

**38th SESSION OF THE ECONOMIC COMMISSION OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE
CARIBBEAN (ECLAC)
DIALOGUE OF MINISTERS OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF LATIN AMERICA AND
THE CARIBBEAN ON THE POST-PANDEMIC ECONOMIC RECOVERY
9:45 AM – 1 PM OCTOBER 26 , 2020**

Mr Chair,

Honourable Ministers

Excellencies

Executive Secretary of ECLAC, Alicia Barcena

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am honoured to address you today on this the 38th Session of the ECLAC.

Our countries face a perfect storm in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, with collapsed tourism sectors that so many of us depend on, losses in foreign investments, high debt servicing costs, rising inequalities, ensuing climate challenges, and of course, limited fiscal space to address these challenges. Recovery from this tragedy will require critical changes in how we operate within and without our national contexts.

In Belize, we managed relatively low COVID-19 numbers early on; but largely due to movement across our porous borders, we experienced a sharp rise in cases in August and numbers are steadily increasing despite concerted national efforts. Thankfully, our healthcare system has been coping well with outstanding dedication from our frontline personnel, some of whom have contracted the virus in the line of duty.

The Health Sector has seen an expected steep increase in government spending, while other government programs experience widespread cutbacks as the pandemic devastates the Belize economy. GDP is projected to decline between 10–20% this year and economic activity has deteriorated across the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. This is generating terrible

socioeconomic perils for our people with a doubtful outlook for significant improvements this year, if any.

At this point, we have been phasing the reopening of our society, including the reopening of the international airport on October 1st. Still, long-term recovery from this tragedy will require critical changes in how we operate within and without our national contexts.

Economic Diversification

The wisdom in having a diversified economy was never lost on us and unfortunately, the pandemic has forcefully drove home this point. True, as a SIDS country, we may never be able to attain prescriptive level of diversification that are often held as shining examples for us to emulate. But for all the woes brought on by this pandemic, it does lay bare some key opportunities that I believe we as Caribbean SIDS can more fully explore to our lasting benefit. These are sectors that we are aware have great potential - agriculture and agri-processing, forestry, and development of fisheries value chain and blue economy. These sectors have long been neglected by national governments as tourism was always the most attractive, particularly for foreign investors. Granted, these sectors may never replace the robustness of the tourism sector but they can offer alternative jobs for the many who are without employment resulting from the fallout of tourism.

We are now living the opportunity cost of focussing only on tourism, although for us the issue of resource scarcity was a major determinant in the decision we made to forego investments in other viable sectors. While there is unanimity that Blue Economy offers SIDS the prospect of sustained, environmentally-sound, socially inclusive economic growth, we are still unable to fully unleash its transformative power because investing in the blue economy comes at a high cost, particularly investing in port infrastructure, marine transport and emerging sectors such as biotechnology and minerals prospecting.

I recognize the limitations with fiscal space in terms of public resources to increase the viability and appeal of agriculture and agri-processing, the blue economy, and forestry sectors but as we come together to reinvigorate our industries, we look to our partners to support these arrangements,

as whatever we do in this sectors must be climate resilient. These changes require long-term planning, but are ever more important in this current international context and with respect to the sustainable development of our countries.

SIDS Compact

Mr Chair,

The pandemic has stalled vital progress towards Agenda 2030 particularly for developing regions. Achieving any of the transformative vision of the SDGs now requires major national realignments, especially for indicators critical for us measuring poverty, inequality, and climate-smart action; these should be foundational considerations for any initiative toward recovery. It requires reaffirming the commitment to the vulnerable.

With COVID-19 levelling such a drastic, fundamental impact on the global economic system, it is important that the response to this crisis be equally overhauling. We echo the call of the SAMOA Pathway, the voices of sub-groups such as CARICOM, SICA, and AOSIS that the antiquated rules and conditions for access to financing for middle income SIDS must be revisited. Recovery for SIDS countries is impossible without adequate development finance support.

We require a SIDS Compact on Access to Finance that can mobilize concessionary financing and scale investments to support immediate emergencies and build the foundations for a better recovery. We vocalize this in earnest to make clear our difficulties as SIDS, as well as to invite partnership and inclusive decision-making for vulnerable economies.

Multilateral Cooperation

Finally, the key driver to success will be multilateral unity and will.

I take this opportunity to thank friends here today that have helped to reinforce Belize's national response to COVID-19. I also commend us all for keeping the lights on and collaborating as we are today.

It is with that same consensus that we should back the efforts of equitable and affordable access to a viable vaccine or treatment everywhere—as a global humanitarian good. We cannot allow this to become competitive, as was the supply of medical equipment at the onset of this crisis. The pandemic has redefined our world, as these events generally do. However, foremost, it should deepen the imperative to overcome together.

Furthermore, where investments and cooperation had once slowed, I expect that this sparks the rejuvenation of our multilateral, interdependent system. I hope to see collaborative approaches found through dialogue, shared experiences, meaningful partnerships, and citizen engagement safeguard us through the ongoing pandemic, climate change, and other contemporary challenges. Any partial, country-level progress towards recovery will be diminished by the failure to address this problem globally, inclusively. These problems are not new, but long-standing and requiring of urgent address.

I thank you.