



## Virtual meeting of Caribbean countries presenting their Voluntary National Reviews to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2020

*12 May 2020*

This report presents a summary of the interventions carried out in the framework of the virtual meeting organized by ECLAC on 12 May 2020 with the representatives of the Caribbean countries that present their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development in 2020. The objective of this virtual meeting was to provide countries with a space for exchanging experiences and peer learning that is useful for the preparation and presentation of their VNRs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. High-level representatives from Barbados, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago participated in the meeting, their technical teams, United Nations Resident Coordinators and experts from ECLAC and the United Nations system. This document has not been subject to formal editorial review.



## PARTICIPANTS

### Representatives from Member States:

- Barbados: Marsha Caddle, Minister of Economic Affairs and Investment of Barbados
- Saint Vincent and the Grenadines: Giselle Myers, Senior Economist, Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning, Sustainable Development and Information Technology of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
- Trinidad and Tobago: Joanne Deoraj, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Planning and Development of Trinidad and Tobago

### Representatives from the United Nations System:

- Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)
- Diane Quarless, Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean
- Didier Trebucq, United Nations Resident Coordinator for Barbados and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS)
- Marina Walter, United Nations Resident Coordinator for Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten

## BACKGROUND

In 2020, 11 countries from the Latin America and the Caribbean region had originally registered<sup>1</sup> to present their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) to be held in July: Argentina, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Panama, Peru, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago. In this context, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) held two virtual meetings (one in Spanish for Latin American countries and one in English for English-speaking Caribbean countries) with ministers and high-level national authorities in charge of follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, technical government representatives and experts from ECLAC and the United Nations system.

## RECORDING OF SESSION, PRESS RELEASE AND PRESENTATIONS

A recording of the session can be found on the following link:

<https://eclac.webex.com/eclac/lcr.php?RCID=630cbd93b79fbd91d834a484522b4d90>

PASSWORD: Forum2020

All presentations are available in the enclosed folder (see e-mail message).

Press release: <https://www.cepal.org/en/news/urgent-attention-should-be-given-unique-vulnerabilities-and-challenges-faced-caribbean>

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<sup>1</sup> The actual number will be reduced to nine countries since, as of June 2020 and in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bolivia has deferred the presentation of its VNR to 2021 and Belize is also likely postpone as well.

## INTRODUCTION

Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC offered opening remarks in which she recognized the commendable efforts being made by Caribbean countries to present their VNRs this year in such challenging times, this effort demonstrating the subregion's unequivocal commitment to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. She also recalled the *Caribbean First Strategy* as ECLAC's modus operandi to consider the subregion's unique needs and respond better to them, increase and enhance participation in all 11 intergovernmental meetings for which the Commission serves as Secretariat, and proposes concrete measures to their most pressing challenges, such as debt relief and resilience building. Her remarks were followed by the presentation "The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in times of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean" (enclosed).

The Executive Secretary indicated that the comprehensiveness of the 2030 Agenda is at risk due to the uneven progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in the face of the pandemic. She recalled that estimates indicate that the effects of the pandemic will generate the largest recession that the region has suffered since 1914 and 1930, with projected growth of - 5.3%, a significant deterioration in labor indicators in 2020 that will generate almost 12 million more unemployed in the region and an increase of almost 30 million people living in poverty. She stressed that the region of Latin America and the Caribbean remains highly committed to the 2030 Agenda, so she called on countries to include the new challenges posed by the pandemic in the preparation of their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) and in the implementation of the overall agenda. She further stressed that policies to implement the 2030 Agenda are more essential than ever and that evaluating the impacts of those policies is crucial. In this sense, she urged to identify how the crisis affects the most vulnerable groups, as well as strategies and policies to leave no one behind. Finally, she stressed that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the post-coronavirus pandemic world (COVID-19) requires more regional cooperation and integration, more multilateralism, new strategic sectors and greater productive integration, in addition to a universal social protection regime.

