



RESEARCH AS THE LINK BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND SOCIETY

Glenn Sankatsing

Coordinator of the Center for Research and Development of the University of Aruba

**Keynote Address at the Official Opening of the Center for
Research and Development of the University of Aruba
Friday, February 8, 2008**

The life of any society and the shaping of a country revolve around five interrelated questions that are critical for its development. They are vital issues that we as the people of Aruba are confronted with, at this point of our history, and that we as the University of Aruba should respond to. Where do we come from? Where are we standing now? Where are we heading to? What future are we dreaming of? What actions do we take to build the future that we desire?

Together they make up the fusion of history (to learn from our past), diagnosis (to know our current condition), trends (to identify the expected scenery), policy (to map alternatives for the future), and agency (to take action to shape our destiny).

For the University of Aruba, the challenge to address these vital issues for our country constitutes the essence of its undertakings. It is a joint integrated action, on the one hand, of training new generations of professionals and experts for the needs of our society, and, at the other hand, of gaining a better understanding of our own reality through scientific research. The task of the university is to contribute to adequate responses to the challenges that we as a society meet on our road.

This brings us to the first important conclusion. Context-free research does not exist for a people, because knowledge is always derived from society. It is more, the very essence of knowledge is its validity in a concrete social reality, otherwise it is not knowledge. Knowledge that is at variance with our Aruban reality of a vulnerable, small scale, island society and a microstate in a globalizing world lacks any validity and usefulness. Social reality is, therefore, the starting point and the target of all research endeavors. That interactive relation brings us to the second conclusion that research is the link between university and society. It is the task of the University of Aruba to translate this interface between science and reality into a comprehensive research program with priority for projects that are relevant for our society and its future.

The statement that “research should be relevant for Aruba” does not provide an answer, but rather begs for an explanation. The basic criterion to measure the relevance of research in Aruba is its contribution to ‘development’. Development is the mobilization of the own potentialities in interactive response to nature, habitat and environment to realize a project of one’s own. One should take advantage of useful

devices from elsewhere, but development itself cannot be transferred, not even as a gift and much less by mimicry or imitation. It is always a process from within that can be triggered and supported, but never donated. For that reason, development is always based on our own reality, resources, self-knowledge and seizure of the opportunities by understanding our potentials. It is driven by the desire for survival and self-realization, as a society, a nation, a people and a culture, in a quest for sustainable options based on participation, ownership and command over the own destiny. The third conclusion is that development is the basic overarching concern for research.

To address these critical challenges and tasks that are vital for the development and future of our island, the University of Aruba just called into being its Center for Research and Development. In the long term research strategy of the Center for Research and Development, five critical research realms can be identified for the mobilization of our own potentialities: (i) human resources; (ii) economic life; (iii) social and political life; (iv) cultural life, and (v) environment.

In the first place, we should mobilize our human resources with research addressing education and health. Attention should be geared towards formal, informal and adult education, lifelong learning, the generation of knowledge, and our being bereft from the educational output by an alarming brain drain. Health research should focus on social conditions of health, health education, and an efficient and effective health system. At this point, the University of Aruba is culminating the most elaborated health research project conducted on the island, as part of an ongoing line of research in support of health education and improvement of health. With regard to knowledge in function of development, a most promising regional project is being initiated involving five countries, supported by an expert in the field who is now a professor at the University of Aruba.

Second, in the economic field, the mobilization of our potentialities highlights our natural endowment, in order to benefit from our assets by a sustainable tourism industry. Given the dangers that are involved in mass tourism, we face a vital challenge that can be spelt out in a simple phrase: How to benefit from the beauty of our island without affecting it? The high priority of the economic field for the University of Aruba already resulted in the establishment of two faculties, the Faculty of Financial and Economic Studies and the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Management Studies, both delivering professionals to society on a regular base. A wide array of small, medium size and long term research projects is already in execution or preparation, regarding critical sustainability issues and the impact of tourism.

Third, regarding social and political life, research should contribute to ownership and social inclusion, as a critical requirement to mobilize assets by enhancing democracy from a formal electoral system to genuine participation. Fostering the democratic texture of a society is enhancing its life chances, for development is impossible without participation and ownership. In nature, if you don't participate you die. At the state level, it is an intriguing challenge for research at our Law Faculty to

provide insights on issues regarding the future status of Aruba. All possible scenarios should be thoroughly mapped, regardless of political preferences, in order to have a response at hand to whatever fate might befall us, even if it is not the one of our liking.

Fourth, cultural life is a focal field of study, given the potentially disturbing impact of tourism. Culture is born as the collective response to secure survival. To secure physical survival, adequate responses are required to deal with the challenges posed by nature. Culture, as a response to nature, is the crystallization of our urge to defend ourselves and perpetuate the life of the community. That is the reason why we build houses, whether bungalows or igloos, wear clothes, invent devices and create tools. To secure social survival, culture is the guard of social peace, by upholding traditions and creating laws, regulations and institutions to secure a peaceful social order. Culture, as the toolbox of survival and the heart beat of society, should never be a casualty of tourism. We should not dance for the tourist, but let the visitor enjoy how we dance for ourselves. Only then will culture be secured as a powerful sustainable asset.

