

GROWING THE CARIBBEAN INNOVATION ECONOMY

National Academy of Sciences
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“The Grand Anse Initiative and Its Objectives”

Dr. the Right Honorable Keith Mitchell
Prime Minister of Grenada and
Prime Minister responsible for Science and Technology in
CARICOM

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Representatives from

- The US Academy of Sciences
- The CARICOM Science, Technology and Innovation Committee (CSTIC)
- Organization of American States (OAS)
- InterAmerican Development Bank (IADB)
- American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)
- The National Science Foundation

Distinguished Scholars

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Members of the Media

1.INTRODUCTION

It is indeed an honor and pleasure to deliver the Keynote Address at this National Academy of Sciences (NAS)-CARICOM Forum and to do so here in Washington D.C., where I spent many a year in pursuit of knowledge as a student, and later pursuing a living and trying to make a difference as a professional. How I ended up pursuing a political rather than an academic path is a story for another day and another occasion.

Let me first commend the organizers for putting together this most timely NAS-CARICOM Forum. It comes at a time when the region's mainly tourist-based, fragile economies are challenged and efforts are continuously being made to diversify the economies. The fragility of our economy was starkly demonstrated when only a couple years ago, winds below hurricane strength struck Dominica, St. Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines and took a toll on their small economies.

This Forum comes at a time when some of our CARICOM countries are still struggling to free themselves from the tentacles of the 2008 recession.

It comes at a time when some of our countries are highly indebted – the debt as a percentage of GDP in over half of our countries is over 70% while in a few it is over 100%. High debt stifles development and progress.

It comes at a time when an assessment of our economy for the period 2010 – 2015 can be best described as one of slow growth.

How do we get out of the doldrums of slow growth? How can we build more robust sustainable economies in the region? Those are the burning questions of the day.

In my humble view, we must not only adapt but also compete in today's increasingly knowledge, innovation, creativity and technologically-driven global economy.

This is to some extent reflected in CARICOM's 2015 – 2019 strategic plan for the region, which identifies specific areas to drive economic growth, and outlines strategies to create a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship.

But Science and Technology underpins all of this. I recall in my early years as Prime Minister, I had to impress upon my CARICOM colleagues that no serious discussion about development could take place without embracing Science and Technology. This situation, I am pleased to report, is now changing, and there is a clear unambiguous endorsement for Science and Technology from my CARICOM colleagues, as was witnessed at the 2015 July CARICOM Head of Government Meeting in Barbados. This is matched by an already changing Science and Technology landscape.

2. GRAND ANSE HIGH LEVEL MEETING

In January 2014, shortly after being summoned by the people of Grenada to take up the mantle of leadership for yet another term, we launched a CARICOM Science, Technology and Innovation Committee (CSTIC), which is headed by the accomplished Professor Emeritus Harold Ramkissoon, who unfortunately could not be with us today due to a long-standing commitment to deliver a Keynote Address at a New York Conference on this very day. However, Professor Cardinal Warde and Dr. Arnaldo Ventura, active, distinguished members of this Committee, are with us here today and I thank them and the rest of the committee for their continued and dedicated support and leadership at this level.

The mandate of this Committee is to swiftly promote the development of Science and Technology so that it can assist with the socio-economic development of our people.

About one year after it was established, I had the honour of hosting the Second High Level Meeting under the title “Strengthening and Utilizing Science, Technology and Innovation in the Caribbean” organized by that very Committee and in which CARICOM Ministers of Science and Technology, Captains of Industry and Academicians participated. The overall objective of this High Level Meeting was to fully develop science, technology and innovation in a structured and accelerated manner, so that they can, in a significant way, drive socio-economic development in the region. The well-attended meeting focused on three key pillars:

- Strengthening Science Education in our schools;
- Strengthening the Research Culture at our Universities, in industry and research institutes; and thirdly,
- Strengthening the Entrepreneurial Environment.

Emanating from this meeting was a Grand Anse Declaration, a number of recommendations and a Plan of Action to implement these recommendations.

Strengthening science education in our schools was identified as a critical first stage. Three Sub-Committees were set up representing the three pillars, to take follow-up action.

I am pleased to inform you that

1. A project funded by the Caribbean Examination Council to determine the status of science education in primary schools is currently being undertaken.
2. Work is being simultaneously done on a CARICOM Primary Science Education Policy.
3. A one-day meeting of CARICOM Ministers is being planned for 2017, to inter alia, discuss this Policy when it is completed and to ensure all Governments are on board.
4. The Sub-Committee on “Strengthening the Research Culture” has submitted their recommendations and these are now being forwarded to all Governments and research Institutes in CARICOM.

Additionally the Region has worked for the last two decades on linking universities and colleges to strengthen the opportunities for research and innovation, through projects such as UWIDITE, CUPIDE and C@ribNET).

There is no doubt that we need to develop a more vibrant and pervasive research culture. More people need to be persuaded to follow their passion for research.

I am equally pleased to inform you that a historic presentation on our High Level Meeting was made at the July 2015 CARICOM Heads of Government Meeting and it was very well-received. More importantly, Governments at that meeting pledged to increase expenditure on Research and Development. Inadequate expenditure on Research and Development has been, for too long, our greatest obstacle to development in the region.

