



"AN ARDUOUS JOURNEY TO THE POSSIBLE"

DELIVERED BY

HON. DR. KENNY D. ANTHONY

PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR FINANCE, ECONOMIC
AFFAIRS, PLANNING & SOCIAL SECURITY

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CARIBBEAN YOUTH
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"INVESTING IN THE FUTURE: EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE"

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INTRODUCTION

Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm pleased to be amongst you, the family of stakeholders, interest groups and participants brought under the umbrella of the Caribbean Youth Empowerment Programme.

May I extend a warm welcome to all those who have flown in for this CYEP activity.

Let me immediately inform you that Saint Lucia is pleased and honoured to host this conference and I trust you have been extended Saint Lucia's simple, yet legendary, hospitality and warmth.

For the next two days starting today, you would be focused on solidifying or reinforcing what you perhaps already know about youth employability: what you may have already been convinced of, through your readings or through everyday interactions which you have had over the years.

Your presenters and panelists would hope that they might stir up new thoughts, I am sure, but certainly this conference is an opportunity to share; to learn best practice, to find common threads amongst our islands, to also share failings and challenges so that we might strategise on the way forward for supporting vulnerable youth.

And so, this morning, the most I might hope to achieve is to cast my perspective on how we can move forward ensuring that our people are prepared for the future, and more specifically, how

our youth can be given options for success, now and in the years to come.

PROVIDING CHOICES

Everyone wants opportunity to better their lives.

We should give our youth that choice; that they can believe that they do not have to turn to drug pushing and even gambling to find wealth or to sustain them.

We must give them real choices.

The choice to get out of poverty;

The choice to remain proud and dignified without having to denigrate their souls, the bodies, their minds;

The choice to embrace empowerment, enfranchisement, entrepreneurship, education;

The choice to embody the good that society has to offer, and to give back to the same communities from which they came.

This, I think must be the dream of this programme; the dream of Caribbean Governments for their youth; giving our young people a chance to choose to do good for themselves and society.

UNEMPLOYMENT & STAGNATION

Today, youth around the world are seen as a critical sub-sector in the fight against unemployment. I would like to think that there is general consensus that if we are to realise sustainable job creation, then it has to come from new growth in our economies.

We know all too well here in the Caribbean the results of a restless, unemployed or underemployed youth population. In Saint Lucia for instance, we are witnessing unemployment rates over thirty percent among our youth, with numbers rising at one time to 46% in the 16-19 age cohort.

COLONIAL RESIDUALS

Unfortunately, our particular socio-economic context in the Caribbean makes tackling unemployment exceedingly challenging, perhaps more so than in many other regions of the world.

I wish to raise six of these factors, some historical, some by virtue of geography, but all factoring in coming to terms with our current plight.

First, we have our colonial past, which might well be thought to act as a sort of background radiation, with residuals that still unfortunately impinge on social equity, cohesion, behaviours and attitudes towards work, authority, law and order.

For example, agriculture still suffers the negative connotation tied to the plantation economy.

Service is still confused with servitude. Many in society still suffer from an inferiority complex created by the cruel, imposed burdens of the past, and the absence of an education that treats such a cross cutting thread, holistically. The rigidity of this phantom, albeit very pervasive hegemony, is one of the factors maintaining cyclic poverty.

And so, even after fifty years of independence in the English speaking Caribbean, many of our policies, procedures and processes have not broken the mould to enable the shifts required to free the rural poor and the generations of dispossessed.

Many of our people still lack that strong sense of pride, purpose, confidence and identity that can and must provide the needed social capital and basis for growth and progress.

We in the Caribbean are then also faced with two strains of our geography.

DRUGS & VIOLENCE

This brings us to a second contextual reality. While being on the doorstep to the world's superpower does have its benefits, we also must face the

negative realities; and specifically the predominance of the illegal trafficking of narcotics. Our islands with our porous borders continue to be used as transshipment points for the drugs trade. It has meant a rise in the influence of drug-related gangs and gang warfare. This also presents an attractive proposition to youth as a way to fast track the attainment of wealth.

The phenomena of the ghetto and the garrison, particularly within the urban realm of the inner cities, continue to strangle many a capital city in the Caribbean.

It has a clear negative impact on economic growth. It keeps youth away from realising their positive potentials, while it literally cuts down our youth through violence.

