

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

ECLAC SUBREGIONAL HEADQUARTERS FOR THE CARIBBEAN



Report of the dialogue on population impacts and policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Caribbean



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**Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean**

Dialogue on population impacts
and policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic
in the Caribbean

Virtual meeting, 8 December 2020

LIMITED
LC/CAR/2021/1
26 January 2021
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

REPORT OF THE DIALOGUE ON POPULATION IMPACTS AND POLICY RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE CARIBBEAN

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A. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Early and decisive action taken by Caribbean governments controlled the spread of COVID-19 although these very necessary measures exerted heavy economic and social costs. The measures implemented to manage the spread of the virus have resulted in a contraction of economic activity which has disproportionately and adversely affected vulnerable groups including women, youth, migrants and persons with disabilities. The pandemic has intensified health, social and economic inequalities in the Caribbean and further exposed the weaknesses of social protection.

2. Measures to contain the spread of the virus are a matter of life and death for older persons and those suffering from chronic illnesses. Older persons must receive priority provision of personal protective equipment and support services so that they can protect themselves from COVID-19 while maintaining some level of social interaction (even if this is virtual).

3. Emergency social protection measures are urgently needed to prevent households falling into destitution and to limit damage to the economy as a whole. Governments should consider introducing (or expanding): income support programmes; emergency public assistance; relief on utility bills; food support; special education programmes to facilitate participation in virtual learning; psychological support services; and the provision of hygiene kits. Infrastructure spending also has an important role to play in stimulating the economy and building resilience.

4. Migrants have greater vulnerability to COVID-19 due to their living and/or working conditions and difficulties they face in accessing health services. The economic, social and cultural contribution of migrants must be recognized and they should have access to health and social services regardless of migratory status including, but not limited to, access to the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available.

5. The pandemic has created further social barriers for person with disabilities, for example children with disabilities who are unable to participate in online learning or job seekers who face an even more challenging labour market. Training is needed for healthcare professionals to eliminate discrimination against persons with disabilities in health care. Meanwhile the increased use of sign language has been a welcome development and the fact that flexible working arrangements are becoming more widely accepted should be leveraged to create employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

6. The crisis has led to an increased risk of sexual abuse, exploitation and violence against women and girls, at least in some countries. Renewed efforts are needed to ensure that gender-based violence is addressed through action plans, greater public awareness, provision of shelters and other conflict management and support services.

7. The pandemic is placing increased pressure on persons with care responsibilities, including care workers. This is leading to burnout, especially for single parents who are having to juggle work and supervision of their children. Employers and social protection systems need to cater to the needs of caregivers, including low paid care workers.

8. The pandemic has exacerbated mental health problems among young people who are missing out on education, social and economic opportunities, all of which is leading to increasing levels of anxiety, irritability, depression, loneliness and suicidal thoughts. Meanwhile, education, curriculums and training need to be adapted to improve the availability and quality of online learning, with a longer-term focus on training young people to meet the needs of digital economies.

9. The inability of persons to access health services risks an increase in sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions and, at worst, maternal mortality and morbidity.

Governments must work to ensure continuity of sexual and reproductive health services, including for persons with HIV, and should consider the use of more flexible mobile teams, free condom distributions and promotion of clinic hotlines. Regional organizations can also help secure reliable and timely medical supplies.

10. Resiliency in the face of crises is a fundamental part of sustainable development and therefore the COVID-19 emergency response and recovery, and “building back better”, should be seen as an essential part of, rather than a distraction, from the longer-term international goals and commitments contained in the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

B. ATTENDANCE AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

1. Place and date of the meeting

11. The dialogue on population impacts and policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Caribbean was held remotely on Tuesday 8 December 2020, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

2. Attendance

12. Participants from the following 11 ECLAC member States attended the virtual dialogue: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

13. Participants from the following 6 ECLAC associate member countries attended the virtual dialogue: Cayman Islands, British Virgin Islands, Curaçao, French Guiana, Guadeloupe and Sint Maarten.

