

Hon. Minister Oliver Joseph Keynote Address at PARIS21 Meeting
19 May 2016, OECD Conference Center Paris, France

Theme: Agenda 2030 and the SIDS: Strengthening Statistical Capacity and Readiness,

It is my esteemed pleasure to deliver this Keynote address on behalf of Prime Minister of Grenada Honourable Dr. Keith C. Mitchell who is unable to attend because of important prior travel obligations. He asked that I convey his regrets for not being able to attend. Prime Minister Mitchell is indeed disappointed that he is unable to attend this conference. Being a statistician himself he feels obligated to this cause.

Let me begin by applauding the efforts of PARIS21 for convening a meeting of this nature and magnitude to facilitate a greater level of discourse with states that have similar characteristics and issues. The timing of this meeting is very appropriate as we enter into Agenda 2030 and as we prepare to report on the sustainable development goals (SDGs) on this agenda. This meeting enables us to critically analyse in a collaborative way our statistical systems bringing to the table the challenges and best practices, a crucial step we need to take as we enter into this New Framework for development. Given the requirements of the SDGs we are now able to assess the needs of our statistical system. Hence, it is very reassuring to know that one of the agenda items specifically focuses on Support for statistical capacity development in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). This in my government's view is of paramount importance to fulfil the reporting requirements of the SDGs.

Eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty and ensuring sustainable development should be the single most important goal for any Government with genuine concern for its people. This is certainly the case in Grenada, as my Government's aim is ultimately to ensure a decent standard of living for all. We recognize that people are at the centre of sustainable

development and, in this regard, we are striving to create an environment that is just, equitable and inclusive. Hence, we have already committed to working together to promote sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development and environmental protection which ultimately redound to the benefit all. This is evident in Grenada with the committee of social partners being very active in the countries development agenda. They have been collaborating for inclusive engagement and dialogue to foster the sustainable and balanced development of Grenada.

The 2030 agenda has presented us with many opportunities and at the same time many challenges. The main opportunity is the drive to eradicate poverty in all its forms within the context of sustainable development. It is my understanding that these 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets build on the foundation of Millennium Development Goals and seeks to complete what these did not achieve. We all can attest to the comprehensiveness of these goals and targets. These goals and targets as you may know are grounded in the three dimensions of sustainable development: Economic, social and the environment. In addition to the eradication of poverty they speak to issues of Human rights, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. This integrated framework, as articulated by many before, is a plan of action for the people, the planet and to ensure prosperity for all. In Grenada we see it as a ray of hope that will guide us in the transformation of our economies in providing more for the hopeless and the less fortunate among us, as it premised on the principle that that no one shall be left behind. Ladies and gentlemen, we need to embrace this principle fully and take ownership as the future of our economies is in our hands.

However achieving this seemingly ambitious agenda would not come easy especially for Small Island Developing States because of the wide array of structural problems confronting our islands . Some of these problems include :

- Their small populations sizes

- Their limited domestic resources and export capacity causing huge balance trade deficit and hence low revenue generation potential.
- Agriculture and in some countries tourism constitutes the backbone of many SIDS and hence provide the main source of livelihood and foreign exchange for our economies.
- They are prone to the effects of global environment and hence external economic shocks which are expressed in the famous saying said that when economies like the US sneezes our SIDS catches a cold.
- They are extremely susceptible to natural disasters that may have severe impact on vulnerability and sustainability, and in some cases reversing previous progress made in terms of poverty alleviation. These disasters can also destroy the major sectors of agriculture and tourism given their significant contribution to GDP in our economies.

This agenda presents insurmountable challenges, especially for Institutions engaged in the compilation of official statistics, given our unique characteristics and structural issues as small island developing states. The million dollar question is how are we going to achieve 2030 amidst these grave challenges? Where do we start?

In answering these questions ladies and gentlemen I would like to first and foremost affirm the work you are doing as statisticians or persons engaged in the field of statistics. The work of our statisticians should never be trivialised because Statistics is at the core of development and similarly at the core of the SDGs are the statistical indicators. Hence we need to start critically examining the statistics we produce and the statistical infrastructure that supports this statistics.

Our economies can be compared to a ship in open water. A country planning without Statistics is like a ship without its rudder. Without statistics there is no sense of direction and although we know our destination we are unable to get there. Rudders are simple navigational tools used to steer boats and ships in open waters. They are used to provide navigation control against winds and currents while staying on course at the same time. Our economies journey to sustainable development is much like trying to journey through open waters.

Whether it is a row boat, a sailing vessel, or luxury liner, the quality of our journey is dependent upon the clever use of a rudder. In the same way whether we are fragile states, Small Island Developing States, Developing economies or Developed economies the quality of life in our economies depends on the skilful use of the statistics produced by our national statistical offices in the decision making process by policy makers. Since these provide the evidence upon which critical policy decisions are made.

