

Opening Remarks
to be delivered by the Hon. Colin Jordan, M.P.,
Minister of Labour and Social Partnership Relations
at the XXI Inter-American Conference of Ministers of Labour
(IACML)
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Mr. Luis Almagro, Secretary General of the Organization of the American States

Mr. Guy Ryder, Director General of the International Labour Organization

Colleague Ministers of Labour

Staff of the Organization of the American States

Officers from the Ministries of Labour of the Americas

Chairs and Representatives of the Trade Union Technical Advisory Council (COSATE) and the Business Commission for Technical Advice on Labour Matters (CEATAL)

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good Morning to you all.

It is my pleasure to greet you this morning as we gather virtually to participate in this XXI Inter-American Conference of Ministers of Labour (IACML). I will echo the sentiment I expressed at the Preparatory Meeting held in July which is to say that Barbados has been honoured to chair the IACML for the past 3+ years. We will remain committed to advancing inter-American dialogue on labour and employment in our new capacity as past Chair and under the leadership of the incoming Chair.

As encapsulated in the Report of the General Secretariat of the Organisation of American States to the XXI IACML, we have achieved a great deal in compliance with the Declaration and Plan of Action of Bridgetown but we are now at a juncture where our mandate has very been heavily influenced by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its adverse effects. We still have much work to do. The Draft Declaration and Draft Plan of Action of Buenos Aires, to be adopted at this XXI IACML outlines the way forward for us as a region, and for our hemisphere, as we seek to navigate the myriad issues that permeate the world of work.

The theme of the Declaration “Building a more Resilient World of Work with Sustainable Development, Decent Work, Productive Employment and Social Inclusion” connotes action to achieve a more resilient, inclusive, sustainable and human-centred future of work for our region.

Our region has traditionally experienced low growth, inequality, rising debt, inadequate health care and social protection systems, capacity deficits and lack of access to technology. With its dynamics of high vulnerability, size and limited natural resources, Barbados, like the rest of our region, has suffered disproportionate and severe economic impacts.

Recovery therefore remains a mammoth task, especially when one considers the unpredictability of the pandemic and the uncertainty it has created. Social and economic recovery will not be immediate and will vary across countries! That said, there will be recovery and we are presented with the opportunity of attaining a post-

pandemic recovery that is green, resilient and inclusive by employing strategies that not only address the current and immediate ills of the crisis, but that also serve to build a better future for us all.

In addressing the devastating socio-economic and health effects of the pandemic, our policy responses have been formulated in the context of our national realities, and have focused on social protection, occupational safety and health, digitalisation and flexible work arrangements, among other areas. These provide us with a foundation to build upon and we must use the impetus that we have now to achieve a better and brighter future of work for our region.

The pandemic has made pre-existing gaps in social protection in our region glaringly apparent and has prompted action to close these gaps through various initiatives. We cannot be content to apply provisional solutions where there has been a history of longstanding deficits. Rather, we must grasp the opportunity to transform any such initiatives into structural changes. Through comprehensive review, we can make our schemes more accessible, inclusive and responsive. Universal social protection is relevant to human dignity, social justice and sustainable development.

In the region, with our major sectors impacted, many of our workers have been displaced. In Barbados, we have been able to use this time to educate, train and retrain our people, including and especially the most vulnerable who have been adversely affected by the pandemic. With the accelerated move towards digitalisation and our labour markets becoming more technology driven, there has

been a need to expand access to technology and develop skills to ensure that our people are not left behind. Skilling, reskilling and upskilling our people is the precondition and an accelerator for them to access decent work opportunities and enable seamless transitions into and within labour markets. If we build on the momentum for investing in our people's capacities, we will also be investing in a worker force that is ready to meet future needs and challenges and foster productivity in our region.

Short term measures of job protection and business support must now give way to policies that stimulate the creation of permanent jobs, executed in tandem with the retraining and reskilling of our workers. The pandemic has seen the rise of flexible work arrangements, including telework, and placed attention on the occupational safety and health considerations in these situations. Further, at the enterprise and national level, occupational safety and health standards have had to be developed and adapted. These all augur well for better conditions for workers as they return to the workforce.

A further legacy of COVID-19 will be a pivot toward entrepreneurship, as persons come up with new ideas and capitalise on opportunities created by the pandemic. We as governments must create an enabling environment to ensure that this new generation of businesses, whatever the scale of operations, are sustainable, function in the formal economy, and can compete globally.

As I contemplate our region's future, we must continue to be adaptable in our policy-making and in the formulation of our strategies. In Barbados, our policy decisions have been made working together as a Social Partnership as our Government has long recognised the intrinsic value of inclusion and social dialogue as a vehicle for social and economic development. Traditionally, it has served to enhance resilience in our labour market. This is even more relevant during this pandemic period.

We must be mindful that environmental sustainability must feature in our social and economic recovery policies and strategies. We as a region are prone to natural disasters. Barbados and other small-island developing states in the Caribbean are forced to contend with the harsh impacts of the existential threat of climate change, and so as we pursue economic resilience, we will seek to improve our environmental resilience while calling on the major polluters to do their moral duty as part of the family of nations.

Reforms for our region can result in economic growth, job creation, reduced inequalities and poverty reduction. The prospects for changing our region's future are evident, but as brought to the fore by the pandemic, there are more fundamental and deep-rooted issues relating to how our world and our societies function.

In very poignant and tangible ways the pandemic has, in essence, demonstrated exactly how inter-dependent we really are. It is only through global action that we will address existing and emerging challenges. Allow me to highlight the importance of regional and international cooperation. Some countries have not been able to

access vaccines only because of the inwardly-focussed approach of some more powerful countries, and some have just not had the fiscal space to effectively pursue post pandemic recovery. If we don't get this right, if we fail to recognise our interdependence as nations, we will be fighting variants for a long time to come.

All that I have spoken of in the foregoing, perhaps with the exception of social dialogue, requires financial and technical support. Using as an example the point made earlier with respect to an accelerated move to digitalisation in the face of the pandemic, some countries have been able to have their people work remotely, conduct business online, and have their children access education by virtual means, while others have not been able to do the same.

For countries like these, unless we stem the digital and wealth divides, there can be no recovery that is sustainable, resilient and inclusive, and the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will be a fleeting illusion.

We must continue to strengthen solidarity and cooperation, recognise our social responsibility, and collectively take action to foster prosperity in our region and in the world.

Please allow me to take this opportunity to thank the OAS for their guidance throughout our tenure as Chair of the XX IACML, and also for making this meeting possible. Ahead of us are two days of what I expect will be riveting deliberations.

As we chart our path and actions to overcome the crisis and build a more resilient, sustainable, decent and inclusive world of work, I will leave you with the words of my Prime Minister, Hon. Mia Amor Mottley “Let us rebuild. Let us retool. Let us repurpose, because this is perhaps the most apt reminder of what we must fight for in the multilateral system, in the global community of nations. We can do it, working together, but we need to respect each other, to see each other, to hear each other and to work together.”

Thank you.