Youth are the principal perpetrators and victims of violent crime. In an age when our homicide rates remain terribly high, we cannot afford to feel overwhelmed by the drugs trade and it's far reaching tentacles.

On the last occasion I spoke at an event of the CYEP, that is at the launch of *phase two* of the programme in November last year, I made reference to 2012 United States Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control which noted that the Caribbean could well face a resurgence in drugs transshipment levels. This possibility would be closely tied to the on-going efforts in in Mexico and Colombia to disrupt the trade in narcotics.

If we are not perceptive in such challenging economic times, the struggle for survival may well cause more youth to become even more attractive to

the alternative lifestyle that the trade in narcotics offers. Make no mistake about it, the gangs that the narcotics trade inevitably spawns provide comfort and attachment, a sense of family, opportunities to impress with the tools of violence, to live dangerously, or to flaunt the women who become attracted to the money and macho image of the youth caught in this vicious lifestyle.

VULNERABILITY AND INDEBTEDNESS

Thirdly, again thanks to geography, the Caribbean is the most disaster prone region in the world.

We see year after year destruction caused by hurricanes and tropical storms. We are faced also with earthquakes, and so for such a small area with a small population, the impact on our economies is immense. This forces our countries to continue borrowing to fix damaged infrastructure, restart destroyed sectors and provide relief to the victims.

Both tourism and agriculture, fundamental sectors throughout much of the Caribbean, are highly susceptible to extreme weather events. Today, President Obama is to reveal his Climate Plan.

We here in the Caribbean welcome this because we've been living Climate Change for years now.

What this means to our unemployment challenge is that Government's ability to support social programmes will continuously be impeded to a great degree by the realities of damage and destruction.

Fourthly, there are effects of the global financial crisis. The resultant slowdown in global demand, the placid flow of capital for investment, the

significant increases in unemployment and inevitably, the lower consumption of goods and services have debilitated Caribbean governments and weakened their capacity to generate economic recovery and growth.

We have seen the collapse of some Caribbean based financial institutions, resulting in the need for serious restructuring of how we manage our financial system.

Further, high debt ratios in many Caribbean countries, in some cases at over 100% of GDP, have made it impossible for some countries to finance their way out of the quagmire. Our region is within a zone of unmanageable debt. The fiscal ceiling to promote stimulus has become ever more crouched as the floor of borrowing continues to rise. Countries are compelled to contain and reduce spending to manage existing debt levels. Inevitably, expenditure on new investment to spur growth has suffered.

This is the fate of Saint Lucia which currently has a debt-to-GDP ratio of around 70% but that figure is set to rise due to a fiscal deficit in the region of 7%.

It therefore signals that Governments must maximise the impact of the limited resources they might afford currently, so as to induce growth and employment, particularly for the youth.

UNBALANCED TRADE AND SKILLS FLOWS

Fifthly, the global economic rules have shifted.

Whereas in the 50s, 60s and 70s our countrymen left

the Caribbean in search of opportunities freely by migrating to North America and the United Kingdom by the boatload, immigration restrictions now means that these countries now want to extract from us primarily our smartest and best educated minds. The result is that much of our highly skilled youth are given the impetus to migrate while our lower skilled remain. And so, we boost their production systems overseas while global trade rules encourage greater consumption of imports locally, undermining even more, our efforts to be self reliant.

Finally, another defining reality with our situation with youth unemployment is the undeniable and age old problem of mismatch. We have had a long, known incongruence between our education and training systems and the human resource needs to shift our economies into higher gear. In fact, our poverty can partly be attributed to the inability of our people to access skills which are marketable and which focus on production, not consumption.

Compounding this is that in today's world, the "shelf life" of skills is becoming shorter. Some might even lament that due to the quick march of

technology and techniques, skills and knowledge are almost perishable goods, not long after leaving the institution where they were learnt.

UNEMPLOYMENT: STRUCTURAL AND CYCLIC

In short, we face structural unemployment on top of persistent cyclic unemployment. That is to say, our economy has long not been able to provide enough jobs to meet the demand for jobs, and this is exacerbated by the clear mismatch between the education and labour sectors.

And so, our youth are the worst off as they are marched annually upon school completion without much prospect for finding a job, nor the skills for the job they might find.

The ILO notes that worldwide, even in instances where young people are employed, they tend to be in low-wage, temporary work which does not allow for economic stability and freedom from poverty.

And so, while we face in this current labour market a challenge in finding jobs for the skilled and educated, the prospects for our vulnerable youth appear more distressing, remote and diminishing.

