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 TEXTUAL

REMARKS BY THE DIRECTOR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TH EXECUTIVE SECRETARIAT FOR INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT,

MR. CLETUS SPRINGER

DURING THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE

 INTER-AMERICAN COUNCIL FOR INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT ON

ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCE. BUILDING BACK BETTER: THE KEY TO RESILIENT RECOVERY

HELD SEPTEMBER 29, 2020

REMARKS BY THE DIRECTOR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TH EXECUTIVE SECRETARIAT FOR INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT, MR. CLETUS SPRINGER DURING THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE INTER-AMERICAN COUNCIL FOR INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCE. BUILDING BACK BETTER: THE KEY TO RESILIENT RECOVERY HELD SEPTEMBER 29, 2020

In the Secretariat for Integral Development, we believe that of the many development concepts to have emerged over the past 50 years, vulnerability and resilience are arguably the most valuable, in policy and strategy terms.

The operational utility of vulnerability is when it is used to inform resilience building.

The COVID pandemic has confirmed that all countries are vulnerable to external shocks. All countries can reduce their vulnerability and increase their resilience. But not all countries have the same capacity for resilience.

The reality is that those countries with less capacity for resilience are those whose vulnerability is predominantly inherent.

“Inherent vulnerability” refers to natural “genetic” conditions that some countries will always have, irrespective of how resilient they become. A useful analogy is an individual who is genetically disposed to Type 1 diabetes or Sickle Cell Anemia. Diet, lifestyle changes and medication can help these individuals to build adequate resilience that they might live with these ailments. But these people will always be vulnerable to these conditions.

There are inherent vulnerabilities that are peculiar to Caribbean SIDS that have complicated their resilience building efforts. I refer to the micro populations and internal markets; their exposure to price volatility of imports like energy, cement and steel and their commodity exports; their openness; and diseconomies-of-scale; and their exposure to hazard events that overwhelm their capacity to cope.

In SEDI, we see vulnerability and resilience as being extremely useful in assessing not only the impacts of shocks, but also the degree of recovery from shocks. The term “Build Back Better” aims for development that is stronger and more durable than pre-shock conditions.  The stronger a country’s recovery, the stronger its resilience to future shocks.

However, in the Caribbean which is perennially exposed to  extreme weather shocks, successive events like those suffered by Dominica from Hurricane Maria and the Bahamas from Hurricane Dorian make it difficult to “bounce back” when a country is beaten down, before it can recover.

Inherent vulnerability to biological and extreme weather shocks can and has contributed to “debt vulnerability” becoming a dominant feature of the economic history of many OAS member states, especially those in the Caribbean.

Take this example. Last week, the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) approved a loan of $40 million for The Bahamas and $30 million for Saint Lucia to help deal with the fallout from COVID-19, while sustaining socially friendly policies for vulnerable people. The tragedy behind this new debt is that before COVID-19, both countries were pursuing reform agendas to promote economic growth, alongside fiscal and debt sustainability. The Bahamas was implementing a comprehensive set of measures to deal with the impacts of 4 hurricanes in the last five years, including the devastating Hurricane Dorian of 2019. Now, the CDB estimates GDP in The Bahamas will decline by 14 percent and by almost 19 percent in Saint Lucia in 2020. The hope is that these countries will see some recovery in 2021, but that outcome is at best, uncertain, and if it happens, it will be at great cost. Of course, this will all depend on whether the countries are spared future shocks. But the grim reality is that if the economies of these countries are to expand, their fiscal windows will inevitably narrow, as declines in income and foreign exchange from tourism, and in remittances will force them to incur more debt.

If we overlay on this scenario, rapid onset disasters like the earthquakes that have hit Chile and Haiti; and slow onset disasters like climate variability and climate change that threaten countries in the Drought Corridor between Panama and Mexico, those that share river basins in South America, and that are coastal states like the Caribbean, we see that vulnerability is very much a reality of life of many, if not all regions in the Americas.

Given these realities, SEDI’s work agenda has focused on fostering cooperation at all levels to promote inclusive, integrated, resilient, and sustainable development in the Americas.

