

THE CROPPER FOUNDATION'S CONTRIBUTION TO MY DEVELOPMENT: REFLECTIONS BY KEISHA

Few young people are blessed with the opportunity to begin their professional careers working alongside the leading practitioners and experts in their field. Fewer yet are afforded one-on-one mentoring with some of these leading minds. There is no doubt that I am one of the lucky ones. I have experienced in only four years what it takes many people a lifetime to achieve, and I would never have thought that a small organisation like The Cropper Foundation, with such modest resources, would be the place to set my career on its current trajectory.

Prior to joining The Cropper Foundation in October 2002, I knew almost nothing of it. And there were many like me in this respect. At that time, the Foundation was a little-known organisation in Trinidad and Tobago; more often associated with its tragic events, than with its activities related to sustainable development policy and practice (locally, regionally and internationally). In retrospect, I suppose that this is not as disturbing as it seemed to me then because in many ways, The Foundation's wheels had only just started spinning in 2002, and its core Programme components had only just begun to take shape.

The last four years however marked a period of tremendous growth for the organisation; evident not only in the current thematic and geographical scope of the Foundation's activities and contributions, but also in its overall recognition and reputation especially in Trinidad and Tobago. I very often feel a sense of pride tied to the Foundation that runs deeper than mere professional identity, because there is something very personal in the way that I associate myself with the Foundation. A small part of this stems from the fact that The Foundation was my first job. Yet, the more important issue, I believe, is that much of the Foundation's growth and my development happened concurrently, and as such there was mutual benefit, even kinship.

As with any job, my time at the Foundation has not been without its fair share of challenges, especially in the early stages. Having been thrown headfirst into the global Millennium Ecosystem Assessment project (MA) in 2002, of which the Foundation through Angela was a part, I had to learn to swim fast. The opportunity to interact with over 1,400 of the world's leading scientists was no doubt exciting and tremendously rewarding, but at the same time, it was often overwhelming and sometimes frustrating. From the MA, and from working alongside Angela, I learned two inter-related lessons very early on – the first is that when you graduate from University, you have barely scratched the surface in terms of knowledge; the second is that professional growth and learning are life-long processes.

With the stage set however, I began to grow into my role at the Foundation. During my third year, I worked with Angela to design and implement a Programme for Environment and Resource Education – a mutual interest of both the Foundation's and mine. And as my experience broadened, further opportunities began to open up for me. I was selected as a fellow and author in the production of the United Nations Environment Programme's Global Environment Outlook 4 publication (UNEP GEO-4); I was elected to the Board of the Rape Crisis Society of Trinidad and Tobago as their youngest member; and most recently, I was awarded a British Commonwealth Professional Scholarship to pursue a fellowship at the UNEP-World Conservation Monitoring Centre in Cambridge, England (UNEP-WCMC).

Currently based at UNEP-WCMC, I am working to help design and implement a programme that seeks to follow-up on the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, by providing support to regional, national and local initiatives across the world (known by the MA as sub-global assessments – see www.Maweb.org). The programme draws on two MA sub-global projects led by The Cropper Foundation (the Northern Range and Caribbean Sea Assessments), and it hopes to use The Foundation's ongoing efforts to provide a platform for pilot testing sub-global follow-up activities within the Caribbean Region. As one can imagine, it is no coincidence that The Cropper Foundation was chosen as a key partner in UNEP-WCMC's effort – the Foundation (with the support of its network of collaborators) has proven to be exemplary in its ability to conceptualise and implement project activities.

By extension, my own ability to contribute to the work at WCMC, and to many of the other activities with which I continue to be involved, has certainly been nurtured by the exposure that I gained at The Cropper Foundation. **I am extremely grateful to Angela for the opportunity to work with her at the Foundation. I have benefited tremendously from her mentoring and support. Angela and The Foundation will always have a special place in my heart.**

Keisha Garcia
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