

Dr. Philip Castillo

Addressing Youth Unemployment in Dangriga

The most recent unemployment data from the Statistical Institute of Belize show a national unemployment rate of 1.9%. SIB's national aggregated data masks disparities at multiple levels. Regarding age, it was noted that unemployment is more than double the national average (5%) among youths 14 to 24 years old. Joblessness was also worse among females by 0.5%. Since no district nor municipality breakdown was provided, the actual joblessness rate in the Stann Creek District or Dangriga remains officially unknown.

To properly put the unemployment situation into context, start with the actual definitions of the concept. To be regarded as unemployed, you must be over 14 years old, and meet three other criteria simultaneously: Be without work; have actively looked for work in the past four weeks; and available to start work within the next two weeks. There are also official definitions for "work" and "actively looking for work."

Note that unemployment is different from underemployment. This latter concept means that you do have work, but you are working for less than 35 hours per week; you want to work additional hours and you are available to do so, either in your current job or another job within the next two weeks. Official definitions are a main reason why there remains a persistent gap between macroeconomic indicators and public perceptions. The official figures are commendable. In fact such a low official unemployment rate is considered full employment. Theoretically everyone who wants a job should be able to find one... but talk to the youths....and you hear the refrain that "things haad out ya."

Given this reality for many Grigalizeans, the challenge ought to be to create their own work. Here's how. Focus on Census 2022 and notice the percentage of households in Dangriga that own specific appliances.

Households & Appliances (Dangriga), 2022

Appliance	% With appliance	% Without appliance	Don't Know / Not Stated	Total
Stove	95.3	4.5	0.2	100
Mobile/Cellular Phone	93.2	6.5	0.2	100
Television	89.7	14.3	0.2	100
Refrigerator	89.7	10.1	0.2	100
Washing Machine	86.0	13.8	0.2	100
Stereo/Radio	76.9	22.9	0.2	100
Microwave	51.1	48.7	0.2	100
Tablet	44.5	55.3	0.2	100
Computer	42.0	57.8	0.2	100
Water Heater	34.4	65.3	0.2	100
Private Motor Vehicle	32.4	67.4	0.2	100
Air Conditioner	9.7	90.0	0.3	100

Clothes Dryer	9.0	90.7	0.2	100
Motorcycle/ATV/ Golf Cart	7.3	92.5	0.2	100
Home Security System	3.3	96.5	0.2	100
Home Exercise Equipment	1.8	98.0	0.2	100
Electric Generator	1.8	98.0	0.2	100
Dish Washer	1.6	98.2	0.2	100

Source: 2022 Population & Housing Census: SIB



View the official and many unofficial dumpsites around the town and see how many of those appliances have been discarded, possibly for want of competent repair at reasonable cost.

Appliance repair has to be regarded as a promising avenue for self-employment.

Start today. The local ITVET does not offer appliance repair. But that can change. How difficult is it to find an existing certified appliance repair technician who can teach perhaps two hours a day? Dangriga's formal education institutions continue to produce graduates annually and that always commendable. But for many of these graduates, the transition from education to meaningful employment may be difficult. Point them in the direction of appliance repair. These graduates are likely comfortable with online learning and they can supplement the practical ITVET classroom sessions with correspondence courses in appliance repair or YouTube learning videos.

Virtually all the large stores in the town sell items that require refrigeration. Who repairs those large units? Wouldn't it be cheaper and more convenient if the repair workers are locally based?

With the construction of the multipurpose park, there are promising avenues for employment in various trades. Jobs will likely exist for, among others, landscapers, chefs, and knowledgeable tour guides who can take tours to Gra Gra and up the North Stann Creek River. Will the tour guides be able to say, for example: How did Gra Gra Lagoon get its name? How diverse are the flora and fauna in the lagoon? How far up the River is navigable using a small motorboat. Boats and engines also need repairs and maintenance. Tourists need to eat and many are grateful for the opportunities to sample local cuisine.

At this juncture in its economic history, GOB is the single largest employer in Dangriga. Monies from GOB flow to Dangriga in three ways: Wages/Salaries/Pensions for GOB employees and pensioners in the town; subvention to the Town Board and a constituency subvention to the Area Representative. It took a Freedom of Information Request from Bro. Jerry Enriquez to obtain these latter amounts. We now

know that these constituency subventions are similarly malapportioned as are constituency voter counts.

Based on the above, expect no notable increase in public funds flowing to Dangriga. The harsh reality is that public sector employment is also no longer secure. A perennial problem facing Governments of Belize is that they have large recurrent expenditures and are dependent on a narrow tax base. Based on recent revelations, we also know that the public sector is also plagued by questionable practices in its procurement and payment processes, and outright pilfering of GOB monies in multiple departments. Have the break-ins that occurred in the revenue department in Dangriga been solved? GOB's largest source of tax revenue is fuel and ongoing uncertainties place Government in an unenviable position where difficult tradeoffs continue to be made. For the foreseeable future, therefore the prognosis is that GOB will continue to operate within a constrained fiscal space.

With the election season now upon us, the incumbent and aspiring politicians will soon be coming to ask your vote. For the aspiring tradesman and tradeswoman, ask in return for technical assistance in setting up and professionalizing your services. Ask for technical assistance in registering your small business and putting your name and contact information on a business card. The Town Board could start an online registry of these tradesmen. Grigalizeans would know that whatever trade service they need, only requires a visit to the website of the Dangriga Town Board where all will be listed.

Dangriga will never ever reach its full development potential on its current employment configuration where Government is the largest employer and a large percentage of the jobs are lower level that are potentially threatened by Artificial Intelligence.

Appliance repair must be regarded as a promising avenue for self-employment. And that provides a niche that could lessen the refrain of things being haad out ya.

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