



**STATEMENT BY EDWIN W. CARRINGTON,
SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY,
AT THE OPENING SESSION OF THE FORWARD TOGETHER CONFERENCE,
2 JULY 2002, GEORGETOWN, GUYANA**

Members of the Planning Committee
Representatives of CDB, CIDA and IDB
Distinguished Delegates
Members of the Media
Ladies and Gentlemen

As Secretary-General of the Caribbean Community, it is my pleasure to welcome you all on this truly momentous occasion - an encounter involving regional civil society and regional governments. This Encounter will be seeking to find agreement on and a vision for the way forward for the Caribbean Community. It will also strive to develop a collective CARICOM Strategy to that end - that is for moving forward together in pursuit of true regional integration.

The CARICOM Secretariat, which has been charged with the responsibility for facilitating this event, wishes to place on record its sincere appreciation to the coordinators and participants of the National consultations that formed an indispensable part of the process that has brought us to where we are today. This event, we hope, will mark the beginning of an ongoing process of genuine consultation to bring Civil Society fully into the Community's development process, - decision-making, implementation and education. Having some five years ago adopted the Charter of Civil Society for the Caribbean Community and thus laying a foundation for the interaction between Governments and Civil Society, today's encounter must take us a significant step forward in building this new partnership of cooperation for regional development. It is therefore most important that you recognize that your engagement with Heads of Government tomorrow, is not only a key element of this encounter but a vital step in the Community's development prospects.

It was almost three years ago, when our Heads of Government, recognising the important role of civil society in the integration process, decided to stage "an encounter catering for the widest possible participation." This forum, they outlined in the Consensus of Chaguaramas, the veritable birthplace of modern Caribbean integration - would "provide for a free and wide-ranging interchange of ideas aimed at arriving at a consensus on a strategy for the development of the Region and its peoples." This encounter is also a natural progression from the recommendations put forward by the West Indian Commission, which a decade ago under the chairmanship of the eminent Guyanese and Caribbean statesman, Sir Shridath Ramphal, argued for greater involvement by civil society. In the words of the Commission:

"Integration inevitably involves inter-governmental negotiation and decision-making; but it is not the preserve of Governments alone. People need to be drawn into the process."

Indeed the Commission's findings resonate in the views emerging from your national consultations - integration is more than trade and economics, it is about our people. - our people in CARICOM and our people in the wider Caribbean home. Merely a week ago I had living proof of this as similar sentiments were expressed to me by the Caribbean diaspora in North America during a whirlwind visit to Canada and the USA.

In keeping with the suggestions of the Ramphal Commission for greater involvement of civil society, it is not always appreciated how much has been done to engage major stakeholders more meaningfully in the Community's development. For example, several consultations, involving business, labour and other sectors have been held at the national level throughout the Community on the various aspects of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy, the flagship of the Community. Similarly, consultations have been held with general and legal interest groups on the role and functions of the Caribbean Court of Justice, an integral part of the Single Market and Economy.

In the field of Gender and Women's Affairs, the Gender and Women's groups have been involved in the series of discussions that have helped to define CARICOM's priorities in the Beijing +5 process.

The Youth have not been left out either. Youth Parliaments with various partners in the Bahamas (1998), Grenada (2000) and Guyana (2001) have permitted Youth groups to assist in defining regional priorities for youth development. Indeed, two (2) CARICOM Youth Ambassadors have been appointed to serve for two years in virtually all Member States. The present group will be meeting in Suriname in August to review the strategies for behavioral change to some of our social problems, chief among which is HIV/AIDS. They are expected to perform the functions of ambassadors, in collaboration with national youth organizations and the Ministries of Youth to advocate, and implement their respective programmes.

One of the most dynamic partnerships with civil society in recent times has been the Pan Caribbean Partnership against HIV/AIDS, established in 2001 and coordinated by the CARICOM Secretariat. It has brought together core partners including the Caribbean Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS (CRN+), the National Aids Programmes, governments, NGOs, several international agencies providing technical assistance and donors including the CIDA, DIFID, European Community, UNAIDS and USAID. This partnership is currently negotiating with the pharmaceutical companies for cheaper anti-retroviral drugs for the People Living With Aids. This is essential and could save the lives of many such people, some yet unborn, for whom treatment and care are beyond their means.

In this general process of consultation, the private sector continues to play an important role. Its representatives participate in the meetings of the Council for Trade and Economic Development (COTED) and other social sector groups - labour, youth, women - participate in those of the Council for Human and Social Development (COHSOD). Also at the regular annual meetings of the Conference of Heads of Government, business, labour and civil society groups are provided an opportunity to make statements on their priorities. True, in recent years, Heads of Government have voiced concern that the segments allocated to these major partners during the meeting have not been effectively used. They hope that the deliberations at this Forward Together meeting would at least make suggestions for a more satisfactory mechanism.

The Reports from your National Consultations and the Working Document which Heads of Government have received would therefore have made it clear that as civil society, you are concerned with the complexity of globalization and the challenges that it poses for the small, vulnerable states that make up our Community. They are aware that you are even more concerned with the slow pace of implementing the Single Market and Economy and the need for greater engagement of Civil Society in that process. Indeed Heads of Government cannot but be aware of your concerns regarding the threats to security and to our youth, caused by the escalation of crime linked to drugs and illicit arms and now terrorism. And as indicated in the Nassau Declaration on Health, they are alarmed by the latest threat posed by the scourge of HIV/AIDS, which is now the highest cause of death among the 14-44 age-group within our society, with an increasing rate among women.

I have no doubt that at the conclusion of this Encounter, it is the hope of all of us - Heads of Government, Ministers, diplomats, technocrats, Mr John and Mrs Jane Public - that we will have a viable framework to effectively address these challenges, which pose a threat not only to the integrity of our Community but to its very survival.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to sincerely thank you, the representatives of Civil Society for the interest you have demonstrated in your national deliberations towards making this Region, truly viable. I am sure that you would join me in giving a special warm welcome to our brothers and sisters from Haiti whose country is now poised to become the 15th Member of the Community with the imminent deposit of its instrument of accession.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank our Governments for their support of the national consultations, a key factor in contributing to what we hope would be a successful outcome of this Regional Consultation. I particularly would like to thank the Government and people of Guyana for their contribution in hosting this conference. This conference however, would not have been possible without the support of several donor agencies including, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB). On your behalf and on behalf of the Secretariat I ask you to thankfully recognize their contribution. Of course the organization of this conference could not have been easy. I therefore wish to recognize the tireless efforts of the Planning Committee, involving the CARICOM Secretariat, CPDC, UWI, CAIC, CCL, WAND, CAFRA and CNIRD.

And now finally to you ladies and gentlemen, the members of the Media to whom I direct a special and specific concern. You are indeed an essential component in the civil society family but beyond that you have the special task of communicating the message from this conference to the regional public. For your presence here today and for the role you must play in advancing this process I thank you, wholeheartedly and also in anticipation.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, this encounter marks a new chapter in the development of our Community. One in which all sectors of our society have the opportunity to play a more meaningful role not only in the integration process but in the uplifting of our Community and its people as we move forward together.

I thank you.