

Gregory Rabess, WACC scholar

WACC Scholar Gregory Rabess talks to Action about his work in Dominica as head of the Government Information Service.

Gregory, can you tell us about your work and how the WACC scholarship has been an influence?

GR: Before I became a WACC scholar I worked with a non-governmental organisation called SPAT, Small Projects Assistance Team, that was set up in Dominica in 1981, two years after hurricane David devastated the entire island.

SPAT worked then in an effort to mobilise resources for national reconstruction, especially in the rural communities. In 1985 we began in earnest a popular education programme, and within that I became the communications officer. One of my responsibilities was also to develop television programming for education.

Initially we did one weekly programme called Development Focus, and later changed it to conlavie, which literally means conk shell which in the Caribbean is used as a means of communication especially among the fishermen who from offshore blow it which indicates to the people on land that they have a good catch and that they should come to the beach. Or people would use it when people die, or in the times of slavery the slaves would use it as a means of rallying other slaves for revolting against the white plantation system. So you see it has a very strong tradition.

We did a bit of community radio programming as well and training people to develop community radio programmes. Prior to that I was involved with the movement for cultural awareness which was involved in popular theatre. From my own personal standpoint I am involved in other elements of the culture, especially the Creole language development, music, I'm a musician, and I'm a poet as well. So prior to coming to Coventry to study my masters in applied communications, that was my involvement in culture and communications.

I also have family roots among the indigenous of Dominica, the Caribbou people and some of my involvements are with Carib territory, among the indigenous people from a cultural communications standpoint.

Having come to England, in 1996, it was an opportunity to reflect on my own work, to catch up on the thinking on an international level in the field of communications and culture which my course was about.

Since then I have continued my work with SPAT until last year, when I was invited by the new labour government which had won the elections to head the government information service. So that is my professional occupation right now, I'm head of the government information service. But I still have my linkage with the NGO SPAT as well.

The scholarship programme in Coventry allowed me to develop my theoretical understanding of the newer concepts and I can use this in my new position to influence policy under the labour government. So, thanks to the WACC programme I can continue to make contributions on various levels of society in Dominica.

What do you see as the most interesting development in the Caribbean area at the moment?

GR: The most interesting thing at the moment is the liberalisation of the telecoms landscape. This leads to the reduction of prices, increased access to internet services, technology.

It opens up new spaces for local independent producers and for communities to get access to television and to get their voices heard. In the subregion, on a political level there have been

changes in governments over the last two or three years. The majority of the OECD countries are now run by labour governments, this is a big difference from the 1980's when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher on either side of the Atlantic dominated a lot of the thinking. At that time the left wing in the Caribbean was on the retreat. Right now in the late nineties and the start of the new millenium, we have a new political space which I think is very helpful and supportive of the development of the media and the liberalisation of the telecoms.

With respect to environment and the development of the popular, grassroots, community media: on the other side of the coin, the Caribbean is facing the challenges of globalisation, competing with cheaper products from the outside, trying to get access to world markets. The situation of bananas, preferential access being against the new WTO ruling...these are the sort of challenges we face at the international level. In Dominica the situation of the banana industry has worsened the economic problems and has caused increased the importance of things like tourism. The economy has also suffered a lot from hurricanes. But there is another side to the Caribbean which is about people, which is about trying to survive, which is about culture, identity, taking advantage of the new technologies, which is about taking advantage of the opportunities provided by globalisation, to project themselves, to export products, or to attract investments. It's a multi-faceted situation.

In practice is there any real relationship between the different islands in the Caribbean? Do you feel any kinship with people on the other islands?

GR: We are very insulated, but when the West Indies play cricket we feel like one nation. Musically too, there is a lot of identification on a Caribbean level. Also with trade, with CARICOM. But there is still a lot of work to be done. For example, for a couple of years now there has been a suggestion of free movement of labour and capital. We have made advances on that, towards integration.

Are there any comparisons that can be made between Dominica and other Caribbean countries?

GR: We have a lot in common, culturally and historically. The Cuban experience has taught the Caribbean a very strong lesson about self-reliance, that is one of the strongest lessons of the Cuban Revolution: that you can survive without the United States. Even so there is a lot of interest in lifting the US blockade, including business interests: we can see that all countries need each other and are inter-dependent. Cuba is not in an ideal situation. But certainly in terms of utilising its resources to pursue development, the Cubans have taught us a lot.

From Haiti too we have learnt a lot; they have had to search within themselves, within Haiti, for solutions to their problems because they too have been very isolated. In Dominica we have a very strong history of self-reliance and self-help for development. So in Dominica, Haiti, Cuba, Dominican Republic, all across the Caribbean there are common tendencies, grassroots struggles to survive, common strategies. Caribbeans are very similar, the differences are political.

Caribbean links:

<http://www.giscaribbean.com>

http://www.oneworld.net/partners/country/country_212_1.shtml

<http://www.asi.fr/~cpalmer/serveur/sicrad2.htm>