



Virtual meeting on the Role of Ministries of Social Development in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Caribbean

Meeting Summary

On Tuesday 21 April 2020, the Government of Mexico in its capacity as Chair of the Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Social Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, jointly with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), organized the extraordinary virtual meeting on “The Role of Ministries of Social Development in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Caribbean”. The main objectives of the meeting were to address the specific challenges and unique vulnerabilities faced by the countries of the Caribbean subregion as well as to identify their needs in relation to technical assistance while fostering collaboration and international cooperation.

The meeting was inaugurated by Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC, who made a welcome speech and also gave a presentation in which she addressed the region’s socioeconomic situation and social protection measures in the context of the pandemic. In moderating the event, Diane Quarless, Chief of the ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean, highlighted the importance of this platform for sharing experience, knowledge and identifying opportunities for joint work at the regional and subregional levels.

In their respective intervention, each representative reported on their country’s response in relation to the following aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic: main socioeconomic problems and priority actions aimed at enhanced social protection, challenges and lessons learned in response to the crisis, and cooperation needs.

The ECLAC Member States present at the meeting were: Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. The Associate Members that participated were: Anguilla, Aruba, Curaçao, Guadeloupe, Montserrat, Sint Maarten, Turks and Caicos Islands, and the United States Virgin Islands. Other virtual attendees included the United Nations Resident Coordinators from the subregion as well as representatives of the United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), and the Organisation of Eastern

Caribbean States (OECS). The list of representatives and other authorities that participated in the meeting is provided in annex 1.

I. Main actions implemented at the national level in the Caribbean

Most Caribbean countries have made numerous efforts to mitigate the negative effect of the pandemic on the well-being of the population by putting into action stimulus or response packages to face the COVID-19 pandemic. These encompass a variety of measures, including emergency financial assistance for income support (early payments of benefits under existing programmes, welfare grants, cash transfers, rental support and/or salary relief grants), food assistance vouchers and care packages including essential medication and cleaning supplies, creation of helplines, in particular for psychosocial support to deal with the mental health effects of the pandemic and domestic violence, offers for retraining workers, orders of non-eviction, as well as moratorium on payment of utilities and deferral of loan payments. These packages have been mainly directed to persons who have lost their jobs as a consequence of the pandemic, whether they have contributed or not to the national insurance scheme; to those who are self-employed; those working in the informal sector, and employers in certain sectors, in particular the tourism sector and owners of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) who needed grants to pay salaries or to receive tax credit and tax deferral to support the retention of employment levels despite reduction in revenues. In addition, these measures have focused on certain groups, including older persons, women, children and persons with disabilities. The duration of the measures varied from country to country but is generally between 3 to 6 months.

More specifically, in relation to food and nutrition security programmes, these have been mainly directed towards population in need, in particular older persons, persons with disabilities, women, children and students who are not attending school due to their closure, but are still receiving free or subsidized meals under the school feeding programmes, single-headed households, those who are unemployed, those living on the street, and caregivers. Importantly to note, many persons from these groups of population were not previously included in the ministries databases or national social security registers. Food is being provided through food vouchers or cards food packages and hot lunches are often delivered with the support of volunteer drivers and civil society organizations support as government offices were not fully functional at the beginning of the distribution system. Seedling programmes have also been put in place, with the distribution of seedlings to people to enable them engage in gardening or backyard farming and diminish the high dependence on food imports and support local farmers.

With respect to psychosocial support, many countries have created awareness raising campaign on social media, which are often broadcast through community radio network and local television stations. Hotlines have also been created in the majority of countries to provide support and assistance to better deal with the crisis, as well as counselling, in particular for parents with children, older persons and for women and children with specialized and trained staff to address cases of domestic violence. Gender-based violence during the pandemic has been a serious concern mentioned by various countries, and some of them have established shelters for this purpose.

Some countries have implemented measures related to mortgages and loans. Others have discussed new arrangements with banks, controlled prices and discouraged landlords from pursuing legal actions against tenants that cannot pay rents, as well as encouraged flexible payment arrangements from utility companies. Others have started distributing tablets and improving ICT technologies for students to be able to attend virtual classes considering existing disparities in access to digital devices and broadband Internet, and, in some cases, also providing student loan relief.

Two groups, older persons and persons with disabilities, have received specific attention. Home visits have been restricted, especially for those living in care facilities and in some cases, groceries and medication have been delivered directly to these groups in their homes or places of care. Cleaning supplies, gloves and masks have been provided to caregivers. In some countries a registry of caregivers and information on persons they care for has been created. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was given to medical, care and other frontline workers, and instructions were also provided to facilitating the making of masks at home.

II. Main challenges identified by Caribbean countries

One of the main challenges mentioned by Caribbean countries in the meeting is the need to have updated data on the population in need in order to reach these groups and have a full understanding of their situation so that the programmes can be tailored and implemented to their needs. Several countries mentioned the lack of complete and up-to-date registries and therefore the need to improve the current information system to collect, analyze, process and generate disaggregated data. The importance of having management information system platforms to facilitate online applications and their automatic processing could help to better identify those who already benefit from existing social protection programmes and put in place other mechanisms for those who have been affected by the current crisis.

The medical and health facilities are insufficient for the level of potential demand and high dependence on imports of equipment and medicines and therefore the limited resources available have also been identified as a challenge that limits the expansion of current programmes to include other populations, such as migrants, in order to leave no one behind. Some governments have, however, made efforts and implemented bilingual health campaign to reach this population and others have also provided computer devices to students regardless of national and immigration status.

