

*Presentation
by the*

*The Honourable Bridgid Mary Annisette-George, MP,
Speaker of the House of Representatives*

*at the
Climate Change Leadership Academy Programme
United Nations Information Centre
for the Caribbean Area, Trinidad and Tobago
Friday September 21, 2018*

Salutations

- Her Excellency Lilly Egerton, Ambassador of the Republic of Costa Rica to the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago;
- His Excellency Serge Lavroff, Ambassador of the French Republic to the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago;
- Executives and Senior Management of the United Nations Information Centre for the Caribbean Area;
- Mr. Omar Mohammed, ASPNet Coordinator of the Trinidad and Tobago National Commission for UNESCO;
- Representatives from the Carbon Zero Initiative of Trinidad And Tobago;
- **Teachers and students from:**
 - Bishop's High School Tobago
 - Blanchicousse Secondary
 - Brazil High School
 - Naparima Girls' High School
 - Parvati Girls' High School
 - Signal Hill Tobago
 - St. Augusting Girls' High School
 - St. Joseph's Convent, Port of Spain
- Specially invited guest
- Our social media viewers

Good morning!

Moses Henry Cass, an Australian Minister of Environment and conservation in a speech to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is quoted as saying:

"We have not inherited this earth from our parents to do with it what we will. We have borrowed it from our children and we must be careful to use it in their interests as well as our own."

That statement from Moses Cass when made in 1974 was not a novel one. It was an expanded version of a well-known and powerful statement on the environment the origin of which is uncertain.

But for me whatever its source, in whatever version and whatever its age, that statement encapsulates the individual and collective duty of all towards the environment for eternity.

I am told that today is the second of a two day programme geared not only at educating and sensitising you on the wide ranging topic of Climate Change but also aimed at developing your leadership and advocacy capacities. It is said that **Knowledge is Power but Knowledge without action comes to nought!**

In spite of statements made by some naysayers, the empirical evidence which exists supports the position as stated by **United Nations Secretary General Mr. António Guterres, that the most systemic threat to humankind is climate change.** World

nations have for some time accepted that climate change is a global challenge and there has been at least on the international level, there has been action or maybe I should say **activity**.

In June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, world leaders and citizens of 176 countries gathered to agree on ways of working together to preserve and enhance the global environment. Thus negotiations to develop the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) began in 1991 and the Convention came into force 1994.

The main objective of this treaty was to:

Achieve stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. Such a level should be achieved within a time frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened, and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.

Trinidad and Tobago participated in this forum along with a host of other conventions such as:

- **The Basel Convention¹**
- **The Stockholm Convention²**
- **The Ramsar Convention³.**

¹ Which sought to control the transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their disposal, between nations, and specifically to prevent the transfer of hazardous waste from developed to less developed countries (LDC)

² Which aims to eliminate or restrict the production and use of persistent organic pollutants (POPs).

³ (Formally, the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially Waterfowl Habitat) for the conservation and sustainable utilization of wetlands to stem the progressive encroachment on and loss of wetlands now and in the future, recognizing the fundamental ecological functions of wetlands and their economic, cultural, scientific, and recreational value.

- **The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species⁴**
- **The Kyoto Protocol; and most recently the⁵**
- **The Paris Agreement on Climate Change⁶**

Despite these agreements, the evidence shows that we still require increased efforts, the data from the **National Aeronautics Space Administration (NASA)** is compelling:

- The planet's average surface temperature has risen about 1.62 degrees Fahrenheit (0.9 degrees Celsius) since the late 19th century, a change driven largely by increased carbon dioxide and other human-made emissions, with most of the warming occurring in the past 35 years, with the five warmest years on record taking place since 2010; and
- The Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets have decreased in mass. Data from Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment show Greenland lost of an average of 281 billion tons of ice per year between 1993 and 2016, while Antarctica lost about 119 billion tons during the same time period. The rate of Antarctica ice mass loss has tripled in the last decade. The global sea level rose about 8 inches in the last century. The rate in the last two decades, however, is nearly double that of the last century.

