RESTRICTED



**Report**

**of the**

**Launch of the**

**CARICOM Digital Skills Task Force**



**VENUE AND DATE:**

*via* Zoom

**15 SEPTEMBER 2021**

**CHAIR:**

Ms. Jennifer Britton

Deputy Programme Manager

ICT for Development

CARICOM Secretariat

**INTRODUCTION**

The Launch of the CARICOM Digital Skills Task Force was held on Wednesday, 15 September 2021, via Zoom and streamed live on CARICOM’s Facebook page and YouTube channel. A copy of the Programme is provided at **Annex I**.

**WELCOME**

**Ms. Jennifer Britton, Deputy Programme Manager, ICT4D, CARICOM Secretariat** and one of the focal points for the Digital Skills Task Force, welcomed all participants. She pointed out that while CARICOM is making significant strides on the digital transformation through the Single ICT Space, there is a persistent and wide skill gaps. She highlighted that the Digital Skills Task Force is tasked to deal with digital skills gaps.

**OPENING REMARKS**

**Dr. Carla Barnett**, **Secretary-General, CARICOM,** in her Opening Remarks indicated that the Task Force has been established to provide an opportunity for the Region to deliver a more collaborative, coordinated and innovative approach to meeting the digital skills challenge. She also emphasized that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of digital skills has come to the forefront, highlighting the inequality of access.

The Secretary-General indicated that in an effort to fast-track digital transformation in the region, the Secretariat will embark on an ICT Gap Analysis in 2022 to identify the gaps in the region’s digital infrastructure. She added that the work of the Digital Skills Task Force will complement other regional initiatives.

In concluding, the Secretary-General thanked the Cochairs and members who volunteered and accepted to contribute to the work of the Digital Skills Task Force.

A copy of the Secretary General’s presentation can be found at **Annex II.**

**INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON DIGITAL SKILLS**

**Dr. Susan Teltscher, Head, Capacity and Digital Skills Development, International Telecommunications Union (ITU)** delivered a presentation which also highlighted the widened gap in digital skills as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. Her presentation provided an international perspective on digital skills, and the different levels at which the gaps exist, based on the ITU digital skills toolkit. She spoke about the need to accelerate digital transition through digital skills.

Dr. Teltscher highlighted that in the CARICOM region, there is a scarcity of official statistics on digital skills. However, based on a report by PWC, 2020, 46% of executives in the region think their organizations are behind in training workers with digital skills. She added that few households have computers in CARICOM region, and this should be considered when looking at digital skills training and online learning.

A copy of Dr. Teltscher’s presentation can be found at **Appendix I.**

**Ms. Karine Sonigo, Digitalization Specialist, International Labour Organization (ILO)** also presented an international perspective on digital skills. She focused on the digital transition of the Technical Education and Training (TVET) sector in relation to challenges and opportunities. Ms. Sonigo stated that some of the opportunities for the digitalization of TVET are to improve the relevance of training offer, allow more global leveraging of TVET offers and expertise, and improve resilience of the sector.

She further added that some of the challenges in the region for TVET institutions are high but unequal internet penetration, human and technical capability limitations to move online, lack of national/regional policies and priority setting, and a need for flexible and inclusive learning systems.

She added that it is necessary to have new attitudes and new types of responsibilities in bridging the digital skills gap.

A copy of Ms. Sonigo’s presentation can be found at **Appendix II.**

**Mr. Wayne Chen, President, Caribbean Employers’ Confederation (CEC)** focused on presenting a regional perspective on digital skills and spoke about the opportunities they present for the Caribbean. He highlighted that the pandemic has reminded us of the need for economic diversification and resilience, allow the region to concentrate on digital transformation, and accelerated the acceptance of future of work. He emphasized that digital skills present the opportunity to address traditional sectors in new ways, such as e-government, e-working, e-commerce, e-learning, e-health, and smart agriculture.

*A copy of Mr. Chen’s presentation can be found at* **Appendix III.**

**CREATIVE PERFORMANCE**

Master Christian Fermin, a form 4 student at the Presentation College in San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago, gave an excellent steel pan performance of the “Caribbean Man”.

