

Forecast: Regional Academic Conference

Keynote Address

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Thank you for your kind invitation to this important event. I am delighted to make a few remarks on the topic ICT Vision, Science and Technology and Regional Development. First let me compliment the organizers for this assembly of academics who are fully committed to Caribbean development.

In July, 1995 as newly elected Prime Minister of Grenada, in my inaugural address of the CARICOM heads of government, I spoke to the need for Science and technology to be a key feature on the agenda for discussion as it would be critical for the success of our countries going forward. This point was made as I observed then, that science and technology was absent from prior agendas. At almost every heads of government since, science and technology has been an agenda item.

A few weeks ago, when I received your invitation to this event, I was in a different place- a different space.

As a former Prime Minister, albeit for 23 years, over five terms, I am now the former Lead Head for Science and Technology in the Caricom Quasi Cabinet.

That being said, as the saying goes- “Change is the only constant”. We must accept it, and we must deal with it. We must address change.

We live in a changing world.

We are witnessing today revolutionary changes in ICT applications and services.

We are faced with increasingly greater understanding of, and confidence in, development science. We are witnessing rapid changes in the technology landscape.

ICT and Science and Technology while undergoing changes, in and of themselves, they are critical to addressing the dynamic changes taking place in the global economy.

Indeed, we are in unprecedented times as the global community as a whole, and the region in particular, are reeling from the multiple crises of the health pandemic, economic and debt crises, energy and food price increases, and the devastating impacts of climate change, pollution and environmental degradation.

The IPCC, in its latest assessment report, dubbed this phenomenon of simultaneous multiple crises as “complex, compounded and cascading risks with increasing difficulty to manage”.

We have experienced in the region the full impact of the pandemic which has upended life, livelihoods and economies.

Covid 19 brought unforeseen challenges and unimaginable economic and social impacts including the virtual collapse of the regional transportation infrastructure and the vital tourism industry.

One of the key pillars of the single market and economy is the freedom of movement of our people. However, over the years we have not been able to successfully address cheaper inter-regional travel. I have lamented the need for governments collectively to take a decision that would see the reduction of taxes on airfares as a possible approach, and I am still hopeful that some formula can be derived to make the reduction possible as it is largely cheaper to travel to the United States than some Caribbean countries.

Presently, the region faced and continues to face massive economic contraction, fiscal imbalances, increasing debt, supply chain disruptions and inflation. The pandemic is not over and there are worrying signs for the future in terms of other variants and other health concerns.

Importantly however, despite the foregoing, the Covid-19 phenomenon saw the birth of a new business and

social interaction landscape,- a new dispensation for work, business and leisure.

A new dispensation enabled by ICT applications and services for example the increasing use of digital platforms for communication like the one in use now. This has indeed provided a cheaper and more convenient form of connectivity.

The pandemic has given cause to reset and reboot the regional development agenda. A new opportunity to reshape the regional development paradigm.

We must now re-engineer government systems and processes, the education system, private sector and civil society infrastructure and systems, and whole of society approaches with infused ICT and science and technology enabled applications and services.

The digital divide as we knew it several months ago is no longer applicable in this new scenario for regional development. Everyone needs to be digitally enabled to participate in the new dispensation.

Sisters and brothers, coupled with the ongoing pandemic, the global community also faces geopolitical tensions and conflicts that further disrupts the supply chain and negatively affects the prospects for recovery. As economic and debt crises are manifested and energy and food prices escalated, these changes

brought further socio-economic challenges to the region.

Sisters and brothers, we must remember that even as we seek to recovery from the pandemic, and the economic and social decline, unprecedented warming of the global climate continues which pose direct and existential threat to the region.

The confluence of these issues has added increasing layers of complexity and difficulty to regional development challenges.

The foregoing underscored the need to urgently deal with these changes and to escalate the process of building economic, social and environmental resilience into regional development strategies.

I argue that the platform for the resilient economy lies with mainstreaming ICT and science and technology in the regional development strategy through digital transformation of the economies.

Digitization of the Caribbean is the only way to the future and the only pathway forward.

Sisters and brothers, it is against this backdrop that the region must embrace and implement the concept of the single ICT space.

The single ICT space is critical for forging the environment and technological renaissance necessary for the digital economy to drive economic growth and social transformation in the region.

The single ICT space will allow for the development and proliferation of regional ICT related content, the harmonization of legislative and regulatory frameworks, the encouragement of digital literacy and entrepreneurship, telecommunications reform and the elimination of roaming charges, sectoral digital leadership, and overall regional digital citizenry.

The Single ICT space will be the appropriate framework for the region to counter the risks associated with cybersecurity threats and digital crime in general.