Not much, unfortunately, has been achieved on the third and more challenging pillar of Entrepreneurship and no doubt this would be looked at in our Forum today on growing a Caribbean innovation economy.

3.THE INNOVATION ECONOMY

What really is innovation? Omar Rahman, former Science, Technology and Innovation Advisor to the Prime Minister of Malaysia, captures it best, and I quote, ***“It is about finding ways of doing what we are doing daily better, quicker, more efficiently and more profitably. It is the result of activity in Research and Development, which can be in the form of new products, new services and productivity increases”***. End of quote.

Innovation generally starts with an idea, followed by research to fully develop that idea and the entrepreneurial spirit and funding to take it to the market. Hence, innovation, research and development and entrepreneurship are intertwined.

In the innovation economy, capacity to innovate and utilize innovation is the determinant of competitiveness.

All of this must be underpinned by a sound education grounded in STEAM – Science, Technology, Education, Arts and Mathematics. I can share with you that the region has embarked on the development of an Education and Human Resource Development Strategy – to investigate, document and provide recommendations for the region's citizens by/before 2030.

While we have had a number of workshops or symposia in the region focused on innovation and entrepreneurship, we are yet to come up with a blueprint or road map as to how we can produce a critical mass of entrepreneurs and innovators.

Our state of innovation is reflected, for example, in the number of patents granted to individuals or companies from the Caribbean by the US Patent Office in the five year period, 2008 to 2013:

Jamaica – 22, Trinidad and Tobago – 17, Barbados – 4.

There are a few nationally driven projects in individual countries which are helping to enhance this:

- Jamaica's Innovation Grant from New Ideas to Entrepreneurship programme (IGNITE);
- Bahamas Telecom Company in July, signed a \$50,000 Memorandum of Understanding with The College of The Bahamas (COB) for a new Innovation Lab.

Global Innovation Index 2015 revealed that Barbados topped the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region at 37th position, while Trinidad and Tobago was placed at 80th position, Guyana at 86th, the Dominican Republic at 89th, Jamaica at 96th.

We need to do much better here. Let me not hesitate to state that we are not a region without talent and creativity. The region has produced, among other world class accolades, 3 Nobel Laureates, including one in Economics.

Our major challenge then is to create in the Caribbean an enabling environment for innovation and entrepreneurship.

One initiative which is designed to assist in this effort is the development of a Single ICT Space by 2019. The Single ICT Space will focus on harmonization of much of the ICT infrastructure (hardware, software, networks, users, skills) across the countries of the region. It will be bolstered by other programmes which speak to Cybersecurity, planning for a Digital CARICOM 2025 and bringing technology to the citizens – which is designed to unleash creativity and spur innovation through various targeted programmes.

The region must, above all, enter the global space. In this regard, we are pleased to see that UWI has taken the lead, through an initiative spearheaded by the Vice Chancellor and under my guidance as Lead Head for Science and Technology under CARICOM. Together with the Global Institute of Technology of China, we now have an established UWI-China Institute of Information Technology (UWICIIT).

This commendable and bold effort can only redound to the benefit of our young people across the region. It will for example, expose our students to state-of-the-art software engineering. Under the arrangement, students will spend two years at UWI and two years in China. I am pleased to announce that programmes at this new Institute started a couple of weeks ago. We look forward to the things to come from this engagement.

Allow me to mention also, that a CARICOM team of scientists visited Cuba a few months ago to interface with other scientists.

The visit will result in a Memorandum of Understanding for the further development of Science and Technology between Cuba and CARICOM.

4. CONCLUSION

It is my fervent hope that this forum focusing on the many aspects of growing the innovation economy will go beyond Grand Anse and make strong recommendations as to how we can bring the economy of the Caribbean region more fully into the 21st century. That is the imperative of our times.

All is not doom and gloom in the Region – there are many positives, including the fact that we are still at the top of many preferred tourism destination lists. We, like all developing countries, simply need the impetus to bring new products and services into our space.

It is also my hope that this forum will further strengthen the glue that binds CARICOM with the wider region of the Americas, with your National Academy of Sciences playing a key role.

As I close, I am well aware that this is an academic conference – but we are well past the time when an academic conference could be held without a key player and enabler -the private sector.

Public-private partnerships for innovation are an important part of the answer to many of the challenges being faced by developing countries in innovation.

The private sector has had a long-term relationship with research and innovation. While we do need them to provide much needed funding—the sharing of institutional knowledge and experience can also be invaluable. I am sure that we will all agree that there is great need for innovation in funding for research.

Distinguished Ladies and gentlemen, I hope I have given sufficient seed to help you germinate and share practical examples and ideas for advancing the Science, Technology and Innovation agenda for the Caribbean, and that those will be part of a continuous dialogue and action plan.

By building on these foundations, we can strive to create a better tomorrow for all our people. That is their legitimate expectation of their leaders. It is therefore our responsibility to deliver on those for the future of our economies.

Thank you.