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS AND LAUNCH**

Dr. the Rt. Honourable Keith Mitchell,Prime Minister of Grenada and Lead Head with responsibility for Science and Technology (including ICT) in the Quasi Cabinet delivered the Keynote Address and launched the Task Force. In his address the Prime Minister opined that, due to the crisis, which was caused by the pandemic, the use of technology has increased.

In the course of his Keynote Address – the Prime Minister shared some key issues related to the:

1. **The imperative of Developing Digital Skills for CARICOM**

The Prime Minister stated that the convergence of multiple technologies will radically transform the economies and how people live and work. He indicated that CARICOM governments have recognized the need to advance the region and its citizens by engaging in multiple activities through the use of technology. He further explained that digital skills are necessary and needed in all sectors to build the CARICOM digital economy.

1. **Future ‘enabling’ our region – focus on Youth**

Prime Minister Mitchell also emphasized that to future ‘enable’ our region, the focus should be on CARICOM youth. By way of example, the Prime Minister reminded that youth are considered to be digital natives. However, most of them do not possess the job-relevant digital skills necessary. As a result, the jobs that require specific digital skills such as cloud technology, and artificial intelligence are left vacant.

1. **New ways of working will be a part of the future public service**

Prime Minister Mitchell also stated that new ways of working will be a part of the future public service. This would include remote working, and new ways of delivering services digitally. This will lead to the public service ‘being digital’ rather than ‘going digital’. There would also be new ways of working in the Education sector where the digital technologies will challenge the traditional methods of delivering education.

1. **New paradigm for CARICOM foreign policy**

The Prime Minister further stated that there should be a new paradigm for CARICOM foreign policy and that it is time to begin work in this area. He added that CARICOM has working relations with many of the countries with the highest levels of digital competitiveness, and it should try to receive assistance for the CARICOM Digital Skills strategy.

**Charge to Task Force members**

In closing his address, the Prime Minister offered thanks to the members of the Digital Skills Task Force for volunteering their time and issued a charge, as per the following questions:

* *How do we develop digital talent in CARICOM? Where should our focus and resources be placed?*
* *How do digital skill-building policies and programmes connect to the other critical areas of digital inclusion – broadband internet access and digital devices such as laptops and tablet computers, the unknowns of future technologies and to the larger regional initiative of developing a CARICOM Single ICT space?*
* *How do we keep our people motivated in a world where there is perception that their work may no longer be needed?*
* *How do we keep ourselves attuned to the many changes?*
* *How do engage* civil society and small and medium-sized enterprises into this essential conversation?

The Prime Minister formally launched the digital skills task force and urged the members to commit to making it possible for all citizens, the youth in particular, to gain the digital skills they need to navigate and success in the digital economy, so that no one is left behind.

A copy of Prime Minister’s address can be found at **Annex III.**

**VOTE OF THANKS & CLOSING REMARKS**

Dr. Laurette Bristol, Programme Manager, Human Resource Development, CARICOM Secretariat and one of the focal points for the Digital Skills Task Force, thanked the presenters for delivering their remarks and presentations. She also thanked all who participated via the various platforms (Zoom. Facebook, and YouTube).

**LINKS FOR PRESS RELEASES, RECORDING OF REMARKS AND PRESENTATIONS ON CARICOM’S SOCIAL MEDIA**

***Blog***

* <https://today.caricom.org/2021/09/22/digital-skills-are-vital-now/>
* <https://today.caricom.org/2021/09/15/digital-skills-vital-to-current-virtual-world-in-which-we-live-and-must-thrive-caricom-secretary-general/>
* <https://today.caricom.org/2021/09/15/caricom-needs-to-advance-digital-skills-for-workforce-at-an-unprecedented-level-pm-mitchell/>

