

Remarks by the Vice Chancellor of The University of the West Indies, Professor E. Nigel Harris

UNICA Conference
Monday, March 15, 2010
Institute of Critical Thinking, UWI, St. Augustine Campus

Welcome

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome each of you to this Conference of UNICA being held under the theme “Partnering for Sustainability”. I thank the Principal of the UWI St. Augustine Campus, Professor Clement Sankat and his team – Mrs. Betty Mc Comie, Mr. Issa Hafeez and the University Marketing & Communications team for making this possible. My thanks too to Ms. Annette Insanally, Ms. Allison Fung and their team for all the work that they have done to ensure that this conference took place.

I am especially pleased to welcome our colleagues from Haiti: Professor Wilson Laleau, Vice Rector, Academic Affairs, State University of Haiti; Dr. Evenson Calixte, Vice Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, Quisqueya University; Professor Guy Laroche, Vice Rector, Academic Affairs of Notre Dame University; and Madame Jocelyne Trouillot, Rector of the Universite Caraibe.

Background and Context for Conference

The Association of Universities and Research Institutes of the Caribbean was founded in 1967 to foster cooperation among the higher education centres in the Caribbean region. UNICA is an independent, voluntary organisation that assembles the highest ranking officials (Presidents, Vice Chancellors, Rectors) of the universities in the Caribbean to facilitate the exchange of ideas and to foster collaboration across the region. This Conference is intended to serve as a call to action for Caribbean Universities and Research Institutes to come together to explore strategies for collectively addressing issues related to competitiveness and growth while ensuring sustainability in today’s challenging environment.

One aspect of sustainability in the context of the Caribbean basin is Disaster Preparedness because so many of our island nations and the South and Central American mainland are subject to natural hazards.

The fortunes of many of our countries can be reversed in minutes by an earthquake or in a day by a hurricane or volcano. Our ability to reduce the devastating effects of such hazards depends on the security of our buildings, the resistance of our hillsides to landslides, the avoidance of areas susceptible to storm surges and flooding. The knowledge resources, both people and information, required to inform our governments and other sectors of our communities depend on the education, research and outreach provided by our tertiary institutions. Universities and colleges are central drivers of sustainable social and economic growth. Many of our universities do not have all the resources, both human and material to respond to local growth and sustainability needs and it is for this reason that collaboration and collective efforts between partners with a common history, in a common geographic space, with common needs and challenges must collaborate. UNICA affords us a framework in which we can work more effectively together.

On January 12, a mighty earthquake devastated Port-au-Prince and other towns and cities in Haiti. In more recent weeks, an even mightier earthquake in Chile followed. Let me first extend our sympathy to the peoples of Haiti and Chile who lost loved family members, friends and their possessions. While Chile had the resources to respond largely internal, the damage in Haiti was far more extensive and requires considerable external support. There has been an unprecedented humanitarian response, one that seeks not only to reconstruct and rebuild, but one which seeks to partner with the Haitian people to create a politically stable, socially and economically resilient country.

There is legitimate concern that the response to the reconstruction of Haiti will be fragmented and not linked to the wishes of the Haitian people, themselves. In planning this particular meeting we recognised that our contribution would be best if focussed and guided by the Haitian community. Thus, we are

focussing on the rebuilding of the tertiary education sector because we believe that Haiti's recovery and repositioning will be very dependent on the expansion of its human knowledge resources and expertise. We have invited our Haitian colleagues to share with us their perspectives on the way forward and I thank them again for joining us during a difficult time for them.

I am aware that many of our universities, colleges and research institutes have contributed to the Haitian recovery effort. The University of the West Indies has sent staff to work with national and regional teams in the recovery efforts, collected donations of money and material, and are making plans to offer places to Haitian students. However, what we are doing is not enough and my hope is that today's session will enable us to construct a collective plan of action in which institutions represented today can propose specific projects and actions to which we can contribute. I believe that it would be useful to link our efforts to specific international bodies and it is in this context that I make note of upcoming conferences in Suriname, etc. planned by the OAS and UNESCO. Linkages with these groups too can avoid duplication; promote more efficient use of resources and a larger, more robust response.

I believe that this effort will also serve to build greater collaboration between our universities and research institutes to promote a broader understanding of our region's needs and a more collective effort to ensure growth, sustainability and greater enlightenment of our people.

Way Forward

My hope is that we shall emerge from today's session with a plan of action that will see each institution represented here today committing to some element within a matrix of proposed actions and projects.

Thank you.