The single ICT space will be critical the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and to forge the future that we want under the sustainable development construct.

The ICT vision must be anchored with the region working together towards a resilient Caribbean within the framework of a single ICT space.

The emerging issues and challenges of big data, cyber-security, artificial intelligence, machine learning, internet of things, data protection, privacy and security require a regional multi-sectoral approach.

Such an approach will be unprecedented and must be immediate, strategic and forward looking, and geared to building greater resilience in the respective countries and the region as a whole.

It is now clear that the way forward must be characterized by data driven, fully researched, and evidence-based, and that data, information and knowledge must constitute the bedrock for the efficient, innovative and practical responses.

Indeed, data driven pathways form the nucleus that must take center stage in the regional development agenda.

I caution however, that the adoption of ICT enabled and science and technology infused development must be accompanied by digital inclusion.

The challenge is therefore issued to you, the academic community, to prepare and develop the underlying education and capacity-building infrastructure that will facilitate and enable inclusive digital transformation.

Our youthful population ought to be equipped with the tools, platform, and capacity to gain certification through ICT enabled applications and services.

The education system must be redesigned and re-engineered to produce students equipped with digital

skills and acumen with a penchant for research, innovation and creativity.

Our education institutional infrastructure must harness the creative and innovate capacity of our people to empower the regional development pathway.

Let me therefore bring my message home with the example of the ongoing pioneering work by the Climate Studies Group at the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies in the area of climate change.

Indeed, this is an example of the scholarship required across the various sectors in the education landscape that are represented in this room.

Many Caribbean based scientists were lead authors in the IPCC latest assessment report and therein championed the cause for the region for limiting global warming to less than 1.5 degree Celsius, the need for urgent and ambitious climate action, the need for climate finance, the need to address loss and damage and the preservation of the concept of unique vulnerability and special circumstances of Small Island Developing States.

It is now well established in the science of climate change that human induced climate constitutes to an existential threat to our region.

It is now well established that if global average temperatures exceed the 1.5 degree Celsius threshold that the region will suffer irreversible loss and damage to our ecosystems, livelihoods and economy.

The global community did not see the urgency to act and the need for ambitious climate action in line with the 1.5 degree Celsius threshold.

The global community was fixed on the idea of limiting global warming in the range of 2 degree Celsius and above. Even so the climate pledges were tending to a 4 degree Celsius world.

We must applaud our climate scientists in our regional educational institutions in particular the Climate Studies Group Mona for steering the course and providing the research agenda and evidence-based science to significantly alter the negotiating paradigm on limiting global warming to 1.5 degree Celsius.

Further, sisters and brothers, I refer specifically to the 2020 publication “State of the Caribbean Climate”. This seminal work was home grown and produced by 28 region-based scientists from our regional institutions. We applaud the Climate Studies Group Mona, the Caribbean Institute of Meteorology and Hydrology, The Meteorological Services Departments of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago and the Meteorological Institute

of Cuba and the Caribbean Climate Modelers Consortium.

A truly regional masterpiece supported by our regional financial institution, the Caribbean Development Bank.

A regional masterpiece which provided the scientific evidence and technology options for proactive decision making that will be fundamental to the regional transformation agenda.

Of particular note, is while the publication focused on technical subjects, such as, satellite remote sensing, regional climate modeling, early warning systems, forecasting, drought management, hydrological modeling and Lidar Surveys that the information was provided in a non-technical way which was necessary for greater uptake through science policy interfaces.

A key lesson here is, while Science and Technology is necessary, it is certainly not sufficient and the need for the socialization of the outcome and the need for political leadership are also imperatives.

Another key lesson learned here is, the imperative for investments in the further development of the regional scientific capacity. Regional investment to develop regional centers of excellence of science and technology with the specific focus on concentration on

the research agenda to address regional development risks, gaps and challenges.

As we did in cricket, in athletics, in academia, in culture, and the creative economy, we must now offer to the world cutting edge initiatives in research and development, information and communication technology, and science and technology.

We must now demonstrate to the global community that we can deal with the changes that are taking place, and in fact provide solutions to address those changes.

We must demonstrate to the global community that we can manage those complex, compound and cascading risks. We must demonstrate that even for those changes that are of crisis proportions, that we did not contribute to, but are to suffer the burden to address, we must provide regionally grounded solutions.

Sisters and Brothers, in closing, I challenge you to make this vision of a Single ICT space for the region a reality. You can do this by providing the necessary support for its implementation through creating and enhancing the opportunities for the development of our human resources and technological applications.

Sisters and Brothers, I urge you to take advantage of the opportunities that are available to usher in a new dawn for our regional integration process.

I thank you and extend best wishes for a successful conference.