**Remarks**

**BY**

**The SECRETARY-GENERAL**

**Caribbean community**

**AMBASSADOR IRWIN LaROCQUE**

**ON THE OCCASION**

**OF**

**the TWENTY-FIFTH SPECIAL MEETING OF**

**THE COUNCIL FOR HUMAN AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT (cohsod)[education]**

**via videoconference**

**17 NOVEMber 2020**

Welcome to the Twenty-Fifth Special Meeting of the Council for Human and Social Development (COHSOD) [ Education].

This is a difficult time for the sector. No one anticipated the COVID-19 pandemic nor the sustained impact it would have on our daily lives. Pundits are predicting that we will be living with COVID-19 as far into the future as 2022.

This situation has presented challenges and opportunities for our education systems. The closure of schools across the Region has affected more than five million students in CARICOM States. It has created new practices with respect to remote tuition and hastened the development of new IT related methods for learning, and new skills for our students and teachers.

Concerns have been expressed about the effect and the effectiveness of online tuition. The lack of in-person interaction between student and teacher, and among students themselves are serious issues which could affect both the learning process and the development of our youth.

Remote learning has also exposed gaps in access to technology, with a digital divide challenging equitable educational opportunities.

It is under such circumstances that the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) was tasked with designing an assessment process appropriate to the demands of the pandemic. This was not without its challenges. However, with patience, care and increased dialogue, the management of CXC was able to ensure the integrity of the Institution, as well as identify ways for us to continue to improve assessment and quality practices.

The Secretariat supports the work of CXC and looks forward to continued collaboration in the interest of promoting excellence among our youths.

Now and going forward, the focus must be on closing the gaps in delivery, reducing learning loss and increasing economic productivity with a skilled workforce.

This will involve:

* developing the private-public partnerships necessary to provide the broadband and computers needed for online education;
* creating an environment conducive to remote learning and teaching;
* and developing mobile and flexible continuing professional development opportunities to support the improvement of teaching in an online learning situation.

In this new environment, the onus is now on our teacher education systems to provide training which is focussed on technology-enabled instruction, and on social and emotional skills. The Secretariat has been collaborating with Member States and Development Partners to coordinate a range of activities to support that effort.

During the period May-August, twelve (12) Webinars and Workshops were convened in collaboration with UNESCO, the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), and experts from the University of the West Indies (UWI), the University of Guyana and the University of Sydney, Australia. These aimed to guide practices to support teaching remotely, learning in a pandemic, assessing learning, providing social and emotional care for students and teachers, and a safe transition back to school.

In June, the Secretariat, with support from the CDB and UNESCO, published the Regional Framework for the Re-opening of Schools in the Caribbean, including Schools for Learners with Special Education Needs.

In September, the Secretariat, in collaboration with the CDB and the Caribbean Association of National Training Agencies (CANTA), published Regional Guidelines for Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Institutions, and Implementation of Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (CVQs) in the Caribbean during COVID-19.

OVID has comprehensively demonstrated that we must ensure education transformation for economic growth. The education system is the vehicle and our teachers are the drivers. Teachers need to be agile thinkers and lifelong learners engaged in information-seeking behaviours.

Honourable Ministers, a 2018 World Bank Report had indicated that globally, “there is a 9% increase in hourly earnings for one extra year of schooling.”

Conversely, the economic impact of loss of learning is not yet fully quantified. I note, however, that an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2020 publication suggests that students 5-18 years “affected by the closures, might expect some 3% lower income over their entire lifetimes. For nations, the lower long-term growth related to such losses might yield an average of 1.5% lower annual GDP for the remainder of the century”.

The OECD publication also warns that it is with certainty that “national economies that go forward with a less skilled labour force, face lower economic growth which subtracts from the overall welfare of society”.

The message is clear, the longer the learning loss, the longer the negative impact on earnings and economies. Let this not be the reality for the Caribbean Community.

Our CARICOM States can ill afford sustained reduced economic growth, thus, it is critical that education be positioned as a critical feature of the economic recovery to ensure sustainable growth.

There is no economic recovery and resilience without an education system designed to strengthen workforce capacity and innovation. We need a regional system that is responsive, technologically enabled, and geared towards nurturing the skills and dispositions needed to reshape and advance the society.

Sustained economic growth is not possible without a suitably trained workforce capable of making the Region competitive in the 21st century.

It is a matter of concern, therefore, that the health emergency is also threatening the progress made in the implementation of the CARICOM Human Resource Development 2030 Strategy, which was designed to create that workforce. The implementation is already confronting significant challenges with inadequate financial and human resources.

That fact of life is a reality for us as we seek to manage our limited resources in the face of competing priorities. It is within that context that we are striving to build back better, not only from the aftermath of the pandemic, but also to be more resilient to withstand recurring natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods and drought.

Against that backdrop, this Council meets today to focus on maintaining and improving the integrity of our education systems as a major weapon in our arsenal to combat, and conquer the challenges before us. I look forward to insightful discussions and creative recommendations to help in charting the way forward.

Thank you.