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Labour Markets: Citizens Empowerment to Improve Quality of Life



Today, I welcome the opportunity to join with fellow panelists and you the members of the audience in participating in this Civil Society Meeting, as organized by the Inter American Development Bank. I am pleased to have been selected by the Vice Presidency for Countries, as one of the panelists for this session which addresses the theme of ‘Labour Markets: Citizens Empowerment to improve Quality of Life.’

I am happy to be back in Brazil for the second time in short order, with my previous visit being in July, 2013. On that occasion I was a member of a panel which discussed the topic of ‘Social Dialogue’, at the 5th International Conference of Força Sindical.

Permit me to bring fraternal greetings from both the Barbados Civil Society Consulting Group (ConSOC) of which I am the current Deputy Chair, and that of my own organization, the Congress of Trade Unions and Staff Associations of Barbados.

Moving to the business of the day, the subject of ‘Labour Markets: Empowering Citizens for a Better Quality of Life,’ is one that holds universal significance. Given the economic and social background of the Latin America and the Caribbean region, it is to be expected that there would be more than a passing interest in this subject by political, trade union and civic society leaders.

We in this region should be cognizant of the fact that the labour market is to be seen as the main source of income for Caribbean and Latin American households,



as unemployment accounts for both individuals and households below the poverty line.

Based on this, there should be no question of the importance that ought to be attached to the introduction of labour and social policies, if the problems which the labour market throws up are to be successfully addressed.

In presenting on the topic before hand, I will proceed to do so by making a link to the Barbados experience which comes out of the work of its the Social Partnership. For your information, the work of the social partnership has been informed by the National Strategic Plan of Barbados, 2006-2025.

Slide #1 I draw your attention to the fact that the plan speaks to:

- 1. Promoting at all educational levels the development of critical thinking and an entrepreneurship outlook.*
- 2. Promoting the improvement and strengthening of technical and vocational education and training.*
- 3. Equipping the population with skills to function in a global economy, and*
- 4. Enhancing adult education, training and long life learning.*

As a small island developing state, Barbados can proudly boast of a Social Partnership which has been in existence for the past twenty years. **The Barbados Social Partnership was initiated in 1993, in response to the severe economic challenges of the early 1990s.**

The Social Partnership in Barbados is to be credited with concerning itself with the empowerment of the workforce; with its primary focus being that of improving the quality of life of the people. This is expressed by the emphasis that is placed on education and health care, governance and economic policy. The process of empowerment however is not limited to the quality of life, but also extends to include work and opportunities for political and civic engagement.

Slide #2 Evidence of this is reflected in the Protocol V1 of the Social Partnership 2011-2013, which reads:

The Government, Employers' Representatives and Workers' Representatives, confirm their obligation to promote employment creation, enterprise

development, entrepreneurship and innovation, as the integral pillars of the National Strategic Plan.

Barbados has embarked on updating its labour legislation so as to provide for worker protection and empowerment. The Occupational Safety and Health at Work Act 2007, the Employment's Rights Act (2013), and the Severance Payment Act, are progressive pieces of legislation which have been enacted. Much attention has also been placed on establishing social security schemes. Notable examples are sick, injury, unemployment and maternity benefits. The upgrading of the minimum wage for shop assistance and the tax exemptions that apply to employees who earning less than Bds \$25,000 (US \$12, 500) annually, are some of the other notable measures to be instituted.

The evidence supports the fact that the Social Partnership of Barbados has embarked on developing a national policy and social policy respectively, which lend to permanent and sustainable growth of the quality of life of the citizens. The successive protocols which have been signed, starting with the Prices and Incomes Protocol in 1993, allow Barbados to focus on labour market issues that include employment. This is reflected in the objectives of Protocol VI, namely; increase employment opportunities, the promotion of a commitment to improve productivity and efficiency, enabling workers to contribute to planning and policy making, maintaining a stable industrial relations climate, the restructuring of the economy and achieving a fair balance between prices and incomes.