IDENTIFYING THE VULNERABLE

And who are we referring to when we speak of the vulnerable?

Specifically, the Caribbean's vulnerable include these groups or combinations of the same:

1. Single mothers, especially when there exists negligent fathers;
2. Teenage parents, again particularly females;
3. Mentally and physically disabled youth;
4. Youth living under extreme poverty and who cannot easily access services and amenities;

5. Youth who have been victims of abuse, violence and crime; and

6. Youth who have not completed their basic education.

In particular, underperformance of the Caribbean boy continues to remain a concern across the region.

The reasons suggested for male underperformance and underachievement are said to include greater negative social pressures towards boys, characterised by weak family structure, an almost

laissez faire socialisation of boys and an education system that appears more unattractive to boys than girls. With most of our economies transitioning from agriculture to services, with minimal industrialisation, the role of males in our economy has been put into stasis.

This, however, should not declaim other forces impacting female unemployment, particularly early and unexpected pregnancy. We cannot ignore too the plight of rural women.

While more women are getting educated, at the lower end of the spectrum, women are also more likely to be poor and unemployed.

THREADING TOGETHER THE WAY FORWARD

What guiding threads can we then pull out to form variables for solving our simultaneous equations for growth and employment in the Caribbean?

One is a well known adage: you can't expect change by continuing to do things the same way.

We have got to break the pervasive cycle of habit that has come to shape our psyche and define us.

Besides accepting that our systems aren't performing, another resounding thread is that we cannot come out of this current socio-economic quagmire on our own. It is going to take regional and international partnership. In this light, the assistance through USAID in continuing to fund this programme is worthy of accolade and emulation.

INTEGRATING THE APPROACH

Third, particularly when talking about employment, we cannot decouple the social issues from the economic. Nearly all sectors perform roles within both society and economy. For example, access to free or affordable early childhood development does not only improve the likely economic success of the child during his or her lifetime, it also reduces the chances of that child becoming a burden on society. It frees up single mothers to work as well.

Another thread that must be realised is that of mainstreaming the youth agenda. Youth Policy and implementation clearly cannot remain the remit solely of one ministry or agency. There must be widespread consensus and pro-youth policies that cut across a number of agencies, the core being Finance, Education, Health, Labour, Culture, Sport and Social Protection.

MAINTSTREAMING YOUTH

Such mainstreaming must be youth driven and youth-consulted.

It makes no sense coming up with policies for the “boys-on-the-block” if they aren’t sold on the ideas, are not convinced on the way forward for their lives. Social dialogue becomes an indispensable tool for change.

Admittedly, in some instances, you will have to exert mandatory actions, particularly when these policies or programmes involve more mature youth outside of the education system.

MEASURE MORE, WASTE LESS

The last thread I wish to identify before tackling possible changes for the future is that our actions must be based on evidence, measurement and evaluation and on best practice. This is even more important in our Caribbean reality where resources are terribly constrained. Every dollar that is spent must be measured by the value it brings.

For instance, Caribbean Governments have long spent large proportions of their budgets on education, and while one might rightly argue that in

a region where the human resource is the singular resource and more should be spent, it still indicates that we may not be getting the best for our dollar spent.

Our approach must be evidence oriented and results driven. I am therefore suggesting that the education, labour and social data and research needs to be “stepped up” so that we might know more certainly where we stand in this competitive world, and how we can better adapt methods from the outside towards our realities.

Also importantly, you should be in a position to make value propositions to the Ministry of Finance and to the political directorate that is measured and telling: for example, how much of our growth rate can be improved if we invest in another compulsory year of school, if we invest in new training in customer service, for instance.

What is the impact that could be had if all workers were given basic computer literacy and skills and taught how to use software that would boost their productivity?

I raised this issue at last year's Annual General Meeting of Saint Lucia's Employers' Federation to challenge the employers to be bold in their willingness to improve their human resources, and to take imaginative, yet measurable steps at causing economic viability.

FIVE MESSAGES

And so then, you must by now be wondering, what are the types of investments that can be made to tackle employability as well as boost employment and entrepreneurship?

The ILO, in a 2011 policy brief on increasing the employability on disadvantaged youth, provided five messages to inform the policy challenge given our current global predicament.

Message one is that a good start is essential: young people need to complete at least the basic education cycle. This is essential for further skills training and enhancing the prospects of getting a decent job.

