social indicators for development. By joining forces with other institutions, researchers and professionals, that project can be finished without trouble within two years with own expertise.

Fifth, the University of Aruba is a critical, non-partisan, autonomous center of knowledge, thought and discussion on the Aruban reality and development. No society can function properly, when the main issues of national discussion and reflection are daily set by sensational newspapers or inspired by partisan or electoral considerations, while experts, researchers and professionals are marginalized into the technical maintenance of the system. As a pluralistic and democratic platform for discussion on social and developmental issues and strategies, the university initiates and hosts a permanent open dialogue and critical debate on all major issues regarding our society. For a university, to think is to work, as a prominent Caribbean thinker said, "thought is action for us."

Sixth, Aruba is too small a place for a self-supporting university. A critical requirement is to embed our university in a system of international cooperation and joint action, by maintaining and consolidating traditional ties with Europe, but in the first place by opening paths to the Caribbean and Latin America. Participation in comparative, transcultural, regional projects should take a prominent place on the agenda, in order to overcome the countless constraints posed to a small island society.

By responding to these six tasks, our university will assume the responsibility of a center for research, thought and learning, involved in designing a feasible development strategy, as the therapy that builds on analysis based on data. This role in fostering development poses an extremely difficult task for our university.

World wide, all scientific centers and universities have dramatically failed to respond to the developmental needs of the majority of the globe. Today's social sciences are immersed in an embarrassing silence, without a new project to offer or an encouraging message to deliver to desperate people who find all paths blocked on three continents.

All development theories of the last fifty years have failed, without exception, and not one single paradigm of development is still in place. Their main flaw was that development was downgraded into transfer, implantation and imitation of achievements and devices from elsewhere. This explains the historical failure of all of them. You can give a mango seed water and protection to grow into a strong mango tree, but it will never become an apple tree. Development, therefore, cannot be transferred. It is a process from within that one can trigger, support and sustain, but never donate by transfer, not even as a generous gift. The correct definition of development is, therefore, the mobilization of the own potentialities in interactive response to nature, habitat, culture and history for the realization of a project of one's own.

Any seed, any embryo will tell you exactly the same story that development is from within. You can only grow out of your own genes; never out of the genetic codes of another, not as an organism, not as a society, not as a university.

A critical analysis of fifty years of development theories reveals that, in reality, what was labeled as development was envelopment, a paternalist process to incorporate the other, to enclose and wrap up by envelopment, as done with an envelope. Transfer and mimicry of devices were taken as the prime agents of progress, in an attempt to clone oneself into other societies, instead of mobilizing their own potentialities and inner forces. The unmasking of the false development discourse led to a new promising explanatory model, the development/envelopment paradigm, with development as self-realization and its negation, envelopment, as the incorporation in an alien project. It offers a powerful tool to reinterpret our history and design our own project for the future.

In this interdependent world, just as in nature and evolution, life always sprouts from the interaction between the internal and the external. All useful inputs and devices from abroad should, therefore, be welcomed and invited, but always previously seasoned and adapted to our own needs and requirements, serving our own development.

This new concept of development allows us now to fine tune the role of the University of Aruba, as a social reality-based, future oriented institution. Contrary to a tenacious myth of science, the aim of scientific research is not to establish objective wisdoms or convey absolute truths. Its prime objective is to significantly reduce the degree of speculation, in order to minimize the risks of failure. Critical and transparent analysis of social reality focused on development should, therefore, be the central goal of the university. A critical stand, it should be reminded, comprises the commitment to accept and make public the results of analysis and reflection, regardless whether in line with own preferences or group interests. That should be the code of conduct of the university: openness, transparency and a critical stand in a dialogue where only arguments count.

To mobilize our own potentialities, we need a university that fosters development, as an autonomous, non-partisan institution at the service of society, that pools all valuable assets. A two way open-door-policy should attract all valuable researchers and scholars, and at the same time return the outcome of all endeavors to society. Knowledge and know-how cannot be put in quarantine, but should serve society. An isolated university compound, pompously claiming excellence but

detached from society, can harbor no esteem of society and its professionals for its ivory tower. Ivory towers are only respected by elephants.

The University of Aruba has a crucial role to fulfill as a platform accessible to all for analysis, thought and dialogue. A society that is permanently polarized along party politics on almost any meaningful social issue is disabled beforehand to cope with the immense challenges of a tiny island on a troubled globe, and plays with its future. A vital issue as the future status of Aruba, the future of all of us, a matter of survival as a nation, cannot be left at the mercy of political polarization and divergent political agendas. It should be deposited right here at the university compound for a critical, impartial, scientific inventory and analysis of all options, with the full participation and input of all expertise that we possess.

The absence of another institution that can assume these tasks, underscores the critical role of the University of Aruba. A university is not a controversial issue, it is not a political matter, it is a national asset. All of us are stakeholders, because the future of Aruba is at stake. Joint action of the government, researchers, professionals, NGO's and the private sector, should support and strengthen the University of Aruba to enhance its capacity to respond to these difficult challenges.

In a hardened world, shaped by rivalry and competition, with selfishness as the highest virtue, other people may be sorry for you but nobody will help you out, and a tiny island may find itself all alone. We are being globalized into extinction, economically, culturally, socially, and we should respond to that with our own forces. The greatest internal solidarity and dialogue will be required to take command of our own destiny. Instead of waiting for the generosity of others we should prepare our own presents, among which, hopefully, the University of Aruba will always be a gift to be proud of.

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