

**The New Socio-Political Architecture:
Implications for Youth Policy**

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Greetings and Salutations

Regional Director of the CYP, Mr. Henry Charles,

Distinguished Cadre of Regional Youth Policy Administrators,

Youth Representative Delegates,

Invited guests, ladies and gentlemen

Good Morning,

Introduction

It is my understanding that this Regional Advisory Board meeting (RAB) marks the beginning of a new programming and administrative cycle for the CYPP. As such it is an opportune moment for you to engage in some reflection on the issues impacting on youth policy in the Caribbean as a means of arriving at an appropriate plan to guide your work in the upcoming cycle. In addition such a moment provides a useful opportunity for the coming together of regional technocrats youth workers, and youth activists, with similar areas of responsibility. It therefore provides for the sharing of experiences and learning, and for the development of a unified collective approach to resolving our common problems. For all these reasons, and more, I wish to thank the CYP for inviting me to participate in this exercise.

The persons who invited me to participate expressed the hope that this Regional Advisory Board would be provided with a clear sense of the broad issues impacting on social policy in the Caribbean, as a basis for arriving at the specific policy and programmatic response for the shaping of youth policy in the region. I have therefore chosen to speak on the issue of the new social and political architecture which has emerged in the Caribbean, roughly since the early 1990s, and the implications of this environment for the formulation of youth policy.

In this paper, therefore, I will seek to do four things. First, I will highlight the main features of the socio-political architecture emergent in the Caribbean. Secondly, I will indicate the manner in which the process of the consolidation of this new socio-political environment has impacted upon the formulation, and implementation of social policy, and in particular youth policy. Thirdly, I will state frankly what I see as the pitfalls in these developments as reflected in youth policy measures currently dominating the agenda. Fourthly, I will conclude by suggesting some programmatic and policy responses which can seek to overcome the challenges which I will have highlighted. I hope that in so doing, I would have addressed the broad architectonic questions pertaining to the evolution and implementation of youth policy which may guide the more detailed deliberations which you may pursue in the rest of your meeting.

The Socio-Political Architecture of Hegemonic Neo-liberalism in the Caribbean

I would be neither alarmist, nor overtly critical, in suggesting that this RAB meeting is taking place in a defensive mode. This meeting like so much of what we do in the Caribbean today, may be a defensive exercise because there is a pervasive sense of limited options. It is overshadowed by pre-determined socio-political assumptions about our transformational possibilities, and there is an overwhelming sense that the overarching socio-political context may have largely circumscribed our interventionist efforts.

I wish to submit that this limiting and frustrating socio-political context is a direct consequence of the reversal of a philosophy of state interventionism which had largely defined the *raison d'état* of the Caribbean post-colonial state from the earliest days of the Caribbean independence movement. In my view, such an interventionist posture was a logical and necessary response to the colonial experience. It was the historical responsibility of the post-colonial state to provide social safety nets, and indeed to build a social apparatus from scratch.

It is no accident therefore, that the first genuine attempts at social interventionism, and the creation of an embryonic welfare state, emerged in the 1940s, following a period of mass social protest in the Caribbean and prior to the period of eventual colonial withdrawal from the region. It is also no accident too, that much of the post-colonial politics of the Caribbean from the 1960s to the 1980s was defined by the creation of an interventionist state that placed the meeting of the social needs of its population at the center.

Whilst admittedly, there were varying degrees of commitment of these approaches due to a period of ideological contestation in the 1960s and 1970s, it can be argued that the decades in question represented a sort of "golden age" in terms of our region's pursuit of a humanistic social agenda. There is no clearer evidence of the successful pursuit of this agenda than the island of Barbados which, through its construction of a highly developed welfarist-interventionist state, now enjoys the high human development rating that it currently boasts.

What is clear however, is that by the mid-1990s, the Caribbean, had undergone a difficult process of transition to a broad acceptance of global neo-liberal norms.

The impact of this reversal, for our purposes, can be seen in a wholesale redefinition of the role of the Caribbean state, specifically in its impact upon the formulation of social policy and the functioning of the public sector. It is in this context that I wish to make my observations about the formulation of youth policy in the Caribbean.