Message two is to diversify training opportunities and extend outreach.

Training is not the exclusive preserve of the state. The basis is that there is a wide variety of training providers whose potential needs to be explored. These include publicly owned and managed institutes; private, for-profit providers; institutions offering both higher education and vocational training; community-based organisations; schools which offer training as well as education; non-government organizations; and employers who conduct their own in-house training.

Message three is an important one: never lose sight of education and training outcomes.

High-quality education and training are essential to enable all individuals to acquire the skills that are relevant not only to the labour market, but also for social inclusion and active citizenship. In other words, and returning to my earlier point, you must do for society just as you do for the economy. They are inter-woven and so education must be balanced and comprehensive.

Message four perhaps does not speak to views held by the majority of persons here this morning: that is that targeted interventions are undervalued.

The *raison d'être* of CYEP is about targeted interventions. The brief noted that active labour market training programmes targeted at disadvantaged young people have been increasingly used with positive impact in the short, medium and long term.

The fifth message is a caveat: that training alone is not enough. To give young people the best chance in the labour market, education and training need to incorporate innovative approaches to skills acquisition that combine training with employment- and income generating opportunities.

Support services including literacy and remedial education, vocational and job-readiness training, job search assistance, and career guidance and counselling can also help young people to find their way into work.

The ILO's brief goes on to detail three priorities for practical implementation.

KEEPING CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS LONGER

The first seems rather obvious but wholly consistent with all that we've discussed.

It is that, as much as possible, states must delay the exit of youth from formal education. If you keep children in school longer, they have a better chance at success, provided that teaching and learning could be made indispensable, attractive and relevant,

This priority is comforting because it is something that my Government continuously believed even when some quarters were suggesting that Universal Secondary Education was not a sound investment.

It appeared that some thought we should not take the opportunity to keep all children of school age in school. And so realizing universal secondary education has helped, but obviously we must continue to do more.

For instance, when we look at the cohort where our unemployment rate is highest, we note it stands at 46% within the 15-19 age range.

A quick estimate indicates that if we ensure that all students stayed in post-secondary education for two

more years, our unemployment rate might decrease in the short term by three percentage points simply because these persons are no longer entering the workforce prematurely.

SOCIAL FLOOR FOR SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Akin to this point is the issue of reducing drop outs and boosting attendance. Currently, Saint Lucia is looking at reforming its social safety nets including its public assistance policies and within this context the issue of conditional cash transfers has been raised. Let me clarify.

Cash transfers to families would be conditional to the school attendance of children within the respective households. This is not new. It has been tried elsewhere, successfully.

I think, without a doubt, interventions to maintain and promote attendance and participation in education and training can be quite justified and consistent with the suggested supports by the ILO.

A SECOND CHANCE

Also related to the issue of providing the benefits of formal education to all is the issue of those whom the system has already failed. For many of our citizens, the “learning horse” appears to have already bolted from the stable as they went through a system where they never went to a secondary school, or they were not able to pursue their education due to poverty and cost. And so even while some might hold the attitude “let the strong succeed and the weak perish,” we know this does not hold in a caring society.

In the case of Saint Lucia, we must see how well our second chance programmes such as the National Enrichment and Learning Programme are performing and what has to be done to increase access for the disadvantaged and youth-at-risk.

With our falling birth rates, the truth is that a bigger challenge of providing opportunities for learning lies with students of the past, who are now in their twenties and thirties, and perhaps less with the smaller number of those who are to come. Our education system must respond to this reality.

INCREASING RETURNS FROM EDUCATION

I also wish to address a matter not tackled within the ILO Brief alluded to earlier. We must not be afraid of change in the education system. The modes of doing things have changed.

Curriculum, pedagogy and delivery technology cannot simply remain stagnant. We need not be afraid of actions to improve learning quality for our youth.

However, it means that there must be a new level of accountability expected from schools and the agencies charged with administering the delivery of education. There must be a new spirit that embraces new ideas. There must also be a willingness to experiment in areas we continue to record failures.

Teachers and principals too must ask whether the school can do more for the community. Can the school afford to remain available for only six hours in the day? Communities all over are clamouring for increased after-school programmes.

However, might I ask: is there not the possibility to enrich the school day with increased time for subjects that suffer due to the lack of delivery time: music, art, physical education for example? Are our students being provided with sufficient instructional time for science and mathematics, particularly as we face a crisis with CXC Mathematics performance in the Caribbean?