14. The following United Nations bodies and specialized agencies were represented: United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and International Organization for Migration (IOM).

15. Representatives of the following intergovernmental organizations and bodies attended the meeting: Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), CARICOM Development Fund (CDF), Organization of American States (OAS), Pan-Caribbean Partnership Against HIV and AIDS (PANCAP) and the Commonwealth Youth Council (CYC).

16. Furthermore, representatives from ECLAC headquarters and the subregional headquarters for the Caribbean participated in the meeting.

17. The full list of participants may be found in annex I.

3. Agenda

1. Opening of the meeting
2. Panel 1: Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable population groups
3. Panel 2: Adapting policy responses and services to pandemic affected societies
4. Closure of the meeting

C. SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

1. Opening of the meeting

18. Opening statements were made by Diane Quarless, Director of the ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean, by Paulo Saad, Chief of the Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE), Population Division of ECLAC, and the Honourable Olivia Grange, Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport for Jamaica.

19. The Director of the ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean welcomed participants and explained that this meeting was part of a series of virtual dialogues held in place of the Regional Conference on Population and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean which had been postponed due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. She made reference to the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development which is the key policy framework for the Regional Conference. The Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters reminded participants that population and development encompasses planning, social development, gender and health policies with a focus on disadvantaged groups such as women, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities and migrants, all of whom have been adversely affected by COVID-19 and its socioeconomic consequences.

20. She commended Caribbean governments on their early and decisive action to deal with the spread of COVID-19 which has so far kept the number of cases and deaths per capita relatively low compared with many other countries. The Director lamented, however, that the response measures have come with heavy economic and social costs. This virtual dialogue was an opportunity for sharing experiences and lessons learned as governments seek to mitigate the impact of the virus and its social and economic effects on the population. She emphasized that emergency response measures should be seen as supplementing existing social welfare policies and programmes in order to prevent backsliding with respect to longer term international goals and commitments, specifically the priority actions of the Montevideo Consensus and the Sustainable Development Goals.

21. The Director then introduced Paulo Saad, Chief of the Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE), Population Division of ECLAC. He emphasized that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified health, social and economic inequalities in Latin America and the Caribbean. COVID-19 has exposed the weaknesses of social protection in the region. The measures implemented to manage the spread of COVID-19 have resulted in a contraction of economic activity which has disproportionately and adversely affected vulnerable groups including women, youth, persons with disabilities and migrants.

22. The Chief of CELADE remarked that the high level of inequality and poverty, and the inequality of access to high quality healthcare, goes a long way to explaining the high social cost of the pandemic in the region. He emphasized the need to analyse and understand the differential impact of the pandemic on different population groups in order to chart a way towards an equitable and just recovery from the crisis.

23. Older persons, he said, are at the greatest risk of severe illness or death due to COVID-19. The increased pressure on health systems has resulted in increased difficulty in accessing quality health care and creates the potential for age discrimination in the treatment and care of patients suffering from COVID-19 or other conditions. The measures put in place to restrict movement have also exacerbated the problem of social exclusion of older persons.

24. Migrants, he added, were also disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19. He commented on the overcrowded living conditions endured by many migrants which puts them at greater risk of contracting COVID-19. Many migrants do not benefit from health or social protection and the loss

of employment and wages has also resulted in a decline in migrant remittances with a potentially devastating impact on those households dependent on that income.

25. Regarding women and girls, the restrictive measures implemented to control the spread of the virus have resulted in additional pressures on women as primary caregivers; an increase in sexual and gender-based violence; greater difficulties in working, providing for, and caring for their families; and greater difficulty accessing sexual and reproductive health services. The Chief of CELADE added that children and young people were also impacted by the interruption to their education. Existing inequalities are being worsened by unequal access to the technology required to access distance learning.