## PROGRESS IN THE NATIONAL VOLUNTARY REVIEW OF BARBADOS

The Honourable Marsha Caddle, Minister of Economic Affairs and Investment in the Ministry of Finance, Economic Affairs and Investment of Barbados, underscored that despite the very challenging prospect of contemplating the submission of a VNR in the current circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the occasion presented an important opportunity to highlight how the pandemic is affecting the achievement of specific SDGs and to scale up investments needed for the country. In fact, she stressed that this is not a business as usual moment as the pandemic has reset every development baseline, requesting government to respond so quickly in terms of innovative and creative policy and solutions for growth, inclusion, and scaling up relief at the social protection investment and coverage in the health sector, among others.

In terms of main messaging for the VNR, she highlighted that it was important to note that in 2018 the Government announced and began implementing the Barbados Economic Recovery and Transformation Plan (BERT), which is aimed to restore macroeconomic stability and to place the

economy on a path of strong sustainable and inclusive growth while safeguarding the financial and social sectors. Many of the small island developing States (SIDS), including Barbados, are in the middle of fiscal adjustment programmes with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) while having to deal now with the COVID-19 pandemic. She added that before the crisis, Barbados focused on policies that reflect the Government's alignment of their anti-poverty and sectoral strategies with the SDGs, particularly in areas of: fiscal policies to achieve greater equality; increased social protection access and social spending floors; enhanced financial innovation, regulation and inclusion; climate resilience, carbon neutral and marine-conscious private-public investment for growth. Prior to the IMF programme, the Government also invested in health, education and social protection, which led to significant improvements with regards to social and economic indicators included in the SDG indicators that they intend to report on their VNR. During the first quarter of 2020, the Government successfully completed its domestic and external debt restructuring, and made significant changes on revenue and expenditure models to work on microeconomic provisions and inclusive growth until the pandemic hit, which required an immediate re-prioritization, restructuring and reorganization of public expenditure.

She indicated that the VNR this year needs to be about the current scenario with the COVID-19 pandemic as decades of human development progress are at risk of being reversed, and therefore it is important that the international cooperation can acknowledge these immediate impacts to shocks, especially considering the effects of the crisis on the tourism sector that represents over 40% of GDP in the subregion and the related increased levels of unemployment and reduced income earning activity in each country as a consequence of the pandemic. Barbados' response to the pandemic not only aimed to scale up social protection investment and fiscal and financial inclusion policy, but also to promote growth and economic equality, in order to reorganize the way to do business and increase competitiveness and access to economic resources for all.

In this process, she also mentioned the challenges faced in monitoring the progress made in achieving the SDGs and the importance of having more regular social reporting to their national statistical system. In terms of SDG, she also stressed that SDG 17 is more relevant than never before and their VNR will highlight that the global discussions on access to financing so far have not taken into account the situation of highly indebted middle-income climate vulnerable developing countries in the Caribbean.

In the VNR report, she added that the Government will focus on 9 SDGs namely SDG 1 (on nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including social spending floors, increasing access to economic resources and basic services, and reducing vulnerability to disaster and climate crisis), SDG 3 (reducing mortality from non-communicable diseases to prevention and treatment and improving health coverage, especially in the context of the pandemic), SDG 4 (increasing youth and adult access to technical and vocational skills for employment and entrepreneurship), SDG 6 (improving water efficiency and reducing water scarcity as part of an umbrella climate resilience project called "Roofs to Reefs"), SDG 7 (increasing the sharing of renewable energy in the global energy mix in accordance with Barbados' carbon neutral by 2030 policy), SDG 8 (promoting sustainable tourism and local culture and products in accordance with the upcoming establishment of a tourism investment facility, which is being launched in the context of

the pandemic to give the sector a chance to rehabilitate and to make other linkages to other sectors such as agriculture and small businesses to create jobs and income for more people), SDG 10 (adopting fiscal wages and social protection policies to progressively achieve greater equality), SDG 13 (strengthening resilience and adaptive capacity to climate related hazards and natural disasters), and finally SDG 17 (improving global coordination to partner with developing countries to attain long-term debt sustainability, through financing, debt relief and restructuring to address the external debt of highly indebted developing countries and reduce their debt distress ). The Minister concluded by indicating that the assistance of ECLAC would be welcomed in particular with regards to social data and statistics.

