

FORWARD TOGETHER Consultation

Strengthening the involvement of Civil Society in the Caribbean Community

I. BACKGROUND

Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Heads of Government have publicly recognised the important role that civil society can play in the integration process. In its publication *Time for Action, 1993*, the West Indian Commission recommended that new modalities of governance and sustainability of the integration process would require a strong and supportive civil society. Subsequently, the Heads of Government, at their Conference in 1997 in Antigua and Barbuda, adopted the Charter of Civil Society which, inter alia, had as one of its principal objectives *'the creation of truly participatory political environment within the Caribbean Community which will be propitious to genuine consultation in the process of governance.'*

At a meeting of the Heads of Government in Trinidad and Tobago in October 1999, the Heads set the stage for greater interaction with civil society. As part of their strategy for the future, they called for an encounter with civil society, to *"provide for a free and wide-ranging inter-change of ideas aimed at arriving at a consensus for a strategy for the development of the Region and its peoples". In so doing, the Heads would have taken into account not just region-wide developments but current challenges, and the principles of the Charter of Civil Society where the Community commits itself to seek to "achieve and sustain such governance by mobilising action for change"*. This civil society encounter will take the form of a Regional Conference entitled "Forward Together", scheduled to be held 2, 3 July 2002 in Georgetown Guyana.

II. THE AIMS OF THE CONFERENCE

It is expected that the Conference will bring together representatives of Non Governmental Organisations and other private sector groups to discuss issues related to their roles in the development of the Caribbean region. Among these groups are representatives of labour, youth and gender movements, representatives of the media, religious bodies, the academic community and other civil society interests. The more specific aims of the Conference are:

- To identify strategies for financing development that pay attention to the needs of the poor and marginalised groups.

- To establish new approaches to collaboration and consultation between civil society and government, especially in the pursuit of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME).
- To strengthen the scope for dialogue and collaboration among the various strands of Non-State Actors in promoting regional development.

III. CONTEXT/JUSTIFICATION

The notion of consultation with Civil Society as an integral part of governance has become part of the new agenda for countries and international/integration organisations alike, particularly in this Hemisphere. Aside from the consultation processes that may exist at the country-level and among many regional organisations, civil society has become a critical element in the Hemispheric Summit process. The Hemisphere's Trade Ministers have created a Committee of Government Representatives on the Participation of Civil Society, which has been receiving inputs from civil society organisations.

In CARICOM, the notion of regular interaction with civil society is gaining increased acceptance among governments, several of whom currently hold regular consultations with the private sector and labour organisations, and receive inputs into policy development from NGOs. Perhaps the best example of this collaborative relationship between a CARICOM Member State and identified members of civil society can be found in Barbados' approach to consultations among the social partners.

Development partners and other regional institutions have also been promoting the need for social dialogue, giving the highest priority to the promotion of social justice and the betterment of the human condition based on full participation for all. The Inter American Development Bank (IDB) has developed a preliminary proposal of goals and lines of action for programmes to modernise the state and strength of civil society. Issues related to the most effective resource-allocation mechanisms and the need to consolidate democratic systems are pre-requisites in the new Bank strategy for helping countries of the region to face the challenges arising from sweeping changes in the marketplace.

Similar concerns are being expressed by several other development agencies, among them, CIDA, UNDP, DFID and the World Bank. In addition, attention is paid in respect of the implications for strengthening economic capabilities while paying attention to the nature of public/private partnerships and the structure of governance.

Already, one notable innovation in the structure of regional governance is reflected in the establishment of a quasi-cabinet system, wherein each Head of Government has responsibility for a specific portfolio. A parallel and logical

development must be the establishment of a firm basis for the deepening and widening of Caribbean integration through greater participation of Caribbean people in the process.

It is evident that the Region would be hard pressed to deal with its current challenges without the support and contribution of an active citizenry, organisations and structures to participate in the business of government.

IV. ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE OF THE CONFERENCE

The Consultative Process

National consultations are preceding the Regional Conference, and have made provision for the broadest possible participation of civil society groups. Each national consultation is being co-ordinated by a focal point who is represented on the Co-ordinating Committee of the Regional Conference. National Consultations are being facilitated by background documents on regional developments, which are being provided by the Caribbean Community Secretariat and other agencies. The records of discussions and recommendations from each National Consultation will contribute to the documentation for discussion at the Regional Conference.