26. Recalling the statement of the United Nations Secretary-General, he reiterated that: “We must take the opportunity of this crisis to strengthen our commitment to implementing the 2030 agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by making progress on our global roadmap for a more inclusive and sustainable future so that we can better respond to future crises.”

27. He concluded by saying that all COVID-19 response measures must contribute towards building more equitable, inclusive and resilient societies. It is vital, he said, to consolidate universal social protection systems based on a human rights approach. The pursuit of social equality and social inclusion is critical to “building back better”. He congratulated the Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the work done to organize the virtual dialogue and also commended the work of the presiding officers of the regional conference on population and development as well as thanking UNFPA for their continued partnership and recognizing the role played by civil society organizations.

28. ECLAC’s Director thanked the Chief of CELADE for his opening remarks and then introduced the Honourable Olivia Grange, Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport, Jamaica, and representative of the presiding officers of the regional conference on population and development.

29. The Minister, in her capacity as representative of the presiding officers, opened the virtual dialogue by emphasizing the shared commitment towards accelerating gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, and stemming inequality and discrimination on the basis of gender. She described some of the effects of the crisis, highlighting the increased risk of sexual abuse, exploitation and violence, and the physical and psychological consequences, that vulnerable groups faced, in particular women and girls. The Minister argued for a gender transformative response to deal with the social and economic consequences of the crisis. She stressed that the response requires significant investment and intervention targeting vulnerable groups, with particular focus on women and girls, older persons, persons with disabilities, rural women and the working poor.

30. The Minister described the gender transformative social protection strategies and programmes employed by the Bureau of Gender Affairs of the Government of Jamaica in order to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and to ensure that no one is left behind. She referred to a number of initiatives that had been implemented to tackle the issue of gender-based violence in Jamaica which included the formulation of action plans, efforts to raise public awareness, provide shelters and other conflict management and support services. The Government of Jamaica has integrated the gender perspective into disaster risk management and has collaborated with the private sector, community-based organizations, international development partners and civil society organizations to ensure that gender differential needs are prioritized during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and in any future crises.

31. The Minister recognized people as powerful resources and change agents during times of disaster and argued that empowerment of citizens is an extremely important part of building community and national resilience. She concluded by underscoring that the COVID-19 pandemic should not be a deterrent or

distraction to progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly the gender transformative goal 5 “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”.

32. The Director of the subregional headquarters thanked the Minister for her statement and then invited Alison Drayton, Director, Subregional Office for the Caribbean, UNFPA, to give opening remarks.

33. The UNFPA Director opened by welcoming participants and emphasized the value of sharing national experiences in the face of common population and development challenges. She stressed the importance of maintaining progress, and not regressing, with respect to the goals and objectives of intergovernmental agreements in the area of population and development. Her opening remarks were interrupted by a loss of internet connectivity but the UNFPA Director later rejoined the session to moderate panel 2.

2. Panel 1: Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable population groups

34. The Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean introduced the four panellists: The Honourable Cynthia Forde, Minister of People Empowerment and Elder Affairs of Barbados; Velda Octave-Joseph, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Local Government and Empowerment of Saint Lucia; Michael Foulkes, Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development of Bahamas; and Floyd Morris, Director of the Centre for Disability Studies, University of the West Indies and CARICOM Special Rapporteur on Disability.

35. This panel was moderated by Francis Jones, Population Affairs Officer of the Statistics and Social Development Unit of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean. He opened by highlighting some of the major impacts on vulnerable groups, including the threat that the COVID-19 virus presents to older persons and persons with disabilities; the economic impacts on women, youth and migrants; and the additional barriers that these groups may face in accessing education, employment, health services or other forms of social protection.

Panellist 1: The Honourable Cynthia Forde, Minister of People Empowerment and Elder Affairs, Barbados

36. The Minister focused on the threat that COVID-19 presented to older persons. She highlighted the measures taken by Barbados to limit the spread of the virus and outlined the actions that had been taken to safeguard life and livelihoods and ensure the sustainability of the economy. The Minister described the efforts made by the Government of Barbados to provide assistance for older persons through the National Assistance Board; the collaboration with voluntary sector organisations, businesses and volunteers which saw the provision of care packages during the lockdown; priority provision of personal protective equipment; and the setting up of hotlines that offer counselling and other relevant services.