The consistency on the part of the Social Partners to addressing labour market concerns was further embedded in Protocol III (1998-2000). The social partners committed to the building of a modern efficient economy, able to produce high and sustainable growth accompanied by job creation, low inflation and equitable distribution of benefits of economic growth.

It is considered that Protocol III reflected the maturing of intent of the social partners into developing a more comprehensive social pact that specifically addressed a number of labour market and socio-economic issues.

The conclusion could be drawn that the social partners have developed a consciousness of the need to have an all embracing look at the structure and needs of the formal and informal economy within the labour market. It is apparent that the informal sector shares similar concerns for occupational safety and health, working conditions, social security schemes and social security benefits. The challenge remains that of promoting improved governance by instituting regulatory and

policy reform, and by engaging people, in order that they can improve service delivery.

This speaks to the need to embrace the ILO's Decent Work agenda within the formal and informal sectors of the economy. It is known that the ILO is concerned with workers beyond the formal labour market, and so concerns itself with the unregulated wage workers, the self employed and home workers. I can quickly add here that Barbados is in the forefront of promoting the rights of domestic workers and those considered to be amongst the most vulnerable.

As an extension to this, the attention of all interest should be directed to ensuring that the ILO's goal of creation of quality jobs is attained. Part of the challenge is the removal of limitations imposed on the informal sector, such as access to knowledge and training. Access to these is essential, if those in the sector are to ensure its sustainability and the quality of output.

Slide #3 The Barbados experience enlightens us that a national strategic plan informs of what is desired of the labour market. According to the mission and strategic goals the plan is to ***“To equip Barbadians with the knowledge and skills which are relevant to a sustainable economy, national development needs and competitiveness in the global market and to offer opportunities for self advancement.”***

Successive Barbados Governments have understood their role in creating institutions to help with job creation and aiding diversification within the small, medium and micro enterprise sector. Over time there has been the establishment of the Barbados Investment and Development Corporation, Youth Entrepreneurship Scheme and Urban Enterprise Growth Fund.

The Central Bank of Barbados provides assistance to businesses in Barbados through the Credit Guarantee Scheme (CGI) and the Export Credit Insurance Facility (ECIF).

Not to be left out, the Private Sector has also embarked on several initiatives which include the Barbados Youth Business Trust, and the Small Business Venture Capital Inc. All of these initiatives evolved from strategies that are intended to offer

technical and financial assistance. As you would appreciate, equity funding is important to small and micro enterprise development.

Considering that there is an increasing focus being placed on sustainable development, there is a solid case to be made for the empowering of people by providing access to working capital and technical assistance, as this would ensure that the immediate needs and those of future generations are secured.

Turning attention to the creation of a stable labour market environment, it stands to reason that the building of the employee–employer relationship at the enterprise level is key to ensuring the existence of this. It is therefore for employers and employer associations to undertake to reduce or eliminate adversarialism, as this restricts the implementation of change strategies to increase international competitiveness. Employee engagement must be embraced. Workers must be consulted. Every effort ought to be made to ensure worker participation in the decision making process.

This brings us to address the point of unionization by employees. In a global labour market environment, the right to be unionized is a cherished right that all workers should enjoy. It should therefore be promoted. Disregard and disrespect for the fundamental human and constitutional rights of people, and the non-observance of ILO Conventions #87 and #98, should be frowned upon. In a globalized labour market environment where the hiring of immigrant labour is widely practiced, these workers must have a feeling of being empowered, so as to be able to negotiate working conditions with their employer(s).

The responsibility therefore falls to governments to promote changes to labour management responses, and move with haste to encourage more dialogue with the social partners as a means of improving the labour relations climate. It requires that greater attention is paid to labour legislative reform, where archaic labour legislation, is replaced by more modern and progressive legislation. It is expected that such new legislation would address economic and social development and environmental protection.

In this redefining and reordering process, the ultimate aim should be the development of an educated and trained workforce, the creation of a knowledge base of society, and the promotion of sustainable and quality jobs. It is to be

acknowledged that Barbados has placed significant emphasis on the training of its workforce.

The Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Human Resource Development has identified Technical and Vocational Education and Training as a priority. The Vocational Training Board and the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Council have been mandated to lead this charge. The Barbados Community College (BCC) and the Samuel Jackman Prescod Polytechnic (SJPP) are two notable government institutions that offer a wide range of education and training opportunities. Beyond the class room, support from the private sector comes by way of job attachment programmes.

The promotion of TVET arising out of the national strategic action plan is specifically directed at strengthening human resource and skill development; which lends to improving the employability of Barbadians and productivity. As an extension of this, attention has to be paid to the comprehensive preparation of the workforce, by way of exposure knowledge management systems and ITC's in education.

Slide #4 Education and training remains a priority as reflected in the National Strategic Goals which are outlined as follows:

- a. To Revitalize the national training and development delivery system
- b. A Workplace focused training and development delivery system.
- c. Improve and support skill development in the CME's.
- d. Develop a culture and sustainable support mechanisms for long life learning.
- e. Accelerate the development and delivery of soft skills.

All these initiatives are part of a deliberate strategy aimed at capacity building that is intended to create a knowledge, skill based and energized workforce. This however informs a need for a change in the value system and the attitude and economic culture. It requires that there is a link established between the private sector and training institutions, for the purpose of driving curriculum reform and development, and new programmes that are designed and intended to enhance worker employability. This would mean improved education, where attention is centred on technical and vocational education, life skills, entrepreneurship, innovation, science and technology.

To add value to the transformation of the labour market and the empowerment of workers, the National Initiative of Service Excellence (NISE) and the Barbados

Productivity Council have been established since the birth of the social partnership. These play an important role in worker empowerment and development. The National Initiative of Service Excellence provides training in service excellence, whilst the Barbados Productivity Council concerns itself with productivity measurements. One important observation is that it promotes productivity based payment schemes.

Slide #5 Already there has been a transformation in the Barbadian workforce. This is borne out in the change in the demographics of the workforce that dates back to the year 2000. The research findings of Roland Craigwell and Anne Marie Warner 2000-2001 revealed that the local labour market had a demand for more educated workers, particularly secondary and university graduates. This can be seen as a deliberate strategy, as the HRD Programme 2009, reads:

“ To strengthen human resource and skill development and to improve employability of citizens to improve overall productivity.”

In the context of Labour market flexibility, the development of a highly educated and trained work force becomes the ideal. The multi skilling of the workforce is paramount if it is to be empowered to seize potential opportunities which may arise. This is clearly a positive outcome of an assessment of the impact of globalization and the technological age. The fact that Barbados has a highly educated and trained workforce, means that the workforce is exportable. Barbados is already well known for the exportation of teachers, nurses, and employees in the hospitality and services sectors.

The point is to be made that none of this has happened overnight. Historically, Barbados has expressed its commitment to HRD through a relatively high budgetary allocation to Public Education. This suggests that careful attention is being paid to manpower planning and new training initiatives.

Slide # 6 Further, the on-going work of Barbados in developing a Human Resource Development Policy and Strategy should be a reference point in relating to what is required in order to empower workers in today's labour market.

You can therefore be guided by the principles of Barbados HRD Strategy, which reads:

“The Barbados HRD strategy is premised on a seamless, high quality, demand driven, enabling environment aimed at empowering citizens to actively contribute to sustainable growth and development in a dynamic and globally competitive environment.

The strategy recognizes the need to provide a solid education and to promote lifelong learning as the foundation for every individual’s personal and professional development. It adopts a holistic approach to HRD which facilitates linkages among stakeholders.”

END



References

- ↪ Barbados Human Resources Development Strategy, 2011-2016
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- ↪ *National Strategic Plan of Barbados, 2006-2025*
- ↪ *Protocols 1-6, Social Partners of Barbados*
- ↪ *The Global and Economic Crisis and Labour Markets in the Small States of the Caribbean ...Andrew Downes*
- ↪ *Social Partnerships in Economic Development, Lessons to be learnt from the Barbados Experience, Harold Codrington*