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Labour Markets: Citizens Empowerment to Improve Quality of Life

Today, I welcomed 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 that 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, having last been here 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 Forca Sindical.

Permit me to bring fraternal greetings from both the CONSOC of Barbados, and my own organization, the Congress of Trade Unions and Staff Associations of Barbados. Beyond being labour's representative on the local CONSOC, I am honoured to be serving as its current the Deputy Chair.

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 the 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 sends the individual 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 emerging problems which the market throws up are to be successfully addressed.

In presenting on the topic before hand, I will proceed to do so by bring to bear the experience of Barbados, which is founded on the work of the Social Partnership. If I may provide a background, Barbados boasts 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; including a high fiscal deficit, declining foreign exchange earnings and rising unemployment. In light of this, the leadership of the Government, Private Sector and Trade Unions became engaged in social dialogue and came to the consensus that a collaborative approach was needed to develop and implement a cohesive national plan to address these issues.**

The Social Partnership in Barbados is to be credited with concerning itself with the empowerment of the workforce; with its primary focus in this regard, being that of improving the quality of life the people. It expresses this through 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.

Barbados has embarked on updating its labour legislation so as to provide for worker protection and empowerment. These include legislation such as the Occupational Safety and Health at Work Act 2007, the Employment's Rights Act (2013), and the Severance Payment Act. Much attention has 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 applies to employees who earning Bds \$25,000 (US \$12, 500) annually are some of the other progressive measures.

These outcomes are derivative of the spirit and intent of the Social Partnership and the six successive protocols which have been signed date; and started with a **Prices and Incomes Protocol in 1993**. The objectives of these protocols were to safe guard the fix exchange rate, improve price competitiveness, increase employment opportunities, promote a commitment to improve productivity and efficiency, enable workers to contribute to planning and policy making, maintain a stable industrial relations climate, restructure the economy and achieve a fair balance between prices and incomes. The evidence supports the fact that the social partnership of Barbados has embarked on developing a national policy and Social policy respectively that lend to permanent and sustainable growth of the quality of life of the citizens. It is to be stressed that the protocols allow Barbados to focus on labour market issues that include employment.

This is borne out in Protocol III (1998-2000), where it is clearly outlined that the social partners were 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. The third protocol has been described as representing a maturing of intent of the social partners into a more comprehensive social pact that specifically addresses a number of labour market and socio-economic issues.

This brings us to take a look at the informal economy. This is a sector that is not ignored, as the need is seen to address matters of interest such as occupational safety and health, working conditions, social security schemes and social security benefits. The tendency is to promote improve governance by instituting regulatory and policy reform, and by engaging people so that they can improve service delivery.

The attention being paid to both the formal and informal sector, is aligned to the ILO 's Decent Work Agenda. 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 among the most vulnerable.

In the changing labour market environment, the goal as pronounced by the ILO must be the creation of quality jobs. Part of the challenge is to remove limitations imposed on the informal sector, such as access to knowledge and training. Such are essential, if those in the sector are to ensure its sustainability and the quality of output.

Successive Barbados Governments have understood their role in created institutions to help with job creation and aiding diversification within in the Small 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 the strategies that are intended to offer technical and financial assistance. As you would appreciate, equity funding is important to small and micro enterprise development.

In the equation of employee empowerment within the context of a changing labour market, comes the need to address the employer-employee relationship. It is for employers and employer associations have undertake to reduce or eliminate adversarialism, as this restricts the implementation of change strategies to increase international competitiveness.

The head of a major financial institution in Trinidad was reported to have said "...to achieve our objectives we have adopted a collaborative approach...the key components of our collaborative environment is comprise: employee involvement and partnering with our unions".

This brings us to the point of unionization. Disregard and disrespect for the fundamental human and constitutional rights of workers should not be the norm. The observance of ILO Conventions #87 and #98, are important to the freedoms that all workers are entitled to enjoy. In a global working environment, unionization becomes important to the Immigrant workers, as they feel empowered to be able to negotiate working conditions with employers.

With an increasing focus on sustainable development, this is contributing to the empowering of people so as their needs and that of future generations. This has resulted in the changing response of governments to their labour management responses, as they are now moving to encourage more dialogue with the social partners as a means of improving the labour relations climate. As a consequence of this, greater attention is being paid to labour legislation reform. This speaks to a recognition of the need to replace existing labour legislation that is outdated and ineffective.

The point has to be stressed that reform which is required to take place has to be inform by an acceptance that attention has to be centred on economic and social development and environmental protection.

In this redefining and reordering process, the issues which become important would be the development of an educated and trained workforce, the creation of a knowledge base society, and sustainable and quality jobs. Barbados has placed significant emphasis on the training of the workforce. Much emphasis is placed on Technical and Vocational Education Training. In Barbados the Vocational Training Board and the TVET Council have been established to lead this charge. Institutions such as the Barbados Community College, the Samuel Jackman Prescod Polytechnic offer a wide range of education and training opportunities.

The increasing emphasis on TVET is seemingly part of the national strategic action plan, as it is specifically directed at strengthening human resource and skill development; which are aimed at 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.

There has been a recognition of the need to make the link between education and training, the delivery of quality service, and enhancing productivity at two levels. Firstly, there is the establishment of effective linkages between the private sector and training institutions, that facilitate a more demand for curriculum reform and development, and new programmes that are designed and intended to enhance workers employability. This is to be followed by improved education, where attention is centred on technical and vocational education, life skills, entrepreneurship, innovation, science and technology.

This is clearly a strategy that is aimed at capacity building, which is intended to create knowledge, skill based and energized workforce. This informs a need for a change in the value system and the attitude and economic culture.

The net effect of this is to be seen in the transformation of the Barbados workforce. This is borne out in the change of the demographics of the workforce that dates back to the year 2000. This is borne out in the findings of research completed by Roland Craigwell and Anne Marie Warner 2000-2001. Those findings show that the composition of employment has changed in favour of educated workers, particularly secondary and university graduates. Employment statistics for 1981 moved from 47,100 and 4,440 respectively, to 76,600 and 22,800 in 2000.

The National Initiative of Service Excellence 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.

Labour market flexibility becomes a key element in today's labour market. The multi skilling of the workforce is paramount if it is to be empowered to seize potential opportunities which may arise. This is clearly an outcome of an assessment of the impact of globalization and the technological age. The fact Barbados has a highly educated and trained workforce, means that the workforce is exportable. Barbados is known to export teachers, nurses, workers in the hospitality sectors and other professional services.

The point is to be made that none of this has happened overnight since historically, Barbados has expressed its commitment to HRD through a relatively high budgetary allocation to Public Education.

In summation it is advisable and imperative within today's labour market that attention is paid to manpower planning and new training initiatives.

Further, the ongoing 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 be guided by the principles of that HRD Strategy. It is envisaged that: "The Barbados HRD strategy is premised on a seamless, high quality, demand driven and enabling environment, that is 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."

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