In his comment, Didier Trebucq, United Nations Resident Coordinator for Barbados and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) congratulated the Government of Barbados for their strong commitment to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs and their VNR process, in particular with regards to the policies to protect the most vulnerable populations, including during the pandemic, and reiterated the United Nations' disposition to assist, in an integrated manner, Barbados in the VNR process and accelerate the implementation of the SDGs during and the post-COVID-19 pandemic He also informed about the launch of the COVID-19 multi-sectoral response plan and funding appeal for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean to mobilize international solidarity and support countries in this process.

During the interactive dialogue, Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC, highlighted the excellent leadership and commitment of Barbados in advocating for other SIDS and conveyed her highest respect for the Honourable Prime Minister Mia Mottley for her strong defense of the Caribbean region. She indicated that the international community and ECLAC plan to engage the IMF and the World Bank, as well as private sector creditors to address the particular challenges of the Caribbean.

She congratulated Barbados on establishing social spending floors and highlighted the need to focus on the sustainability of said social protection measures in times of COVID-19, and on establishing a new narrative on SDG 17 to change mindset of international institutions and foster global partnerships and solidarity to have a standstill on both public and private debt payment, and increase fiscal space to address the unique vulnerability of the Caribbean. She concluded by highlighting that Barbados' selection of SDGs in the VNR report were the most relevant as being the most affected by the global pandemic and reiterated ECLAC's support to the VNR process and beyond.

Diane Quarless, Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean, also informed that her office is launching a survey on the single-use of plastics in the context of the pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago and could extend this study to Barbados.

In her closing intervention, Minister Caddle indicated that Barbados have completed the domestic and external debt restructuring based on a bold choice as 80% of the debt was domestic and 20% was external in order to keep the levels of foreign reserves in June 2018, especially considering certain human development commitments made in the first budget statement that could not afford

to lose that levels of reserves and change the macroeconomic foundations. The domestic debt restructuring was finished a year ago and now the external one is being settled while protecting labour. In this process, the burden had to be on capital and thanks to the tripartite model of governance, social partnership that sits with the government, private sector and labour, including with its expansion with the participation of civil society organizations through the Social Justice Committee, the Government was able to implement a “solidarity approach to adjustment”. The approach to deal with external creditors was more like a traditional restructuring process with an External Creditor Committee, but having seen how the financial sector in the region responded to the social and economic goals of the domestic debt restructuring, external creditors were also willing to share the burden of adjustments.

In relation to SDG 17, she stressed that in midst of this pandemic, some countries of the Caribbean have to deal with issues of compliance with money laundering and other European Union and OECD issues such as downgrades and black and grey listing that erode investors’ confidence and credibility of small economies while countries are fighting the pandemic to save lives. This cannot be called global partnership, therefore she highlighted that in future restructuring process and bond issues, it is important to include natural disaster clauses that give 2-year moratorium on debt payment in order to focus on recovery, as well as to add pandemics as there is a need to look at financial shocks more broadly. Furthermore, she indicated that as a result of COVID-19, there had been an increase of single-use plastics in the health sector, reversing previous gains on SDG 13 and reiterated Barbados interest in working together with ECLAC, including in order to move forward with the Vulnerability Index.

## PROGRESS IN THE NATIONAL VOLUNTARY REVIEW OF SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

Giselle Myers, Senior Economist in the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning, Sustainable Development and Information Technology of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, started her intervention by addressing the key messages of the country’s VNR report. She informed that it was important to go back 8 years ago when the Government formulated its National Economic and Social Development Plan (2013 - 2025), which outlines the country’s strategy for national development and offers a vision of improving the quality of life of its population by putting people at the center of development in alignment with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

She mentioned that this country’s development plan has a vision along five interrelated goals which are 1. Re-engineering economic growth; 2. Enabling increased human and social development; 3. Promoting good governance and increasing the effectiveness of public administration; 4. Improving physical infrastructure, preserving the environment and building resilience to climate change; and 5. Building national pride, identity and culture. The methodology used for the plan was based on inclusion, wide range of public participation, including with consultations throughout Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and abroad with the diaspora for people voices to be heard and that these guided the localization of SDGs in the country. She showcased a 62% alignment of the development plan with the SDGs indicators and noted that the Statistics Department had collated data on 130 SDG targets. She indicated that no new plans, policies and programs were developed, but rather the goal was to build on the existing ones. The Ministry of Finance, through its Central Planning