These factors all come together to produce a serious and taxing scenario which among other things when applied our human existence, **the end results are**

⁴ CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between governments. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

⁵ which is an international agreement linked to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, that commits its parties by setting internationally binding emission reduction targets (UNFCCC 2013)

⁶ Where each country determines, plans and regularly reports its own contribution it should make in order to mitigate global warming. There is no mechanism to force a country to set a specific target by a specific date, but each target should go beyond previously set targets. (PACC 2015).

increased sea levels, flooding, soil erosion, habitat loss, and super storms. In our own regional experience we witnessed the decimation of many of the pearls in our island chain such as Barbuda and Dominica and the devastation in St. Kitts, British Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, last year from the onslaught of hurricanes **Harvey Irma, Jose and Maria.**

In 2015, the international community achieved a historic agreement on climate change at the **Conference of the Parties COP21** in Paris, Franc. The agreement charts a new course in global efforts to keep the rise in the temperature of the planet well below 2 degrees Celsius and to strengthen national capacities to adapt to the impacts of climate change. The Paris Agreements, sets out a global plan to prevent catastrophic climate change through the adoption of national legislation, policies and regulations to achieve targets required by science, and commitments nations a to robust transparency and accountability in implementation, monitoring and reporting.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development complements the Paris Agreement through its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and corresponding indicator frameworks to monitor and report on progress achieved at the national level.

In our hemisphere the **Organization of American States (OAS)**, guided by its four pillars of **action democracy, human rights, security and development**—has

introduced as a crosscutting theme climate change. Its hemispheric actions include relevant contributions in supporting climate change mitigation and adaptation.

The Sendia Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) 2015 was created to combat these increasing natural disasters. This framework explicitly promotes the integration of gender, age, disability and cultural perspectives into DRR.

“The framework calls for the participation of women, children, and youth, person with disabilities, older persons, indigenous peoples, and migrants in managing disaster risk. These vulnerable groups are vital in designing, resourcing and implementing gender-sensitive DRR policies, plans, and programmes.”

The roles of stakeholders such as children and young persons have been identified as crucial facets, since you are agents of change and should be given the space and modalities to contribute to disaster risk reduction, in accordance with legislation, national practice and educational curricula.

It is noticeable that all of the recent international agreements and frameworks place a responsibility on national Parliaments to take action recognizing that firstly without legislation enacted by Parliaments and secondly without monitoring and oversight by Parliaments of the commitments given by the their Governments the goals set out in the international agreements may not be achieved.

So what has all this have to do with you?

Parliaments are about citizens! Parliaments are about engaged citizens! Parliaments are about involved citizens!

ParlAmericas which is an organization comprised of the Parliaments of the 35 member states of the Organization of American States of which Trinidad and Tobago is a member in its publication **Climate Change-A Comparative Overview of the Rights Based Approach in the Hemisphere** makes the point as follows:

“The impacts of Climate change also require the engaged citizens who take a leading role to ensure that their rights are safeguarded”

Intending no disregard to the work of the sponsors of this important programme, I want to recommend that you take a look particularly at the Chapter entitled **Climate Change and Human Rights Law: A People’s Centered Approach to Address the Impacts of Climate Change**, which will give some circumstances in which climate change impacts your lives and communities.

So again what does all this have to do with you?

Part of the responsibility and the required actions to be taken lie with you and your participation with the decision making process and the parliamentary process, which you must be assertive enough to **engage and activate**.

There are many opportunities which currently exists for you to engage and activate your voice in your Parliament. As citizens we tend to hold the view that the exercise of your democratic right is limited to that finger staining exercise once every five years. Or what an old sage termed an electoral dictatorship.

I challenge that view as steeped in a level of ignorance of process. Admittedly not perfect, there are mechanisms which exist but which are not fully understood, activated and utilised by our citizens for productive engagement and deliberation. Active participation by citizens in the Parliamentary process allows citizens to contribute to decisions which affect their lives.

For example our committee system.

- **Do you know that there are 14 sub-committees of your Parliament that meet almost weekly when Parliament is in session inquiring into varied aspects of national life?** These sub-committees send out requests for members of the public to submit contributions on the subject matter of the inquiry and additionally witnesses are called before the Committee to give evidence. **These inquiries are carried live on Parliament's TV channel 11 and FM radio 105.5.** Additionally, parliament has a very active social media presence on **Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube** which allows a direct interface with the public and the Committee's secretary while the Committee is meeting.

Recently the Committees of Parliament have been asking the public to submit topics for inquiries.

- **Do you know there are 14 Municipal Corporations in Trinidad? All of which have a disaster management unit?**
- **Do you know that the Regional Corporations have a monthly statutory meeting which is open to the residents of the regional corporation at which times questions can be posed and issues can be raised with the Council?**
- **Do you know that constituency offices are public spaces and not the office of the Party of the sitting MP?** This means that any constituent can drop in and raise a matter of concern with his/her MP including climate change its impacts and methods to address it. It is not only a place to deal with requests for box drains- though arguably that request may be related to disaster risk preparedness, mitigation and resilience.

Again, you will ask what this has to do with you ?

My challenge to you is to become a **Parliamentary Advocate for Climate Change: Activating Your Voice Now.**

This means that you have a role to play at the **local level, questioning your municipal corporations on their disaster preparedness plans and bringing awareness to the need for more increased education on DRR and Resilience.** This is one key factor in achieving the targets set out such as reducing disaster mortality especially to vulnerable groups.