C.Y. Thomas, in an insightful and instructive paper on public sector reform in the Caribbean, entitled "A state of Disarray" and published in **The Bulletin of Eastern Caribbean Affairs** made the essential point, that the entire thrust of the public sector reform ethos in the Caribbean, was not necessarily "a downsizing of the state" but was its specific attack against the social interventionism of the Caribbean state. Ironically, this attack against social interventionism, is witnessed in the proliferation of special Ministries of Social Transformation, complete with special Poverty Reduction units. It is as if aware of its abrogation of its historical role since the 1980s, the Caribbean state has belatedly and apologetically recognized the need to create buffer zones and shock absorbers to human misery and neglect.

This represents a significant descent from the position held in the first decade of decolonisation when the very raison d'état of the Caribbean state was the elimination of poverty and human misery.

It is in this context that I am suggesting that this Regional Advisory Board should avoid the pitfall of engaging in its work as a defensive organization, accepting of given realities, and conditioned to adjust into, rather than to break out of the limiting overarching context.

The Pitfall of Defensiveness: Assessing Youth Policy Issues and Formulation

I say this because it is clear that the new socio-political architecture has impacted directly upon youth social policy formulation in the Caribbean. In the introduction to its National Youth Policy document the Government of Saint Lucia, observed a number of “deficiencies in several critical areas that would affect national development”. According to the GOSL document, these include “inadequacies of the formal education system, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, insufficient sporting and recreational facilities, substance abuse, crime and social deviance”.

Whilst it is true that some of the “ills” identified such as teenage pregnancy and drug abuse can be sourced in the psycho-social realm and may be attributed to individual failure, it is also clear that the resolution of many of these ills would require a deeper and more fundamental commitment to social protectionism than is currently envisaged within the current framework. For example, overcoming the challenge of the “inadequacies of the education system” would require a degree of investment in the education sector which would reverse the current trends of reduced state responsibility and increased student responsibility. The difficulties associated with these realities were witnessed most recently in Barbados, Trinidad and Jamaica, where the efforts on the part of regional governments to reduce state funded support for the UWI, has meant a greater share of tuition and other costs, being transferred to students, at great social cost to our populations.

Many of these weaknesses continue to manifest themselves when one moves out of diagnosis and into the area of policy prescription. Indeed, many of the policies normally identified within Caribbean Ministries of Youth as correctives, suggest a tendency to treat symptoms as causes. In addition, these policy prescriptions suggest that our Ministries of Youth now accept the prevailing conditions as given. As a result, their policies tend to provide mere palliatives rather than real solutions to the problems confronting our youth.

Thus, for example, the Government of Saint Lucia Youth Policy document supports the creation of “an “employment agency that provides unemployed young people with information about job opportunities” (GOSL National Youth Policy document). In other words, as opposed to addressing the issue of youth unemployment frontally by insisting upon the creation of conditions which can allow for greater participation by youth in economic activity, the Ministry of Youth is taking on the role of employment agency, an activity which can best be undertaken elsewhere. In this way, the problem of youth unemployment - which is the absence of jobs - is

therefore treated as a symptom – the absence of knowledge about available jobs, and as a result of this wrong diagnosis the wrong prescription follows.

This is not to suggest that there are no aspects of the youth policy document that I have cited which are laudable. However, what I am seeking to highlight is the manner in which those defensive tendencies have become so deeply rooted in our consciousness that we balk at the responsibility of shaping a broader and more progressive conception of our roles.

It will be a fundamental challenge of this RAB, to identify a policy program that can meet the needs of youth and at the same time circumvent ideological opposition to its transformatory policy programme. But hope is not lost.

Clear evidence of a movement towards the creation of a progressive youth agenda can be seen in some of the conclusions arising out of the Third Meeting of CARICOM Directors of Youth Affairs, held in St. Kitts and Nevis in August 2004. One of the strengths of the meeting, was its commitment to developing regional and collective approaches to the formulation of youth policy. In this regard, a key conclusion arising out of the document was the need for a “regional system of NYCs/umbrella youth organizations; and institutionalization of the CARICOM Youth Ambassador (CYA) system in the context of functioning NYCs”.