Division, has been the entity leading the development process, including the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. However, the preparation of the VNR report in times of a global pandemic emphasizes current well-known vulnerabilities but also new ones. Therefore, she highlighted the challenges but also the opportunities offered by this crisis to implement the 2030 Agenda. In this context, she informed that with the support of ECLAC, the Government conducted multi-stakeholder engagement with private and public sectors and other entities in September 2019 and since then they have built on this initiative and drafted their main messages for the VNR. Due to the pandemic, the Government has also used technology and conducted virtual meetings, and an online survey to continue with this important element of the VNR process and ensure that no one was left behind. The Statistical Department was also engaged to formulate the main messages to adopt an evidence-based approach. She indicated the several challenges for the progress on the 2030 Agenda, such as lack of financial resources and that as the country addresses the pandemic, the use of new ICT was essential to guarantee the continuity of the VNR process. She concluded by highlighting that the concept of 'leaving no one behind' fully resonates with the country's development pathway, as it targets issues related to reducing inequalities, eliminating all forms of poverty and empowering women and youth, , and reiterated Saint Vincent and the Grenadines' full commitment to five principles of the 2030 Agenda - people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership.

In her comment, Diane Quarless, Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean, noted the very strong degree of commitment and enthusiasm to the 2030 Agenda in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. She also highlighted ECLAC's partnership with the Government through the Development Account Project being implemented across the region aimed at strengthening the institutional frameworks, developing or retrofitting national development plans, and building statistical capacity in the Caribbean for an integrative approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SIDS sustainable development agenda. In this context, she also informed that the collaboration focused on conducting stakeholder workshops in September 2019 to advance the country's implementation of the 2030 Agenda. She also mentioned ECLAC's collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in late November 2019 to support the review of the alignment of the national development plan to the 2030 Agenda, and reiterated ECLAC's interest in continuing the collaboration and support of the government on the institutional framework, stakeholder engagement and data and statistics. She concluded by highlighting that she looks forward to continue working with the Government in its capacity as the upcoming chair of the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee, which meeting had to be postponed due to the pandemic.

During the interactive dialogue, Dillon Alleyne, Deputy Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean, indicated that Saint Vincent and the Grenadines had to turn to a lot of short-term financing due to budget constraints which poses problems in terms of debt servicing. He also informed that the country is part of the ECLAC Debt-for-Climate-Adaptation-Swap Initiative, and the regional commission will continue the process aimed at establishing a Climate Resilience Fund to address Caribbean countries' high levels of indebtedness and limited access to concessional funding due to their middle-income status. In addition, Abdullahi Abdulkadri, Coordinator of the Statistics and Social Development Unit in the same office, highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to include in the VNR report the challenges faced by the country due to the



crisis, as well as the positive effects with the enhancement of institutional frameworks and official statistics, for instance with the use of administrative data to provide social support to the population during the crisis.

## PROGRESS IN THE NATIONAL VOLUNTARY REVIEW OF TRINIDAD Y TOBAGO

Joanne Deoraj, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Planning and Development of Trinidad and Tobago, thanked ECLAC for the tremendous technical support rendered in the VNR process. In her presentation (enclosed), she indicated that the national alignment with the SDGs took place very early on, through their National Development Strategy- Vision 2030, which includes five thematic areas that integrate the SDGs, which are: theme I: Putting people first nurturing our greatest asset; theme II: Delivering good governance and service excellence; theme III: Improving productivity through quality infrastructure and transportation; theme IV: Building globally competitive businesses; and theme V: Placing the environment at the centre of social and economic development). The Government has also established a monitoring system for the implementation of Vision 2030 while following-up on the achievement of the SDGs. She also informed that the Government benefited from a number of initiatives, such as the mainstreaming, acceleration and policy support (MAPS) mission by the United Nations system.