Finally, the environment should be an issue of constant concern and monitoring on an island of mass tourism facing rising sea levels due to a global warming that already evolved into a pathological global fever. No longer are we dealing with a far-from-our-bed-show, for the rising sea level is definitely not provoked by water pouring from Hooiberg.

This then is the general framework of critical research realms that should be further enhanced, elaborated and discussed in joint efforts of all stakeholders in the society. To address these tasks, the Center for Research and Development will build a professional research atmosphere and infrastructure that mobilizes all assets in a national undertaking, including all assets of the University of Aruba at the faculty level along with the huge untapped professional potential scattered on our island.

In a collaborative effort with existing research and data-gathering institutions, the target is to pool all national assets to forge the critical mass required to address the challenges we encounter as a society and to locate the development of Aruba at center stage. For that purpose, the Center for Research and Development will initiate, stimulate and support research and provide methodological training and assistance, in joint action with other research entities in Aruba. An example is the dissertation forum that will invite all PhD candidates in Aruba for regular deliberations.

The University of Aruba can resort to a solid research capacity hidden in its pool of professors, lecturers, researchers, assistants, and PhD, Master's and Bachelor's students. In addition to that, it counts on a broadening network of international relations with institutions and experts in Europe, USA, Latin America and the Caribbean that can provide specific expertise, if not available locally.

We should be open and receptive for valuable theoretical and methodological input from other latitudes, but always previously adapt any device or model to our own reality to season it for proper use. We should correct the mistakes of the past, when the model was not adapted to reality, but reality was modified to accommodate

the model. Never again should we permit experts from a distant location to design and take command of projects that are not embedded in our own social reality, leading to a practice of telepathic research. Research that does not include local expertise and institutions, and that does not generate accumulated knowhow, value-added knowledge and experience will miss the contextual local touch. It may deliver sophisticated technical reports, but will be unable to translate its findings to the national requirements and commit the critical social actors to meaningful action. Research that is detached from contextual embedment will score low on relevance and may seriously hamper development.

The Center for Research and Development will, therefore, give priority to context-based, dynamic, adaptive, responsive, process-related, future-oriented, and locally-driven research to enhance command over our own destiny. Through this center, the University of Aruba as a scientifically autonomous institution will positively respond to the needs of the government, the private sector, and society in general for data and insights required for policy making, problem solving and practical action.

Nation building is not an archeology that digs in the past, but a forward looking project that shapes the future. A country that was chronically shaped by colonization and immigration lacks a common ancestry and shared genealogy. What really binds us together is the common destiny that we are constructing together. That commitment to Aruba requires forward looking development-based scientific research geared towards knowing our own reality, assets and resources, in order to mobilize our potentialities. History is never a history of fatalities, always a history of possibilities, opportunities and creation. Research should therefore supply the required insights and offer the tools to a people to become the architect of its own future.

With this center the University of Aruba has added a solid pillar to its scientific building, enhancing its capacity to contribute to the development of Aruba. Development can even allow us to turn formidable impediments into fine assets in a creative process of discovery. The steel band – that you will be hearing shortly in our yard – may well stand as the symbol for development. It was created by transforming the oil barrel from a vehicle of economic exploitation into a creative message of cultural liberation. That illustrates the regenerative force of development.

The future is in our own hands, but we should be forewarned of the dangers. Lack of solidarity can trample the development options of small island societies in a menacing globalized world. Sectarian struggle or useless polarization in the social, cultural or political field can easily eliminate continuity, seriously weaken our response capacity and even jeopardize any development option for the future. Absence of solidarity and lack of concerted action will endanger our survival options as a nation, a society and a culture. The University of Aruba will therefore overcome that barrier, with a joint, collaborative and concerted approach in the field of research when assessing our potentialities and when identifying alternative roads to be taken towards a common destiny.

With efforts of the whole university community, the firm support of the government, the advocacy of people's representatives chosen to the parliament, and the responsive action of our society, the University of Aruba is ready to start a center that can embark with enthusiasm upon the task of dedicating research to the service of development.

In joint action, the Center for Research and Development of the University of Aruba will be able to provide valuable data, insight and understanding of our Aruban reality. That will be its contribution to answer the last and most important of the five vital questions that we put at the very beginning. What actions do we take to shape the future of our choice and the Aruba that we desire?

This evening, Your Excellency, Governor of Aruba, Minister of Education, members of Parliament, Board of the University of Aruba, Rector, colleagues, students and friends, the University of Aruba assumes its responsibility and takes the challenge to put research at the service of our people, our development and our future, with the establishment of its Center for Research and Development.