Furthermore asking the right questions in the right fora and probing for answers are some of the best opportunities in ensuring that our infrastructural developments are improved to ensure that the disruption to our basic services such as education and health can be minimised.

Might I say that now that you have been educated and sensitized and are armed with your leadership skills, possibly your next step may be a:

Youth for Resilience Campaign which looks at the implementation of the Sendai Framework or on the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals and Climate Change.

If there were any doubt about the effectiveness of youth and digital platforms, I encourage you to look at **Voices of Youth Maps** which unites youth who map their neighborhood using a mobile application by taking pictures of their surroundings in order to advocate for change within their communities as the information is presented to local authorities as well as spread throughout social media. The power

to directly link persons and regions with distinct issues of climate change and environmental protection presents a serious evolution in civil society organization that can be effective and engaging to decision makers and advocates.

A country can be moved by a digital platform. I reference last year when, young, **Mr. Kalain Hosein** became a hero to thousands, who accessed his site for reliable, and timely information during the intemperate weather. Hosein is the sole entity behind the Trinidad and Tobago Weather Centre and critical information was first disseminated from this hub. Flooding bulletins, emergency numbers, maps of alternate routes and photos of destruction were all supplied from the **digital platform/social media** site of Facebook. Notably, this act prompted a state agency to revamp its operations as it relates to informing the public and truly is a testament to the fact that a chain reaction can often begin with one.

So I implore you to recognize that no act is too small as advocacy is about participating, informing, influencing people and reforming policies to bring about change. It is in part about influencing those in power to act and act with fairness and equity which could only come from the inclusion of all stakeholders primarily the citizen

Youth advocacy can bring change but like any good change agent, action and strategy is key. There are times you will be called upon to send a cogent and effective message to the persons who have the power to challenge an injustice or law. It could include, calls for arranging public meetings, writing newsletters, taking part

in peaceful and lawful demonstrations or marches, or asking people to sign petitions.

In giving more practical examples of youth have **Activated their Voices**, it would be remiss of me, to not name a few of your counter parts in other parts of the world:

- **Dutch youth innovator Boyant Slat**, activated his voice by launching his garbage-collecting booms following a two-year feasibility study. Young Slat, advocates through action, innovation and science.
- The case of **Juliana v. United States**, a law suit led by youth, who , argue that the government, "through its affirmative actions in creating a national energy system that causes climate change, has violated their (the younger generation's) constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property, and has failed to protect essential public trust resources." This cases highlights advocacy through campaigning for legislative reform.
- In the publication **Youth in action on Climate Change: Inspirations from Around the World**, I was astounded to learn that in Barbados, our CARICOM neighbour, students of the Lester Vaughan Secondary School, **Activated their Voice** by implementing a project to raise awareness about the use of biodiesel as an environmentally friendly alternative fuel for diesel vehicles. The members of

the school's Environmental Club collected used vegetable oil from their homes and communities and handed it over to the Sole Proprietorship and the generated income from the biofuel was shared with the students and their school in order to conduct other environmental and community activities.

- After the hurricanes devastated the sand dunes in 2005, students at Hope Town Primary School in Bahamas, **Activated their Voice**, by mobilizing the community to plant sea oats, a kind of dune grass and the roots held the dunes in place in the recent onslaught of the hurricane season.

These examples show that your voice and action matters only if activated and strategically positioned to bring about the required attention and change. This is in fact a testament that the creativity of young people is invaluable and must be taken seriously and be given the opportunity to flourish in the search for innovative solutions and responses to climate change. Think of the current matter in this way, if you demand a change in the way our supplies and needs are met as a consumers, businesses can be made to take environmentally responsible decisions, along with politicians and national leaders. Hence the time is ripe to begin **Activating Your Voice Now**.

As young adults, I will encourage you to follow and or pay attention to the developments in your country and the Parliament. It is here where the laws are made and quite often where the voice of youth is not always given an opportunity

to flourish. However, by responding to the calls to the public by the Joint Select Committees, you are activating your voice, by following the live Sittings and writing to us thereafter about matters that concern you, you are activating your voice, by engaging in constructive discourses, you are activating your voice, by engaging in honest and critical commentary, you are activating your voice.

You cannot afford to be silent and stagnant, speaking way back in the in 1950's *Martin Luther King Junior* stated that *"History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of that period of [any period] social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people"*. You are good people, you cannot allow bad actions to continue, and you cannot be silent, inactive and muted as youth.

I now wish to share with you a practical tool which is not very much employed- certainly in my capacity as Speaker-I have not witnessed it.

A petition!

(Proceed to power point presentation)