SEDI’s agenda is of necessity, multi-dimensional because the vulnerability challenges I have described encompass the economy, the society, and the environment. SEDI’s cooperation agenda is framed by the following facts:

* Economic resilience cannot be achieved in the absence of social and environmental resilience.
* A competitive economy is not necessarily sustainable if human and natural assets are undervalued and abused.
* Enhancing and maintaining environmental quality builds the resilience of the economy and society to natural hazards.
* Resilient and competitive economies cannot be achieved without a workforce that is well trained and can adapt to shocks to the labor market.
* Inclusive, resilient and sustainable development is a pre-requisite for the attainment of fundamental human rights, including: the Right to Development; the Right to a Healthy Environment; the Right to Work; the Right to Education; and the Right to share in scientific advancements and their benefits. In short, SEDI’s work promotes the attainment of more rights for more people.

Delegations may ask, what in practical terms is resilient development? We can do no better than draw on Dominica which is one of the few countries that has designed a comprehensive national strategy for resilient development[[1]](#footnote-1). Thirty-two of the 42 objectives of this strategy have direct relevance to SEDI’s work, including these examples:

* a robust electricity supply system driven by renewable energy and energy efficiency
* a sustainable, vibrant, well diversified tourism sector
* better organization of small and micro business sector
* a world- class resilient infrastructure sector, including housing stock
* a modern and relevant education system
* a legislated disaster management framework
* a modern, dynamic science and technology sector; and
* a safe, affordable, and reliable water system.

These resilient development imperatives, and the presentations we have heard today, confirm that resilient and sustainable development is not some abstract, esoteric construct. Dominica’s resilient development agenda, which is being pursued in various ways, by all OAS Member States operationalizes key international agreements including: the 2030 Development Agenda and the SDGs; the Paris Agreement; the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction; the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development; and the Inter-American Program for Sustainable Development.

This agenda of imperatives which is reflected in the OAS Charter reminds us why SEDI exists; and why the Charter is such a pioneering instrument.

Chairman, as this is my last presentation to CIDI, I crave your indulgence to close my presentation with these frank perspectives.

I joined the OAS in 2006 because in my 25-year career as a national and regional public servant and international consultant, no other international organization impressed me as much as the OAS. I had seen first-hand, the immense transformational impact the OAS was able to achieve, through the creative and targeted use of its limited resources. In my time as the Head of the Ministries of Tourism and Planning and Development in my country, the OAS was my “default” organization—the one I most trusted to support the programs of my Ministries.

Across the hemisphere, there are hundreds of thousands of people including many decision-makers in the public and private sector who have benefited in some way, shape, or form from the work of the OAS, especially, SEDI. I am the beneficiary of a partial OAS scholarship to pursue post-graduate studies in Urban Planning.

My experience has made clear that comparative advantage is not a function of which agency has the most resources. Had it not been for SEDI-DSD’s interventions, regional agencies like the Caribbean Emergency Disaster Management Agency (CDEMA), the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre (CCCCC), the Amazonian Treaty Organization (ATCO), and the Inter-American Commission for the La Plata Basin (CIC) would not exist; St. Kitts and Nevis and Dominica would not be on the road to a resilient energy future; IFIs would not now be able to take advantage of $1 billion investment made possible through shared management of the La Plata River Basin; and coffee farmers in the Trifino region shared by Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador would not be using an app to guide their farming decisions that was developed through a partnership put together by SED-DSD involving the Trifinio countries and a Costa Rica-based university.

There are countless other examples that I can give to prove the point, that comparative advantage does not reflect comparative resource endowment. In virtually every case, DSD has done, not only things that needed to be done, but the things that IFIs had not done.

I cannot say that I leave the OAS in high spirits. I leave with heavy heart. Over my 14 years with DSD, 12 as the OAS’s only Caribbean Director, I have watched the steady dismemberment of a Department that arguably has achieved far more than any other, through the dedication and commitment of a team of truly outstanding professionals.

Together, we have achieved a great deal. Thanks to the efforts of the ECPA team, the ECPA is now an established vehicle for the promotion of clean energy in the Americas with Ministerials that are more efficiently run and more productive than many, including I daresay the General Assembly; the Environmental Rule of Law is now a universally recognized principle; circular economy is being embraced within the Americas; thousands of citizens, including city and disaster risk management officials have received certified training; a solid comprehensive meta data base of biodiversity now exists; and over $300 million has been raised for shared water resources management projects in the Americas.

I have nothing but good wishes for my DSD colleagues that I leave behind. I thank them for their support.

I thank the OAS for giving me the opportunity to serve the hemisphere. I thank DSD’s countless partners for their steadfast cooperation. And I thank Secretary Kim Osborne for her unflinching support, which made these past 4 years, bearable and fulfilling.

Chairman, I thank you!

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1. <https://observatorioplanificacion.cepal.org/en/plans/national-resilience-development-strategy-2030-dominica> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)