

## Carnival's economic impact not falling, says Dr Tull



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Dr Jo-anne Tull, lecturer of Carnival Studies at the St Augustine campus of The University of the West Indies.

One of the reasons that it is difficult to track the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from Carnival and the creative industries is that this country does not have a satellite accounting system set up.

That's the revelation from Dr Joanne Tull, lecturer in Carnival Studies at the St Augustine campus of The University of the West Indies, during an interview with Business Guardian.

Satellite accounting is a term developed by the United Nations to refer to an extension of the SNA (hence, a "satellite" of the SNA) to measure the size of economic sectors that are not defined as industries in national accounts. Tourism, for example, is an amalgam of industries such as transportation, accommodation, food and beverage services, recreation and entertainment, and travel agencies.

Tull said that once data is not collected it cannot be placed into the Central Bank accounting system. The absence of a satellite accounting system means data from the tourism, energy and manufacturing get counted in the GDP tabulations, but not Carnival and the creative industries.

"To be able to measure productivity in this area is a little challenging as you have to do macroeconomic modelling and it is a little tough. We know a lot of steelbands are rehearsing across the country, which would be accounted for and every time they do that money is turning around, and also the bars are operating at an increased level for the Carnival season.

"It's not to say that the satellite accounting system setup cannot be done, but it will be complex and what will happen is that they would go down the road of probably trying to do it for something like the music and film industry first," she explained.

Delving further as to how T&T's Carnival can be exported and generate much-needed foreign exchange, Tull said that must be a critical element.

"I think the emerging aspects of the ecosystem need to be tended to. Export is about people being able to carry their brand aesthetic to another country. We need to look at other opportunities beyond that to try and make the ecosystem more balanced again," she outlined.

Tull indicated that it is about harnessing, creating avenues, and the opportunities for growth that would lead to export.

On the branding and marketing side, the lecturer of Carnival Studies said marketing is very much tied to that aspect of economics because marketing is about how it drives demand and what would be needed to supply in a nuanced way to get that demand.

"What is also needed is a diversification in the strategy, on how the product is marketed, as the same method done in previous years cannot be adopted."

Asked if the authentic Carnival element is being lost, Tull said "no." But she did say the authentic element may be suffering, as increasingly people for the longest time have been complaining about events and the fact that events were no longer like how Carnival events used to be.

"Our natural cultural practices where fete and enjoying Carnival is concerned is that we end up

with an over-commodification. We end up with something that seems overly packaged and it loses the patron who is really at the end of the day this West Indian or this Trinbagonian who just wants to enjoy the Carnival as a lot of these songs would pinpoint,” she detailed.

Also, Tull noted that the heritage, the traditional mass, needs to be supported more in terms of finding a way to mix of contemporary ways of entertainment with them.

“I also feel there is a way in which we could be having a night in every community coming up in this week and have it from an early evening so that people would still have time to go to fete. In that way, it would enhance the community. It would allow the communities to build out their resources and show off their capacities and, of course, showcase their mas,” she mentioned.

Tull highlighted that the state already has to play the role of facilitator and investor, and it must give enough thought as to how they can get a return on their own investment.

“When you do it like this, you’re also creating business opportunities. Business opportunities for the Carnival entrepreneurs, especially those who are operating as small and medium micro enterprises. What you are doing is also generating employment opportunities.

“When one looks at it from a community-oriented approach, chances are there is always a window of opportunity for development beyond the Carnival season.”

Fete prices

On most all-inclusives that have been starting from \$1,200 this year, Tull said if persons are spending their money for these events they must get value for money and it must not be lacklustre.

“The service as soon as you enter the all-inclusive must be on point until you leave. Events have raised their ticket prices this year, which people are buying because it is being sold out, so they must get quality.”

Some people in the past have said that Carnival is dying. In providing her thoughts on this issue, Tull said one of the things is that there is a lack of industry standards and, when people talk about the dying aspect, it’s the industry part that they look at and think of how that is causing the Carnival as an ecosystem as a whole to be negatively affected.

“The lack of industry standards is one of the challenges that is pressing heavily, unfortunately, on the ecosystem as a whole.”

Tull outlined that for a proper understanding of Carnival, and to develop plans for its sustainability and development, consideration must be given to Carnival as an ecosystem.

“We have to move past just measuring experience and begin to measure that entire ecosystem so that we can contemplate not just what we gain from the Carnival when it’s happening, but what we don’t gain because losses are equally important when we contemplate Carnival’s future,” she remarked.

When asked whether the economic impact is falling, Tull said no, but this is where data capture is needed because if there is going to be a discussion about economic impact, you need data.

“For me, who has the experience of measuring and capturing data, I can safely tell you that it isn’t falling. The hotels are booked out. You can’t get anything.”

The Business Guardian called several car rentals who wished to remain unnamed.

They said that their cars have been booked out for the Carnival season since December.

The cost of a rental starts at \$300.

As it pertains to flights from North America, a Caribbean Airline official said there have been solid bookings from this route, for the carnival season.

Over two weeks ago, Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, Randall Mitchell, told Business Guardian that there is an anticipated surge in visitor arrivals, increased aircraft frequency, fully booked hotels, and an expanded lineup of events, which promises to surpass all expectations.”

He noted Carnival 2024 welcomed approximately 41,444 visitors by air, including 29,651 non-nationals and 11,793 nationals residing abroad.

However, for Carnival 2025, the Tourism Minister said projections indicate a significant rise in arrivals stating, “the Airports Authority of Trinidad and Tobago estimates that between February 1 and March 14, 158,897 visitors will arrive. This growth highlights the festival’s growing appeal and increased participation.”

According to Mitchell, visitor expenditure for Carnival 2024 was estimated at US\$94.2 million (TT\$640 million), covering food, entertainment, accommodation, transport, and other expenses