The changing face of governance

The terms ‘governance’ and ‘government’, are often used interchangeably. However there are distinct differences. Governance is a broad concept encompassing various mechanisms that provide direction to society; direction that is not only made up of laws and rules but also includes norms, mores and conventions. Government refers to the systems, processes and institutions of the public sector, and is therefore just one actor within the framework of societal governance. Other actors include the private sector, and the wider civil society. This is important because while every citizen may not have an opportunity to participate in ‘government’ they should all have an opportunity to participate in the ‘governance’ of their society.

This distinction between ‘governance’ and ‘government’ becomes more important when we contrast the traditional approaches with the emergence of newer governance structures. Traditional approaches to governance witnessed within Trinidad and Tobago, regionally and internationally were conventionally state-centric and government focused, with clearly defined boundaries, roles and responsibility for each of the actors within the system. In this system it was solely the government’s responsibility to identify, prioritize and address societal concerns and the private sector and civil society had less of a voice in providing direction.

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s saw the spread of neoliberal ideologies of Thatcherism and Reaganism throughout the developed world that quickly spread to developing societies. This era witnessed a shift away from state interventionist approaches to a belief in the ‘power of the market’. With this shift came the increasing global power of the corporation and simultaneously, although some argue not consequentially, increasing disparities between the ‘haves and the have nots’ the excessively wealthy and the desperately poor.

This increasing gap between the rich and the poor has failed to be filled by either the ‘market’ or a return to conventional approaches and demands a move to more pluralistic approaches to governance, ‘new governance’.

Both on a local and an international scale we continue to witness growing challenges that seemingly are no longer within the control of nation-states or their governments alone to solve. Increasing social, environmental and economic concerns are no longer confined to sovereign states or geographical parameters. Today’s increasingly complex societal dynamics have resulted in a growing interdependence between and among societies and the actors within them; an interdependence which
requires a similar complexity in governance. More and more we are seeing societal issues that were traditionally the concern of states being raised and addressed by both the private sector and civil society, both of whom also have an important role to play in providing direction to society.

Modern societies have witnessed significant changes in the roles of all three of the main actors, the private sector, governments and civil society and there has been a dramatic shift from state-centric to more pluralistic approaches to governance. This however should not be viewed as diminishing the role of government as an actor within the system, but rather a redefining their role and an appreciation that today’s multifarious societal challenges require similarly multifarious forms of governing; multi-stakeholder approaches that acknowledge and appreciate the role of all the actors.

Moving toward more pluralistic and less state-centric approaches to governance requires a certain level on maturity on behalf of all actors to responsibly accept the part that they can and must play in the development of their societies. It also requires the government to facilitate. Organizations, including all civil society groups, non-government organizations, advocacy groups, faith based organizations, etc. have a significant role to play in societal governance vis-à-vis national development. Trinidad and Tobago, like many other countries in the region, continues to experience the growing role and influence of this third sector and must recognize, respect and draw upon their experience as a partner in providing direction to the society. The importance of these organizations cannot be overstated and it is a mature society that recognizes and appreciates this.