She indicated that the VNR emphasized the progress towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including through very inclusive stakeholder engagement with government entities, civil society organizations, private sector, academia, and members of the general public in both islands of Trinidad and Tobago. She added that the VNR is focused on 8 SDGs, as illustrated by the following examples: the development of a draft National Child Policy approved by Cabinet, as well as the provision of Community Therapeutic Services for persons with disabilities,(SDG 1); distribution of food cards to the most vulnerable individuals and households, including migrant populations (SDG 2); introduction of a Non-Nationals Policy to grant migrants access to healthcare services(SDG 3); development of a School and Learning Management System and School-Based Management Standards to drive education outcomes(SDG 4); the establishment of a Gender-Based Violence Unit (SDG 5); strengthening the economic and fiscal frameworks, considering the oil-based economy of the country and tourism sector in Tobago (SDG 8) She added that the country is faced with great economic challenges related to the tourism economy as a result of COVID-19, and downturn in international oil and gas industry. She also informed about the adoption of the National Social Mitigation Plan (2017-2022), which is forming part of their analysis on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the most vulnerable (SDG 10). SDG 13 is also being included in the VNR, in particular the importance of National Determined Contribution, and considering the impact of climate change in the country and the need to build a resilient nation. Finally, SDG 16, which is interrelated to SDG 17, is aimed at building their civil society organizations. Permanent Secretary Deoraj highlighted that data suggested that there had been some success with regards to the SDGs, but some development gains could be reversed due to shocks and vulnerability, and that the main issue was to ensure that SDG progress is maintained and every effort should be made to build resilience to respond to the different types of challenges. She mentioned that data and statistics still remain a challenge for the country and that the National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago (NSITT) will promote Monitoring & Evaluation across the public sector. She concluded by mentioning the



creation, by the Government, of a COVID-19 Recovery Committee to respond to the pandemic and expect that the outcome of this Committee will continue to address the implementation of the Vision 2030 in alignment with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

In her comment, Marina Walter, United Nations Resident Coordinator for Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten, congratulated the government of Trinidad and Tobago for all their efforts in the VNR process and appreciated the whole of government and multi-stakeholder approach. She recognized the Government's effort to show progress across sectors and to bring everyone around the table, and despite the fact that in this first VNR the focus is on 8 SDGs, the country has worked towards all of the 17 SDGs. She indicated the whole VNR process had been very efficient, with an emphasis on obtaining high-quality data. She highlighted the need for a data repository that can be maintained and updated collectively with the Government, the United Nations System and other stakeholders on progress made towards all SDGs. She highlighted the joint work of the United Nations System, and specifically thanked ECLAC for the support provided in the VNR process and indicated that moving forward, there will be a need to do a joint system-wide United Nations analysis on the social and economic long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the subregion.

## CLOSING

Diane Quarless, Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean, expressed whole-hearted thanks to the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, as a host country to ECLAC's office in Port of Spain. She highlighted the extremely valuable shared of experience presented by the three Caribbean countries and noted that this very informative meeting served to encourage ECLAC by showing that there is momentum and this will help to continue offering support to the countries in this process.

In closing, Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC, thanked all participants for the active discussion and recognized the opportunities to rethink development and build back better that can emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and build back better. She acknowledged Barbados for the innovative initiatives to activate the tourism sector and for the strategies to achieve greater resilience with fiscal policies, and for mentioning how the international community is addressing the needs of highly indebted countries in their VNR and the importance of working on expending natural disaster clauses across the Caribbean SIDS, as well as on the vulnerability index. She noted the commitment of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to put people at the center of development and to "leave no one behind" and the consistent efforts to align the national development plan with the SDGs. She highlighted Trinidad and Tobago's commitment to people-centered development and to address the needs of specific vulnerable populations such as migrants and persons with disabilities. She thanked the United Nations Resident Coordinators and their teams for bringing their valuable perspectives and indicated that the ECLAC community of practice will continue to meet at the technical level in June. She reiterated ECLAC's commitment to continue supporting countries in the final stages of the VNR preparations and beyond.