Another important challenge is related to technology and digital gaps. Two areas were mentioned, the need to apply modern technologies in the disbursement of payments as many are still using manual processes and more broadly the importance of improving information and communications technology (ICT) capacity in the subregion. Some countries have made efforts in this regard, for instance, by creating simplified online applications; others by setting up mobile numbers where persons can leave WhatsApp or voicemail messages to avoid using their own mobile credit when requesting assistance; and even some have created apps or are in the process of using one.

Finally, a critical lesson learned was the importance of having in place effective institutional framework to facilitate coordinated and integrated planning and actions across sectors and at all levels. In this context, the participation of other key stakeholders, such as the private sector as well as the international community, including international development agencies, should be further incorporated

in the response and recovery. Some countries have established multi-stakeholders emergency and recovery teams to determine the way forward post-COVID-19 and additional support will be necessary in this endeavor.

III. Conclusions

The 18 country representatives, and members of the United Nations system and subregional organizations acknowledged the relevance of the meeting as a unique platform to share experiences, while identifying common challenges and good practices. They also highlighted that multilateral cooperation is key to address the short, medium and long-term social and economic consequences of the pandemic at a time when social protection systems offer limited coverage due to heavy external debt burdens and threats such as climate change and natural disasters in the subregion. ECLAC concluded by encouraging the consideration of promoting regional coordination and cooperation in the face of this crisis, taking into account the Regional Agenda for Inclusive Social Development (RAISD) agreed by the member countries of the Conference in Mexico City in October 2019 in the broader context of the Decade of Action to deliver the 2030 Agenda and its 17 time-bound Sustainable Development Goals. More global and regional solidarity is needed to support Caribbean countries in advancing towards less unequal and more caring societies to leave no one behind.

IV. Annex 1: List of participants

Country	Name	Title	Institution
ECLAC Member States			
Antigua and Barbuda	Samantha Marshall	Minister	Ministry for Social Transformation and Human Resource Development, Youth and Gender Affairs, with responsibility of Agriculture, Fisheries and Barbuda Affairs
Bahamas	Jacinta Higgs	Director	Department of Gender and Family Affairs, Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development
Dominica	Adis King	Minister	Ministry for Youth Development and Empowerment, Youth at Risk, Gender Affairs, Seniors Security and Dominicans with Disabilities
Grenada	Delma Thomas	Minister	Ministry of Social Development, Housing and Community Empowerment
Guyana	Adel Lilly	Manager	Gender Affairs Bureau, Ministry of Social Protection
Jamaica	Wayne Henry	Director General	Planning Institute of Jamaica
Saint Kitts and Nevis	Janelle Lewis Tafari	Permanent Secretary	Ministry of Community Development, Gender Affairs and Social Services
Saint Lucia	Velda Octave-Joseph	Permanent Secretary	Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Local Government and Empowerment
Suriname	Agnita Tjokrojos	Chief Policy Officer, General Social Care	Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing

Trinidad and Tobago	Jacinta Bailey-Sobers	Permanent Secretary	Ministry of Social Development and Family Services
ECLAC Associate Members			
Anguilla	Bonnie Richardson-Lake	Permanent Secretary	Ministry of Social Development
Aruba	Glenda Hernandez	Director	Department of Social Affairs
Curaçao	Arelys Meulens	Policy Advisor	Directorate of Foreign Relations, Ministry of General Affairs
Guadeloupe	Emily Siousarram	Head of Service	Institutional Cooperation Unit, Regional Council of Guadeloupe
Montserrat	Veronica Dorsette-Hector	Parliamentary Secretary	Ministry of Health and Social Services
Sint Maarten	Francetta Schoe	Policy Advisor	Ministry of Public Health, Social Development and Labour
Turks and Caicos Islands	Carolyn Dickenson	Director of Aender Affairs	Ministry of Education, Youth, Culture and Library Services
United States Virgin Islands	Kimberley Causey-Gomez	Commissioner	Department of Human Services

Regional Organizations		
Douglas Slater	Assistant Secretary-General	Human and Social Development, CARICOM Secretariat
June Soomer	Secretary-General	Association of Caribbean States (ACS)
Grace-Ann Cornwall	Head of the Social Development Unit	Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS)

United Nations Resident Coordinators and Offices	
Didier Trebucq	Resident Coordinator for Barbados and OECS countries
Mikiko Tanaka	Resident Coordinator for Guyana
Marina Walter	Resident Coordinator for Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten
Tracey Hutchinson	United Nations Coordination Analyst, Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator for Belize and El Salvador
Morgan Lea Murray	Team Leader, Strategic Planner, Development Coordination Officer, Office of the UN Resident Coordinator of Jamaica

United Nations Bodies		
Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)	Renata Clarke	Director Subregional Office for the Caribbean
	Mariana Escobar Arango	Coordinator of the issues of eradication of hunger and extreme poverty in vulnerable territories, Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (Chile)

	Arniela Rénique	Social Protection and Rural Development Consultant
Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)/ World Health Organization (WHO)	Yitades Gebre	PAHO/WHO Representative for Barbados and Eastern Caribbean Countries
	Erica Wheeler	PAHO/WHO Representative, Trinidad and Tobago
United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)	Vincent Sweeney	Head, UNEP Caribbean sub-regional office
	Alexandra Karekaho	Programme Management Officer, UNEP Caribbean Sub-regional office
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)	Alison Drayton	Director, Subregional Office for the Caribbean
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)	Vicente Teran	Deputy Representative, UNICEF Jamaica
United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)	Sonia Gill	Multi-country Manager and Head of Programme, English and Dutch Caribbean, Barbados
United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)	Alison McLean	Representative for the Multi-Country Office (MCO) – Caribbean
World Food Programme (WFP)	Regis Chapman	Head of Office, Caribbean Preparedness and Response