37. Older persons, she asserted, were also impacted by job losses, either themselves or indirectly through other household members. This impacted their ability to care for those under their charge such as grandchildren who were at home because of school and nursery closures. Older persons were unable to participate in social activities or to access support services due to COVID-19 restrictions and this isolation and lack of socialization left many older persons feeling alone and dejected.

38. The Minister referred to Barbados’ pre-existing strategy to map the most vulnerable households including older persons and those living below the poverty line. The results of this effort were utilized to identify households and families who were most likely to be in need of assistance through initiatives such as: the “Elder Care Companion Project” which provided aid to those older persons not benefitting from the National Assistance Board; and the “Adopt a Family” initiative which provided cash transfers with financing from the Government, the diaspora and the private sector. With the lifting of restrictions, the Government of Barbados placed priority on ensuring that older persons could resume their regular activities.

39. The Minister concluded her statement by thanking PAHO, ECLAC and other agencies and institutions for their continued support, collaboration, funding and much needed assistance.

Panellist 2: Velda Octave-Joseph, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Local Government and Empowerment, Saint Lucia

40. The Permanent Secretary began by highlighting the economic and social impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable households. She described the situation in Saint Lucia where, based on the 2016 Survey of Living Conditions, 25 per cent of the population were already considered poor. She added that as an economic consequence of COVID-19, the incidence of poverty could jump to 41 per cent due to the extent of job losses in the hotel and tourism sector on which Saint Lucia is heavily dependent. Citing the “Saint Lucia COVID-19 High Frequency Phone Survey”, the Permanent Secretary explained that more than 70 per cent of households had reported a decline in income since the COVID-19 outbreak began.

41. This loss of income and jobs due to COVID-19 has led to widespread food insecurity with poor households particularly affected, being twice as likely to become food insecure as non-poor households. Fifty per cent of poor households had had an experience where they ran out of food.

42. She described the relief initiatives the Government of Saint Lucia have put in place. These include an income support program; the horizontal expansion of the public assistance program (PAP); food support; relief on utility bills; a special education program to facilitate participation in virtual learning; psychological support services; and the provision of hygiene kits.

43. Moving forward, the Permanent Secretary stated that Saint Lucia has committed to an Economic Recovery and Resilience Plan for the medium to long term. The plan focuses on economic stimulation through the implementation of fast track, shovel ready projects and strengthening of the social protection system, alongside strategies for resilience building in the productive sector, health resilience and disaster risk reduction/climate change adaptation. She described two activities intended to facilitate economic recovery which will be implemented during 2021. Firstly, persons will be retrained and reskilled for employment through partnership and finance from the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) and secondly, a project focusing on the development of micro-entrepreneurial skills through the James Belgrave Enterprise Development Fund.

Panellist 3: The Honourable Michael Foulkes, Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development and Member of Parliament, Bahamas

44. The Parliamentary Secretary described how the COVID-19 pandemic, which for the Bahamas came on the back of Hurricane Dorian, has compounded the social and economic challenges facing the country. He described the effects on the economy such as the closure of key industries such as tourism and fishing as well the disruption of the education sector and agriculture.

45. The crisis has also affected the capacity of the Government itself to implement response measures. Nevertheless, the Bahamas developed a comprehensive approach for COVID-19 relief and recovery which includes financial and tax deferral assistance for SME businesses (small and medium-sized enterprises); financial assistance and unemployment benefit assistance; food assistance and rent assistance. The Parliamentary Secretary also indicated that access to international funding is required.