Continuing with the analogy; A ship can be smooth sailing or very tumultuous. Storms are always on the horizon. When conditions become hazardous, our rudder becomes even more essential for staying on course. In the same way in our context when we are faced with hard economic times statistics become even more vital. Ships without rudders lose their ability to steer and often end up on the rocks or at the bottom of the sea. When we try to navigate through the many challenges we face as SIDS toward the path of sustainable development without Statistics, we can wind up rather helpless with little or no progress. Having a rudder sometimes means the difference between life and death. In the same way ladies and gentlemen statistics has the power of saving lives by giving us the tools which inform us of the problems and the corrective steps we must take. Statistics has the power to steer us out of turmoil into a path of recovery. Without statistics, we lack substance and are at the mercies of our structural problems.

In addition to ensuring that our policies are guided by statistics, as a statistical community, we need to ensure that quality statistics is produced. A ship cannot operate with a faulty rudder. Inaccurate and unreliable statistics can even be just as damaging as or more damaging than no statistics since they both can result in the wrong policies being implemented. There is no value in bad data. This can impede the development process and contribute to a waste of government scarce resources. To avoid this we should ensure that quality assurance is embedded in our statistical production at every phase.

Despite the obvious consensus on the importance of good quality official statistics and the best efforts of our statisticians, many SIDS still do not have the sound and credible national statistical systems required to support the development

processes. This inevitably inhibits the work of statisticians and thus prevents them from fulfilling their data obligations. Prime Minister Mitchell and I understand the plight of statisticians given the severe challenges that the National Statistical Offices (NSO's), also the heart of our statistical systems, are currently faced with. Likewise Regional Statistical Offices in the context of the Caribbean region are also equally challenged. I have been reliably informed that some of these challenges in the Caribbean include inadequate staffing and resources; limited investment in statistics; outdated statistical legislation; low response rates from surveys; lack of access to administrative data; lack of autonomy and independence in the production and publication of statistics; low public confidence in statistics; inefficiencies and duplication of efforts in the region; and increase demands on national statistical system as a result of the 2030 development agenda and the expanded list of indicators to be monitored under the Sustainable Development Goals and also demand of regional and international organisations on the national statistical system.

The work of statisticians is impacted greatly by these challenges as they are not able to produce adequate statistics in a timely manner. The lack of statistics has been a major limitation to research done on Caribbean economies. Hence they must be addressed if our various statistics agencies are to effectively achieve the development outcomes of our respective countries, regions and the international community.

Being one of the Key Advocates for Statistics the Prime Minister Mitchell has pledged his support to the Standing Committee of Caribbean Statisticians to address these issues at the highest level of governance in the region (the CARICOM HEAD of Government Meeting) and to bring forth a plan of action to be endorsed by these heads. This plan of action speaks to the needs of the National Statistical system and it also epitomizes the theme of this conference of strengthening Statistical Capacity and Readiness. The following action plan is therefore applicable to all SIDS:

- Strengthening of the National Statistical Systems (NSS) and specifically the National Statistical Offices (NSO).
 - ***Highlights of actions required:*** Adequate staffing, education, training and development of Staff in statistics, update statistical legislation, Autonomy, Support to National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) to transform the National Statistical System (NSS), financial and related support, the establishment by Governments of a continuous multi-purpose survey programme, efficiency gains in having access to administrative data sources through IT networking data exchange arrangements.

- Upgrading of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) base.
 - ***Highlights of actions required:*** Training of statisticians as data scientist, IT needs assessment/provision of state-of the art IT equipment; Positioning/retention of key staff with IT skills within the NSO including enabling adequate remuneration to encourage a career path for these personnel.

- Promoting of careers in Statistics should be undertaken by Governments – embedding statistics as a [data] science in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools and enabling scholarships at the tertiary level.
 - ***Highlights of actions required:*** Provision of scholarships, training opportunities, incorporating statistics as indicated in the curriculum, training of teachers in statistics, etc.

- Endorsement and promote the Caribbean Association of Professional Statisticians (CAPS).
 - ***Highlights of actions required:*** Promote the CAPS and bear the cost of institutional membership of the CAPS and provide support to get the CAPS started;

- Governments should support a regional approach to the development of statistics to optimise scarce resources in the strengthening of the NSS:
 - ***Highlights of actions required:*** Alignment of the Regional Statistical Work Programme (RSWP) with the strategic objectives currently being pursued by countries, creation of centres of excellence, the

strengthening of the regional statistics office as part of the reform of the Secretariat, support the post 2015 agenda and the CSMDGS,

Our Governments have an important role to play in the development of statistics and in allocating more resources to this cause. The government of Grenada under the leadership of Prime Minister Mitchell has pledged to try its best in supporting the plan of action for statistics and creating the environment for it to flourish. However we cannot do this alone. Government assistance and investments alone would definitely not be able to transform the national statistical system because of the other competing priorities of governments. Hence, we want to encourage greater collaboration among stakeholders. The development of our statistical systems must be a collaborative effort for there to be sustainability. In this regard we want to solicit the support of more local, regional and international institutions.

Ladies and gentlemen let us not be dismayed at this time though the challenges are overwhelming they can be solved if we continue to work together and support each other wherever possible. Just keep pressing on. Rest assured that Statistics is not our Governments last resort but the only resort to stare our countries through turbulent times and into prosperity.

Thank You