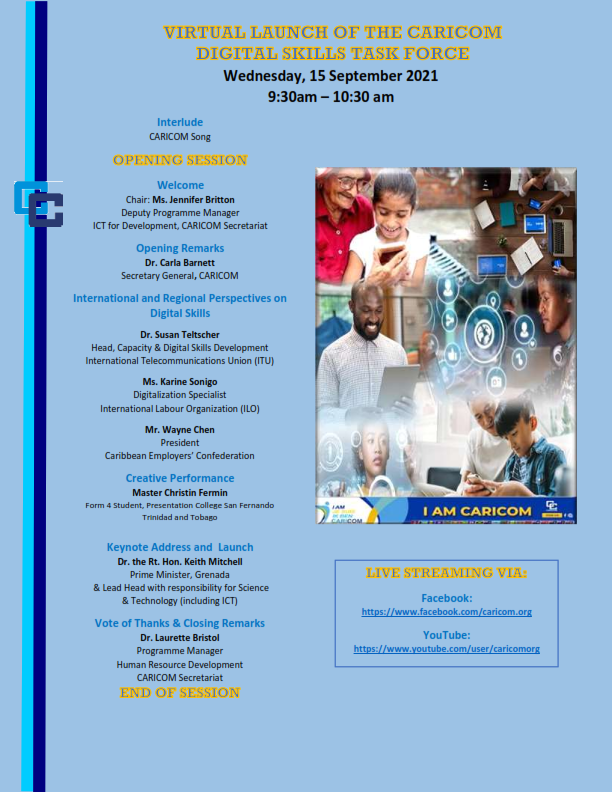
***Facebook***

* Launch: <https://www.facebook.com/caricom.org/videos/589445615802658>

***YouTube***

* Launch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1O69qw42NE>
* Dr. the Rt. Hon. Keith Mitchell, Prime Minister, Grenada: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugq75CIpUa4&t=19s>
* Dr. Carla Barnett, Secretary General, CARICOM: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SB9aqCzbXGg>
* Dr. Susan Teltscher, ITU: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApL7dLyyeF0>
* Ms. Karine Sonigo, ILO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIKquCDVntE>
* Mr. Wayne Chen, CEC: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_Omsps4nD8>

**ANNEX I – PROGAMME OF THE LAUNCH**



**ANNEX II – OPENING REMARKS BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL – CARICOM**

**Opening Remarks by Dr. Carla Barnett, CARICOM Secretary-General at the Launch of the CARICOM Digital Skills Task Force, 15 September 2021**

* Honourable Ministers;
* Heads and Representatives of Regional Institutions and Organisations;
* Cochairs of the CARICOM Digital Skills Task Force – Dr. Barbara Reynolds and Mr. Carlton Samuels;
* Representatives of the Media;
* Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good Morning, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the Launch of the CARICOM Digital Skills Task Force.

The Task Force has been established to provide an opportunity for the Region to deliver a more collaborative, coordinated, and innovative approach to meeting the digital skills challenge. Technology is quickly transforming the way we live and work. Most transactions are digital, information is immediate.

As you may be aware, the need for digital skills has also come to the ‘forefront’ due to the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The regional digital footprint has increased tremendously over the past year, with citizens doing what they can to adapt to the new normal way of living.

However, COVID-19 has deepened the existing inequality of access, and further exacerbated the mismatch between income and education, training and job prospects.  The crisis revealed the weakness and unpreparedness of the current education systems worldwide, following the deployment of digital learning during mass school closures across almost all countries.

At the Global Education Meeting (GEM) convened by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in October 2020, governments and the international community identified five priorities for urgent action, including support to teachers as frontline workers, scaling up of digital skills and narrowing the digital divide.

Before the pandemic, digital skills were valued, but now they are vital to keep up with the growing trend of the virtual world in which we live and must thrive.

Strong collaboration is needed between the public, private and civic society sectors, to promote learning and skills delivery in different environments, and make it accessible and inclusive to all. The private sector is well-positioned to help meet and expand this increasingly urgent, and unmet need and demand.  At the government level, this will also mean developing comprehensive education, social welfare, and economic policies.

Addressing digital inclusion and proliferating digital skills across CARICOM in a comprehensive, strategic manner will add another important layer to being “**A Community for All**”, as it will help to ensure that all CARICOM citizens have the necessary skills and can participate meaningfully in society.

Digital skills for CARICOM citizens were already envisioned as we crafted the CARICOM Single ICT Space in 2014 and, in 2017, the Human Resource Development Strategy 2030. Those skills are identified as key inputs to achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

The need to close the global skills gap is now urgent. While the full effects and numbers of this gap in CARICOM are not yet known, I am happy to share that the CARICOM Secretariat will embark, in 2022, on an ICT Sector gap analysis across the whole of CARICOM, with funding provided under the 11th European Development Fund (EDF). This gap analysis will support the recovery efforts of the Region, through the identification and quantification of critical parts of our digital infrastructure and help to fast-track digital transformation.