In addition, the prescriptive and diagnostic approaches addressed by the Third Meeting of CARICOM Directors of Youth Affairs, appeared to move beyond symptoms to embrace an approach which was developmental rather than remedial.

Thus for example, the model for youth development adopted by the meeting was one which was “asset based as opposed to problem centered”. Arising out of this shift in consciousness, was a policy formula which expressed a commitment to “holistic positive development” which includes parenting and citizenship education; the exploration of issues pertaining to cultural roots and identity; the use of sport and the performing arts as development tools”.

Towards a Holistic Youth Agenda for the RAB

What is progressive about the model being advanced by the Third Meeting of youth Directors is that it addresses youth needs, not as a curative measure, but as a model of advancement. A failure to build on that approach will be to treat youth work as Social Work that is a branch of work dealing with social problems. Youth policy, in my view, is not synonymous with addressing social ills such as unemployment, teenage pregnancy, HIV AIDS, and drug abuse. Youth policy ought to be broadened to place youth at the center of the development project.

If we take for example the above recommendation, that “sport and the performing arts should be used as developmental tools”, we move away from a perception of youth policy as specifically targeted at addressing societal ills, to one which is elevated to an agency of development on equal footing with our Ministries of Agriculture, tourism and industry and commerce.

This is a quantum leap that we must make if real advances in youth policy formulation in the region are to be made. Indeed, it is surprising, that given the historical success of the West Indies Cricket team, the brilliant and original creations of our young musical icons on the global

stage, as well as the rich record of success by our young regional academics, that we have not yet come to the realization that our youth may be the real engines of our development, rather than the social problems that we currently take them to be.

It should be observed too, that such a philosophical quantum leap does not in any way downplay the real presence of dehumanising circumstances impacting upon our youth. What it calls for is a shift in policy focus. For example the construction of recreational and sporting facilities can continue to be a policy priority of our Ministeries of Youth. However, they should be pursued, not as an exercise to get young people “off the blocks” but as an investment in training, calculated to advance regional development. A similar focus can apply to the provision of duty free concessions and special tax breaks to musical artistes and groups, steelband groups, painters and craftsmen and other cultural workers. Such a philosophical shift, is perhaps dependent upon another key statement coming out of the Third Meeting of Caricom Directors of Youth Affairs, that issues pertaining to cultural roots and identity be explored.

I am aware that this RAB has been contemplating issues which fall in the category of approaches which I have described as remedial rather than developmental. Among such policy issues have been the exploration of institutional mechanisms such as National Service, the promotion of civic education among youth to foster a greater sense of social and political responsibility and the advocacy of second chance programs to ensure that troubled youth are given opportunities for full integration to mainstream society. Whilst I am not advocating the abandonment of these approaches and policy measures, I am suggesting that your conception of yourselves as youth workers be widened. You must, in the formulation of your policy agenda, build on the strengths of our youth, rather than focus on the social ills associated with their presence amongst us. You must, carve an agenda which will allow you to convince regional governments of the economic and developmental benefits which can be derived from their investment in youth infrastructure, rather than highlighting the social consequences which may arise from the abandonment.

Finally, you must come out of defensive mould. All of us are aware of the overarching global politico-economic context impacting upon our societies, but it must not constrain us. All of us are aware of the rising statistics of youth crime and violence and dysfunctional behaviour, but it must not overwhelm us, and dominate our consciousness and lock us into a remedial mould. We should instead, seek to fashion an economic development agenda, one that sees youth as a resource to be tapped rather than a problem to be addressed.

I recognize that such a philosophical shift may take time to emerge. I am also aware that there may be built in agendas, and hardened positions which need to be overcome in the development of such a new approach. But the old defensive posture has dominated our approaches for too long. It is time for a fresh start and a new beginning. I am confident that this RAB, is equipped with sufficient ideas and talent to give rise to a new policy agenda which redefines our youth, not as societal problems, but as equal and central partners in the Caribbean development effort. I thank you.