

## SVG-Mexico Relations: A Partnership across the Caribbean Sea

Nathaniel Williams

*Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

The forging of alliance between civilizations brings with it many opportunities as well as challenges. However with mutual-trust and commitment, such alliances will stand the test of time. In the Americas one such relation can be found between Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) and the United Mexican States (Mexico). Despite being located on opposite sides of the Caribbean Sea with over 4 000 km between them, both states have and continue to seek out new mechanisms based on the intent of the instrument establishing relations.

Approximately 25 years ago, on July 31, 1990 SVG and Mexico concluded a joint communique, commencing what would turn out to be firm friendship. The initial discussions between countries were led by engagements in the halls of the headquarters of the Organisations of American States (OAS) in Washington D.C. However, with the formation of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) as a means to strengthen ties within the context of the Greater Caribbean, those discussions were amplified through the Embassy of Mexico in Port of Spain, Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Further, with the decision of the Mexican Government to open an Embassy in the Eastern Caribbean in 2005, the prospects for even greater collaboration and meaningful dialogue increased even more. This was evident with the first official visit of Prime Minister Ralph E. Gonsalves to Mexico in 2005, marking the first official visit by a Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to Mexico. Resulting from the visit, was the signing of a Joint Declaration by which Prime Minister Gonsalves and then President Vicente Fox Quesada expressed their interest in formalizing co-operation through a Basic Agreement on Technical and Scientific Cooperation.

The excellent relations that began to flourish also prompted the Prime Minister Dr. Ralph E. Gonsalves to subsequently make another visit to Mexico in 2008, where he met with the then President of Mexico, His Excellency Felipe Calderon Hinojosa, with whom he discussed issues of bilateral cooperation, regional issues and multilateral agreements.

In the decade that followed, bilateral relations, built firmly on the foundation of respect, cooperation and mutual benefit was strengthened. As you progress through this article, you will see how SVG and Mexico has worked together to effect change in the world through its joint efforts in promoting regional integration and by providing support for each other's candidacy in various international organizations elections. People to people exchanges, though still limited, have brought benefits to both countries, and help create understanding of each others' culture and values.

Furthermore, during these years, cooperation blossomed in the areas of maritime port operation, airport management, the public service and agricultural and land tilting which were identified as critical areas geared towards the development of our tourism industry and for the strengthening of government's ability to deliver efficient and effective services to the general public.

Additionally, during this time, several scholarships were also offered to Vincentians. Today, many of those scholarship beneficiaries can be seen throughout society in our public and private sectors, leading innovations in their respective fields and contributing to the development of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Some have even become teachers and professionals in the cultural industry, imparting their experience in to the minds of the Vincentian populace serving as a testament of the success of SVGs foreign policy relations with Mexico.

Alongside scholarship recipients are those who would have taken part in the numerous technical and vocational training offered by the Government of Mexico. Through these training programmes, Vincentians would have developed knowledge and skills in areas such as, trade negotiation, care and prevention of HIV/AIDS, diplomacy, disaster risk management and agriculture, among others.

The benefits of the training and projects offered to Vincentians are not easily quantified, but they are large and carry a multiplier effect in society, and the communities and families privileged to be recipients. It is therefore

no surprise that the mechanisms that make such cooperation possible are of great importance to us, and work is being undertaken to develop, strengthen and operationalize agreements which fuel them.

### **Solidarity in Times of Disaster**

Following the passage of a tropical trough system over the Eastern Caribbean on December 23-24, 2013 which produced heavy rains resulting in devastating floods across the main island of Saint Vincent, and the recognition of the country as a level 2 national disaster zone with US \$108.4 million in damages or 15 % of the country's Gross Domestic Product. Mexico was one of the countries that readily provided assistance to rehabilitate sections of the country destroyed. To this end, two separate grant funding were facilitated through (i) Infrastructure Trust for Mesoamerica and the Caribbean towards "Bridges Reconstruction & River Embankment Protection Project" in the amount of US\$5 million in the Cumberland –Spring Village Valley and (ii) a Memorandum of collaboration between the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB) and the Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines for the Implementation of a Project entitled "Protection and Prevention program for Emergencies and Disaster" in the amount of US \$ 500 000.

These assistance packages are timely and important in supporting the national development agenda of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, as they address not only infrastructure but also ensures access to fundamentals rights and freedoms for our people such as access to affordable housing and other public goods such as agriculture and food production, energy and health and tourism which is vital to our continued development.

