



### **PR Participatory Democracy on the Move: What To Do About Oil & Gas?**

A gathering of some eighty people – the majority young – set in train a new initiative in participatory democracy at the Open Space event *“Fathoming The Future: What To Do About Oil & Gas* at the Marian Academy last Saturday. The meeting was live-streamed on the Catholic media web-site. Rather than experts giving lectures in a different approach to oil and gas, ordinary people raised issues they wanted to learn more about. These issues – some thirty in all - then became the agenda of the meeting. From that point on the event became a market-place of ideas with people joining whichever discussion groups they were interested in. The meeting ended with participants assigning priorities to recommendations which arose from discussions.

The event, sponsored by the Policy Forum Guyana(PFG), Transparency International Guyana Inc (TIGI) and the Guyana Human Rights Association(GHRA) aimed to generate momentum among the younger generation around forming a broad agreement, on the kind of society oil and gas issues revenues could help to create.

Issues addressed at the meeting included whether Guyana will put unlimited faith in market-led forces pursuing a free-for-all, or will we aim at an equality-oriented agenda creating a more contented, less stressful Guyana, respectful of our forests, rivers and climate goals.

The discussion-led agenda inevitably generated momentum around how such discussions be multiplied and where are they leading.

The organizing agencies, explained that in addition to their particular interests, they share a common goal of generating a stronger governance profile for the civic sector. At the present time the political sector is in turmoil and patently not ready for oil. For this reason the task of creating coherent and democratic oil and gas policies cannot confidently be left to politicians to develop in isolation. To this extent the civic and business sectors need to shore up our ramshackle representative democracy with effective participatory democracy.

Multiplying Open Space initiatives with their emphasis on democracy and equal participation will not only produce a coherent civic consensus but also provide democratic legitimacy for what's to be done with oil and gas.

Rather than approach the next election waiting for political parties to produce wish lists of what they would do if elected to office in a party Manifesto, civil society should reverse the process, presenting its own Manifesto, or list of demands regarding oil and gas to all contesting parties for their public endorsement. The final phase of this process would be for civil society to remain in place to ensure implementation of the commitment in the post-election period.

A major challenge for injecting participatory democracy into Guyanese politics is that it requires politicians willing to rise above subservience to party leaders and a narrow party line. However, politicians responsive to the outcome of citizens' assemblies such as occurred at Marian Academy are more likely to be rewarded by electors. A second lesson to be drawn from the Open Space on oil and gas is that while for politicians the major divide in Guyanese public life may be ethnicity, for the younger generation it is age.

Reflecting the inter-generational dimension of the meeting, the Open Space agreed to develop an on-line continuation of the discussion initiated at the Marian Meeting. Forthcoming Open Space meeting in rural and hinterland areas were also announced.

**Policy Forum Guyana  
Steering Committee  
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