

The Imperative of Recontextualizing OECS Integration

Dr. Didacus Jules, OECS Director General's Remarks at the 62nd Meeting of the OECS Authority, Commonwealth of Dominica November 18, 2015

We meet today at a time when extremes are becoming the new norm whether in the conduct of nations or the circumstance of nature. And in the face of these polarities, the smaller countries of the Caribbean continue doggedly in their pursuit of their common good. We have been struggling to transform what Sir Arthur Lewis once described as the “agony of the eight” into the promise of the nine as Martinique’s entry has infused a greater sense of optimism in our integration project.

The principles of the Revised Treaty of Basseterre subscribed to in 2010 remain relevant and true today. Indeed these principles are now more of an imperative today than they were yesterday. But the context has changed in fundamental ways. The global context which circumscribes the boundaries of our possibility is fundamentally different.

Our world today is a more volatile and unstable place and war is no longer a contest of aggression between states but a spreading conflagration of hate targeting the innocents. The forces of hate are spilling innocent blood in all corners of our planet and we bleed not only in and with Paris but with all those in Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Beirut and in every unacknowledged corner where the darkness seeks to prevail.

Humanity's disrespect for the planet earth and the delicate ecological balance of life has resulted in climatic consequences that threaten the very existence of small island states. COP21 is going to be that critical cross road that will determine whether we can step away from the environmental edge and begin to move towards equilibrium.

Despite these negative trends, there are also indications of positive change in the context. South-South cooperation is on the increase with more institutionalized forms and structures opening new avenues for foreign direct investment from the South and new options for development support. The emergence of the BRICS and their establishment of the new \$100B Development Bank can break the hegemony of Western multilaterals. Africa is the new investment frontier that is showing great economic and positive political promise to which we must also turn.

Within the international community of nations, we are in transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promises to be a new framework for addressing issues of poverty, global change and achieving prosperity for all and notwithstanding the pessimism with

which such grand declarations have been viewed, we should approach them with an optimism of will.

All of these contextual changes challenge us to re-conceptualize the OECS integration project.

The first challenge is the need to reconcile the national imperatives with regional necessities. It is widely accepted that all politics is local but not all solutions can be purely local given the power and dynamics of the global.

The OECS Commission is therefore challenged to exercise greater responsiveness to the particular challenges of individual member states and extracting lessons applicable to the collective of members in ways that add greater value, create best practice or avoid the duplication of trial and error. A good example of this is our engagement with Dominica on addressing the setbacks of Tropical Storm Erika. On the assumption supported by the science of climate change that such devastating events will occur more frequently and unexpectedly, we are proposing to treat Dominica as a precursor of climatic events to come and as the exemplar of what building resilience requires. It is clear that our collective future requires a more integrated approach to land use and coastal zone management, zoning, construction codes, water management and so much more.

A related challenge for the Commission is that of giving voice to the needs of non-independent member states. All member states – whether full or associate – must find value in their membership. We need to speak collectively to things which impacts the viability of any member state. We must be the advocate of the just causes of member states in which for example, their financial services are discriminatorily black listed when jurisdictions such as the British Virgin Islands have done everything possible to maintain international compliance.

As a Commission, we need to move faster to strengthen our institutional capacity to act more strategically and decisively in the public interest in energy, broadband and Telecoms, food security, poverty elimination and others. Institutional capacity is one of the less recognized conditions for successful and sustained development and building public and private institutions that are capable of accumulating knowledge capital, delivering cost effectively on their mandate, responding respectfully to stakeholders is critical to the success of the development agenda. The restructuring of the OECS Commission and the re-engineering of our work processes have been an on-going effort that we expect will finalized in this meeting of the Authority. In the past thirteen months, we have systematically convened various Councils of Ministers as mandated by the revised Treaty of Basseterre. Several meetings of the Economic Affairs Council and the Council of Ministers of Education, Human & Social Development, Legal Affairs, Tourism, Trade, Agriculture, Environment and Foreign Affairs have been held. Our pride of accomplished collaboration

goes to the Ministers of Health who have met since the emergence of the Ebola threat at least 49 times over the past 13 months – all by video conferencing and with the participation of CARPHA and PAHO. This represents a savings of at least EC\$2.94 Million; had we met face to face! But more importantly is the habit of collaboration that has now taken root in the fraternity of Health Ministers and I wish to acknowledge two ministers who have been pillars of this initiative that are here with us today – Hon. Molwyn Joseph of Antigua & Barbuda and Hon. Dr. Kenneth Darroux of Dominica as well as Hon. Dr. Clarice Modeste-Curwan of Grenada who as former Minister of Health was also seminal to this effort.

Relatedly, we are challenged to accelerate the agenda for social development and in particular addressing the increasing scourges of rape, violence against women and children and ensuring the protection of the vulnerable. We expect that the Authority will be excited by the emerging Youth Strategy that has been endorsed by the Ministers of Human and Social Development and the Economic Affairs Council.

Distinguished leaders, ladies and gentlemen, the landscape in which we live and move has changed and its polarities are now extreme. We therefore must adopt new, more adaptable strategies to weather these extreme climatic changes whether they be in the natural landscape or in the social environment or in the economic arena. In our search for these new strategies, let us be mindful of the admonition of Sir Francis Bacon that “there is no comparison between that which is lost by not succeeding and that which is lost by not trying”. Let history not record that we have not tried!