### **Multilateral Partnership**

Without doubt, the bonds between Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Mexico have been enhanced by our bilateral relations. In like manner, these bonds have been further solidified through our countries cooperation in the multilateral sphere. Though our countries have different characteristics and even priorities, there is a natural synergy between our two states that allow our interest to align, more often than not, as it relates to our foreign

policy. This translates to the importance we place on south-south cooperation, peace and security, the rule of law and democracy.

Today, beyond the OAS, SVG and Mexico are members of Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), regional initiatives which works towards integration and cooperation in various areas for the mutual development of its Member States. To this end, upon Mexico's assumption of the Presidency of the ACS in 2014, His Excellency José Antonio Meade Kuribreña, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, visited SVG, primarily to conduct discussions on how the ACS could work more effectively with the Caribbean region in the functional areas of the organization. This demonstrates the principled and exceptional leadership abilities of Mexico, which SVG acknowledges, and hence have supported Mexico's candidatures to a number of elections within various international organizations.

### People to People Relations

Additionally, it should be noted that relations between two nations cannot simply be measured by political will and cooperation between foreign ministries, but by the people to people exchanges and the level of integration such relations effect. Consequently, we are aware of several Vincentians who have started families in Mexico, who work there, and are contributing to the further development of that country. We are also cognizant of the ambassadorial role they play, to promote SVG in Mexico, and facilitate bonds between our peoples. The more we come to understand each other, the more attractive we will also become to each other, sparking the flames of tourism and investment development.

That being said, there is still much to be done in developing our relationship with Mexico further. Firstly, bridging the language divide, and although strides are being made by the SVG and its allies, to develop a bilingual nation where persons are able to use conversational Spanish, more work has to be done. The issue of differing language limits cooperation that is possible with Mexico, particularly as it related to technical cooperation and people to people exchanges. It should be noted that Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is positioning itself to offer the teaching of English as a

second language. To this effect, we have already had success in the teaching of English on our Go-Teacher programme, where dozens of Ecuadorian Teachers received quality English training at the Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Community College. We hope to further strengthen this programme, and introduce other Latin America partners such as Mexico.

Secondly, trade and economic activity between SVG and Mexico remains low. It is anticipated that with the opening of the International Airport at Argyle we will see more cooperation in this sphere between both countries. There are huge potential for cooperation in investment and tourism, and with the plethora of goods, products and services produced by both countries, it is imperative for the private sector and the various chambers of industry and commerce to connect, and establish mechanisms and processes to facilitate these economics activities. To this effect, agreements for visa-waivers, air services, and trade and investments will serve to facilitate the process, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines have shown its willingness to initiate and to continue dialogue in making such agreements a reality.

Lastly, the process of learning is a continuous one, and knowledge must constantly be challenged, improved and increased in order to improve efficiency and the quality of cooperation mechanisms. That being said, it is important that programmes of technical cooperation between Mexico and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines be perused and enhanced. There is much to be learned from each other, and in understanding each other. The Agreement on Educational and Cultural Cooperation between SVG and Mexico is a good step in achieving these objectives, so it is therefore important that the executive bodies in charge of coordinating the activities derived from agreement to work on its conclusion and operationalization. It will be a welcome initiative when more Vincentians will be able to study in Mexico, on scholarships at both undergraduate and post graduate level or otherwise, as this is another way that the cultural and linguistic divide between us can be closed.

In summary, the advancement of SVG-Mexico relations have been strengthen and driven by the political will of our governments and the bonds of friendships being forged between our peoples. Therefore key individuals in this regard, which includes Ambassadors Ellsworth John of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines first accredited Ambassador to Mexico and

## Testimonios

Ambassadors Sergio Saavendra, Gerardo Lozano Arredondo, Edmundo Font Lopez and Luis Manuel Lopez Moreno of Mexico must be recognized for the excellent work performed during their tenure at the Mexican Embassy in St. Lucia. In most cases, these diplomatic agents are the first form of contact in getting any projects between the states realized.

In the words of Seneca, "One hand washes the other." The point of forming relations with states lives the notion of more can be done together than apart. SVG-Mexico relations have helped to bridge the divide between people that exists when they do not understand or know each other. It has brought insurmountable benefits to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in the area of education and other key development areas, and opened doors for opportunities in trade, tourism and investment. Working together, we have influenced international decisions, and made strides in our shared vision of an integrated region of the Americans. Moving forward, it is my hope that both countries will continue to build on the relationship that we have and deepen the existing bond of friendship and cooperation, for the development and mutual benefit of our friendly peoples.

DOI: 10.22403/UQROOMX/RMC22/06