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Remarks by the President of the General Assembly, Mr. Dennis Francis, at the Presidential Roundtable on the theme, “#ChooseSustainability: Building Resilient and Prosperous Societies”

Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs in collaboration with the Institute of International Relations of the University of the West Indies
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Let me begin by expressing my sincere appreciation to Acting Director Niles and to the Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs for the generous invitation to join you today.

It is a warm homecoming, indeed, to return to this vibrant campus at Saint Augustine – a place that nurtured my own curiosity as a student and provided the strong academic underpinnings for a most fulfilling career in diplomacy and public service.

As today’s talented young leaders, you are now assuming this critical mantle of inquiry.

It will fall to you to make the hard policy choices that will sustain or suppress inclusive economic growth, preserve the diverse expressions of our cultural heritage, uphold the core tenets of international law, advance human rights for all – and in so doing, write the next chapters of a larger, uniquely Caribbean story of sustainability and resilience.

It is an awesome responsibility.

One that will be undertaken amid a host of global challenges – from conflict and climate change to poverty, hunger and food insecurity; challenges that are stymieing progress across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, our shared blueprint for global peace, security and prosperity.



One, frankly, that cannot be fulfilled without addressing the debt crisis fuelling dangerously unsustainable socioeconomic disparities between the Global North and the Global South and indeed within countries in the South – particularly Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and other Developing countries in vulnerable situations.

More than 40 per cent of SIDS have a debt to GDP ratio above 40 per cent – with some exceeding 100 per cent.

This means filling these gaps and moreover, fixing an outdated global financial system that has in fact disadvantaged many by failing to assist them in building resilience against exogenous shocks.

Choosing sustainability means promoting sustainable consumption and production in every facet of human existence so as to leave behind an inter-generational inheritance to allow future generations to enjoy the environmental assets that have supported our civilization.

Choosing sustainability means strategically embracing a diversity of perspectives and backgrounds and empowering people to unleash progress across the 2030 Agenda – ensuring that the benefits of peace and prosperity are shared equitably, by all, with no one left out or left behind.

As a contribution to these efforts, I convened the first ever Sustainability Week in the General Assembly in April of this year – a series of events focused on the critical sectors of the economy, including tourism, transport, infrastructure and energy, and the urgent question of debt sustainability, largely informed by the realities attending Small Island Developing States as well as low -lying coastal states and communities.

Building on this success, at my initiative, the General Assembly will convene on 25 September, a High-Level Meeting at the level of Heads of State and Government to address the existential threat posed by sea-level rise.

This is a matter of such complexity and implications that it demands urgent attention by the international community as critical issues of sustainability arise in the context of the future of these countries. So foreboding is this issue particularly in the Pacific that some countries in that region have already entered into legal agreements with Australia to relocate their populations in the event of maritime inundation. But quite apart from the loss of physical territory, there are other sensitive issues that will need to be addressed.

For example, among these would be the loss of culture and heritage built up over large swathes of time. Cultures lost are not easily replaced, if at all, which begs the question of loss of national identity; all consequences of the human-induced problem of climate change, to which the impacted countries made the most miniscule contribution.



The aim is to stimulate and encourage multisectoral, multi-stakeholder collaboration to deliver on our promises and to ease the anxieties for millions of people living in Small Island Developing States and low-lying coastal areas, some of whom are facing the real threat of submergence of their island home beneath the sea.

Throughout, Small Island Developing States have been in the vanguard in advancing these conversations – actively engaging in General Assembly deliberations and harnessing the full strength of our multilateral system for the benefit of all.

Their leadership was on full display when nine island nations – led by Vanuatu – successfully brought a case to the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea, which ruled that carbon emissions can be considered a sea pollutant. The tribunal’s ruling obliges countries to mitigate the effects of emissions on oceans – potentially creating an important basis for future climate jurisprudence.

Their efforts also laid a strong foundation for a transformational Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States, which was successfully hosted by Antigua and Barbuda in May.

So I challenge you to choose sustainability in the small and large things you do, for example, turn off the tap when brushing your teeth, act to save and not to waste water because our reserves are globally running low and by walking or taking a bicycle ride to work. All of those options help to reduce our carbon footprint and goes to the solution of climate change.

I am confident that working strategically together, we have it within us to fortify the foundations for trust and cooperation that will bring us to a safer, more inclusive, more prosperous, more sustainable world for all.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on how we can get there, together.

I thank you.