The primary objective of the CARICOM Digital Skills Taskforce is to promote awareness of the importance of digital skills for students, business and governments. It is also to provide technical guidance on the development of digital skills and capability levels across CARICOM.  The work of the Task Force will therefore be complementary to many other important regional actions.

I express sincere thanks to the Co-chairs and all Members of this Task Force, who have volunteered their valuable time, and accepted to be a part of this important and much-needed initiative.  Your work will contribute significantly to the education, human resource development and digital transformation efforts of the Caribbean Community, and ultimately provide many individuals, especially our youth, with greater opportunities towards providing a better quality of life.

I encourage all of you listening and participating today, CARICOM citizens in the Region and in the Diaspora, and key stakeholders, please keep interested and engaged in the work of the Task Force, which holds its inaugural meeting today. Share your expertise, contribute wherever necessary and however possible.

Once again, welcome to this Launch Ceremony and I look forward to the outcome of the efforts of this Task Force.

Thank you.

**ANNEX III – KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER OF GRENADA**

**Keynote Address** by **Hon. Dr. Keith Mitchell**, **Prime Minister of Grenada and Lead Head of Government responsible for Science and Technology (including ICT) in the Quasi Cabinet**, **at the launch of the CARICOM Digital Skills Task Force**, **15 September 2021**

* CARICOM  Ministers of Government
* Secretary General, CARICOM – Dr. Carla Barnett
* Permanent Secretaries and other government officials
* Heads/Representatives of Regional Institutions/ Organisations
* Co-Chairs of the CARICOM Digital Skills Task Force – Dr. Barbara Reynolds and Mr. Carlton Samuels, and Members of the CARICOM Digital Skills Task Force
* Participants in this Opening Ceremony from the ITU, ILO, Caribbean Federation of Workers, our young pan man from Trinidad & Tobago
* Private Sector Stakeholders and Partners
* CARICOM Secretariat Team
* Members of the Media
* Sisters and brothers, good morning to all

It is my pleasure to be part of today’s launch of the CARICOM Digital Skills Task Force, an important entity as CARICOM continues the march towards digital transformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has commanded our attention for the past 18-months, as governments seek to ensure the collective safety of all nationals.  Through it all, our citizens have shown tremendous resilience and our front-line workers must be commended for the tremendous service they have provided during this challenging period.

Every crisis presents opportunities, and this pandemic has caused us to use technology more and place greater value on its critical role in the world today.  Digital transformation is also a concept that is becoming increasingly familiar and is impacting every industry imaginable causing both fear and excitement – excitement in advancing the frontiers of human endeavor and the fear of negative repercussions on jobs and rising inequalities.

The convergence of multiple technologies will radically transform the organisation of economies and how people live and work. It also holds the promise to address CARICOM’s pressing economic and social development challenges amidst a rapidly shifting digital frontier.

Grenada, like many of its CARICOM sisters and brothers, has recognised the need to advance our countries and citizens through the strategic use of digital technologies – and this is evidenced in the plethora of activities being undertaken by each CARICOM Government.

At present, the Government of Grenada is fast-tracking its digital transformation agenda to create a more citizen-centric public service that is capable of delivering more online services. At the same time, we are cognizant of the need to improve the digital literacy of our citizens, allowing them to better capitalise on our improved service delivery platforms. We are rolling out a digital skills programme that will enable them to do just that.

Digital Skills are required across the board, from Agriculture to Creative Industries, Defence to Hospitality, Transport and Tourism– all sectors are reporting the need for digital skills. Therefore, to build and foster the CARICOM digital economy, we must embrace the role of technology and have a digital workforce.

Young people today have a much higher level of education regarding digital skills and competences. While they are often considered “digital natives”, the reality is that the majority do not possess job-relevant digital skills. As a result, jobs requiring Cloud computing, artificial intelligence, mobile app development are going unfilled. We need to change that reality.