It is recognised that consultations on similar issues are already taking place in some countries. In other instances, opportunities have been identified for discussions at the level of sectors/regional organisations. It has therefore been agreed that the Consultations and Conference should take these into account to build on them.

National Consultations

Plenary Discussion

- The vision and strategies of Caribbean Development in the global system.
- The role of civil society in the design and implementation of these strategies.

Sub-themes for plenary sessions and for working groups

- Organising the proposed Caribbean Single Market Economy to maximise the development potential (nationally and regionally) to benefit Caribbean people;
- Integrating Women and Youth into the development agenda
- Justice, Governance and Human Rights: Are there useful models? What has to be changed, why and how?
- Moving beyond the rhetoric of human and financial capital investments towards improving the Region's international competitiveness.

The Regional Consultation

The final agenda for the Regional Consultation is being determined by the Regional Co-ordinating Committee on the basis of the results and recommendations from the National Consultations. It is anticipated that the Regional Conference will take more or less the same format as the National Consultations. A major feature will be the participation of Heads of Government in the dialogue related to the outcome from the plenary and working group sessions, on the final day of a proposed 2-day meeting.

Documentation

For the National Consultations, the Secretariat provides a brief background document to facilitate discussion on the Vision for Development as well as a brief "Issues Paper" which is to guide the discussions on a strategy for development. It has circulated documents on the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME), the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ), the Charter of Civil Society and relevant papers from the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB)/ Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) Task Force and the IDB's Frame of Reference for Bank Action in Programmes for Modernising the State and Strengthening of Civil Society. The Working Document/ Report which will form the base document for the Regional Consultation will be comprised of the outcomes of the National Consultation.

V. RELEVANT ISSUES ARISING FROM NATIONAL FORUMS

Some of the major issues that will serve as a springboard or for possible inclusion in the agenda for the Regional Conference are:

- **How can the Region's productive capabilities be increased?**

This will require focus on the exports of goods and services as well as on investments. It also includes placing emphasis on agricultural commodities that show strong demand growth in market segments, such as those of the Caribbean Diaspora in Metropolitan countries. Services such as tourism, professional, telecommunications and information, education and culture could be further developed through the support of a policy framework which includes upgrading production technology and knowledge through human resource development and careful adaptation and assimilation of imported technology.

- **What are the most appropriate strategies for dealing with enhancing Employment Opportunities and Human Resource Development?**

The relationship between employment and human resource development, and economic growth and economic and social development needs to be explored more fully, especially in the context of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME). It will include incorporating work ethic issues into the formal education system; establishing flexible education systems (including non-formal education to facilitate adaptation to technological change); strengthening the links between employers and the education system; developing an environment in which Labour Unions and the private sector contribute to the process; free movement of labour in the Region; the development of a labour market information system; and devising programmes for the retention of skills in the Region.

- **Why is the Development of a Technology Policy so important?**

A Caribbean Technology Policy is deemed to be a critical component of increasing the region's competitiveness. It needs to focus on the broadest possible network; from appropriate science-based education at the primary levels of the school system, to the high-end which focuses on cutting-edge, innovative research and development, as proposed by the Caribbean Regional Research Agency (CRRRA), an initiative sponsored by CARICOM/UWI/CDB and private sector partners.

- **What is the relevance of Sustainable Development?**

Policies need to be implemented to balance the objectives of economic growth, social equity and environmental conservation. The generation of research could be used to provide solutions to environmental problems in the region, and there could be the development of relevant legislative frameworks, as well as efficient co-ordination of implementation at the political, institutional and community levels.

- **What financial structures are necessary to make Capital Accumulation meaningful?**

It is necessary to focus on measures/incentives to increase internal savings as well as foreign direct investment, because considerable amounts of capital accumulation are required to complement domestic savings. The Caribbean Stock Exchange and the Caribbean currency and ultimately, a monetary union, are seen as mechanisms that can reasonably effect this.