If we are to provide students with greater options in the areas of technical education, where would this additional time come from?

What benefits do we stand to gain if students spent an additional hour a day in school? With our economic plans to increase ties with Latin America and Africa, has the time come to pilot special language immersion at some schools, perhaps with the help of friendly partners?

SPENDING SMARTER IN EDUCATION

These are matters that must be discussed with stakeholders within the construct of curriculum reform and modernisation.

The education sector represents a major investment for all Caribbean Governments. In Saint Lucia, well over a quarter of all public officers fall within that sector. The ministry's budget this year is over US \$70 million, second only to the Ministry of Finance that has the task of debt repayment.

Therefore, any efficiencies and value-for-money enhancements realised in delivery of public education services should translate positively on our accounts. It would mean more money freed up to invest in improving other aspects of our education.

EMPHASIS ON TECHNICAL & PRODUCTIVE SECTOR SKILLS

Returning to the ILO policy brief on employability, the next priority area identified is strengthening the link between education and training systems with the world of work. This has long been a lament of reformers. The commitment to ensure it is realised will require a serious shift away from the typical offerings towards an emphasis on technology and trades based education, what we all know as TVET.

TVET IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

I need not belabour this point as I am sure there will be much said on this matter. However, the reality remains that only a small fraction of students get technical qualifications at the secondary level in science and technology subjects.

If we are to look at our CXC CSEC Examinations performance for 2012, 1 in 15 subject passes were in the natural sciences, and 1 in 11 in a technical related subject.

Mathematics, a compulsory subject for the approximately 2500 students who sat, saw a pass rate of only just about 30%.

Again, Government will not be able to reverse this trend alone. Making the transition towards greater exposure to scientific and technical skills at an earlier age might well increase students' appetite for learning if the applicability of their lessons is immediate and even tangible in their lives.

Saint Lucia will soon be following the Governments of Antigua & Barbuda and Trinidad & Tobago in introducing a programme of *“one laptop per child”* within the next school year, initially targeted at all form fours. We believe these investments are necessary to allow students the opportunity to expand their learning, not only in the traditional subjects but including technical and vocational skills training.

We are anxious for our children to discover this wonderful and extraordinary world that is so filled with possibilities.

TARGETED INTERVENTIONS

The final priority identified to help disadvantaged youth is that of targeted interventions in the labour market. Such measures, termed active labour market programmes, or ALMPs, are well known here through the acronyms NICE, the National Initiative for Creating Employment, YAEP, the Youth Agricultural Enterprise Programme, and SMILES, the Single Mothers In-Life Skills Programme. This suite of programmes was introduced in 2012 and has already had the effect in Saint Lucia of curbing and in fact reducing unemployment, even while we see contraction in some sectors.

Such programmes cannot, however, be sustained without growth in our economy. The Government believes that this was important in providing some comfort to the youth, many of whom had not had a job since leaving school.

These interventions are seen by some as a big risk, but we believe that it can provide tremendous impetus in sectors that have long been suffering. In this financial year, the hope is that greater effort will be made to overcome the urban bias that is characteristic of such programmes.

NICE, for instance, hopes to explore together with the Ministry of Agriculture, two new initiatives to train persons in the areas organic farming and in fisheries. Further, the private sector must now be more integrally involved in playing their part, just as they have been through the CYEP.

CONCLUSION

Ladies and gentlemen, this has been a “mouth full”. I emphasize that the way forward calls for cooperation and collaboration. It calls for inter-generational understanding and mutual respect.

It calls for engagement of all parties: the youth, business communities, justice and law enforcement, schools and institutions, NGOs, churches, trade unions; all that have an interest in seeing a better world. Our youth want decent work. They want real choices. It is true that this is a task easier said than done. But we cannot fold our arms, shake our heads and give up.

The opening quote for the World We Want 2015 Consultation Report on Employment and Growth had this lament: “*Seeking a job is an arduous journey into the impossible.*” I do not accept this.

That is why I have titled my address as an “Arduous Journey to the Possible.”

I hope that the dialogue at this conference can support this tone, can help build up a different outlook, can project hope for the future. We embrace the youth because we know we don't have all the answers. We embrace them because we know it is their creativity and energy which can reshape our world, and hopefully put right the mistakes of the past.

The power of a job, the power of starting a company,
the power of creation, the power of decent work is
the choice that our young people must have.

I thank you all.