According to the Caribbean Development Bank, about 60% of the Region’s population is under the age of 30. Given the prevalence of youth unemployment, the growth potential of the digital economy and skills present an opportunity for tackling this and fostering entrepreneurship.

Colleagues, friends, new ways of working will be a part of the future public service. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the public service shifted, where possible, to remote working and scrambled to find new ways of delivering services digitally. The public service in our respective countries now have the rising challenge of ‘being digital’ rather than ‘going digital’.

Digital technology will also change traditional methods of delivering education.  This is already evident as schools, teachers, parents, and students have been forced to adapt to more online learning. There should be greater emphasis on providing every citizen with adaptable digital skills. Changing demands from businesses, consumers, students, and communities mean that apprenticeships, vocational qualifications, technical and vocational training, and degrees, need to deliver both general and specific digital capabilities that support the evolving nature of the workplace.

We must also encourage a stronger focus on lifelong learning. The rapid evolution of technology has created a continual need for lifelong learning and up-skilling and will help create an economy of adaptable workers who can take on current and future roles.

It is imperative that CARICOM countries agree on an agenda of change for further and higher education that addresses the magnitude of the challenge; and we must re-examine our human, technical and financial investment in science and research.

Sisters and brothers, we are in the midst of the Fourth Industrial Revolution which has ushered in extraordinary technological advances, fusing boundaries of physical, digital, and biological worlds to create new paradigms in the way we live, work, and interact.

To become a medium to high growth economy, CARICOM as a whole, needs to advance digital skills for the workforce at an unprecedented level, particularly for low-skilled workers who will otherwise bear the brunt of job vulnerability.

I see a need for a new paradigm in CARICOM foreign policy. CARICOM has friendly working relations with many countries which are regarded as leaders in the area of digital talent and competitiveness. We must use these alliances to actively promote and garner assistance for the CARICOM digital strategy and to enhance the digital skills of our people.  The time is now for us to begin work on a CARICOM digital foreign policy strategy.

The advocacy work being done at the level of Heads of Governments and teams must be replicated across all levels of government and governance to ensure uniformity in our conversations and requests to move CARICOM countries forward in the digital space.

Madame Secretary General of CARICOM, I expect to see many of our proposals to these countries, regarded as digital leaders, reflecting the digital needs of the region.

In closing sisters and brothers, I wish to thank members of the task force for agreeing to serve in such a critical capacity that is likely to have a significant impact on the future of the region. Each of you possess specific competencies and I urge you to harness your various areas of expertise for the greater good of the region and its people.

I think some of the critical questions will be:

* How do we develop digital talent in CARICOM? Where should our focus and resources be placed?
* How do digital skill-building policies and programmes connect to the other critical areas of digital inclusion – broadband internet access and digital devices such as laptops and tablet computers, the unknowns of future technologies and to the larger regional initiative of developing a CARICOM Single ICT space?
* How do we keep our people motivated in a world where there is perception that their work may no longer be needed?
* How do we keep ourselves attuned to the many changes?
* How do engage civil society and small and medium-sized enterprises into this essential conversation?

These are some of the implicit issues, not necessarily in your terms of reference, but with which you must grapple, to help us arrive at a comprehensive, harmonised CARICOM frame of reference on digital skills, as we work towards achieving key sustainable development goals by 2030.

You will have to interrogate how digital transformation has changed the character of many of our priority sectors and provide technical guidance on what schemes and incentives can drive that forward.

Your work is vitally important to what is envisioned as a ‘human-centred, sustainable and more prosperous digital future’ that requires a whole-of-CARICOM approach and which includes institutions, governments, industry, academia, and civil society.

As we launch this digital skills taskforce today, let us commit to making this exciting and necessary journey together. Let us make it possible for our citizens, our young people in particular, to gain the digital skills they need to navigate and succeed in today’s digital economy. In so doing, we can build a CARICOM digital future where no one is left behind.

I thank you.

**APPENDICES**

**NB: Please double click on the pdf icons to view the presentations**

**Appendix I – Presentation delivered by Dr. Susan Teltscher, ITU**

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**Appendix II – Presentation delivered by Ms. Karine Sonigo, ILO**

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**Appendix III – Presentation delivered by Mr. Wayne Chen, CEC**

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