46. He thanked ECLAC for the COVID-19 policy briefs which had assisted the Government of the Bahamas in mainstreaming gender considerations into the national COVID-19 response strategies and initiatives. Some of the gender responsive social protection mechanisms he highlighted include: the COVID-19 National Recovery Multisectoral Advisory Committee which comprised 50 per cent women,

with stakeholders from private, civil society and the Government; funding for the National Food Distribution Network; virtual information sessions targeting vulnerable groups in partnership with regional and international agencies and institutions; and the establishment of an emergency assistance programme for persons with disabilities which includes provision for accessible communication on matters related to Hurricane Dorian and COVID-19.

47. The Parliamentary Secretary highlighted additional allocations to education programmes and business development including funding, training and upgrading of skills for women and youth; and loans and grant funding for micro and small businesses. He also noted the funding and support provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the American Red Cross to support migrant populations, in particular those relocated following Hurricane Dorian. Other activities included training for women in partnership with the Caribbean Institute for Women in Leadership; initiatives to reinforce food security and sustainability through provision of support for farmers; and various collaborations involving technical training from organizations such as the CARICOM Secretariat, ECLAC, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) which formed part of the multisectoral response to COVID-19.

Panellist 4: Floyd Morris, Director of the Centre for Disability Studies, University of the West Indies and CARICOM Special Rapporteur on Disability

48. The Director of the Centre for Disability Studies indicated that, globally, COVID-19 has had a deleterious effect on persons with disabilities. He went on to suggest that the pandemic has impeded progress made since the establishment of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. He further described how COVID-19 had impacted persons with disabilities with reference to various models of disability. He described the welfare model in which persons with disabilities are thought of as charity cases, and there is indeed a danger that we see more dependence on welfare from persons with disabilities due to job losses and COVID-19's impact on the economy. In the medical model, the focus is on illness and not impairments but, in reality, persons with disabilities often receive inadequate care and treatment. He also referred to the social model and the human rights model and pointed out how COVID-19 restrictions compounded existing difficulties that persons with disabilities face participating in education and accessing healthcare.

49. The Director of the Centre for Disability Studies called for reinforcement of the gains made over recent years in advancing the disability agenda throughout the Caribbean and the rebuilding of more resilient societies. He highlighted COVID-19 related challenges in access to education where a significant proportion of children, or other persons with disabilities, have been unable to participate in online learning because they do not have access to the technology. The pandemic has also worsened the already dire employment situation for persons with disabilities with the Director indicating that between 80 and 90 per cent were already unemployed or inactive before the onset of COVID-19. He called for employment opportunities to be opened up to persons with disabilities, with flexible or remote working arrangements as necessary.

50. Those with disabilities are likely to have greater unmet needs for health care which, he indicated, is partly due to the lack of training for healthcare professionals on how to treat and interact with disabled patients. He cited that in his work as CARICOM Special Rapporteur on Disability, a ten-point protocol had been issued on how to treat persons with disabilities who develop COVID-19 in order to strengthen health workers' capacity to deal with these patients. He lauded the increased use of sign language for communication by governments across the subregion and hoped this would continue to grow. Concerning social security, the existing systems need to be improved to better target and serve persons with disabilities.

51. In conclusion, the Director of the Centre for Disability Studies argued that an attitudinal shift was necessary across the Caribbean. He maintained that public education should be intensified to teach persons how to treat with persons with disabilities, to ensure non-discrimination and inclusion in the mainstream of society. He called for a renewed focus on the rights of vulnerable groups in the post-COVID-19 recovery and for improvements to social protection systems to build resilience in the event of future pandemics or other emergencies. Finally, he encouraged use of the social and human rights-based models as the basis for disability policy, emphasizing access to education, modern technology, quality healthcare and employment.

Panel 1: Discussion

52. Robert Natiello from IOM addressed the situation of migrants whom he indicated had greater vulnerability to COVID-19 than native born persons due to overcrowded living and/or working conditions, difficulties in accessing health services and, in some cases, language barriers preventing them from receiving information about the pandemic. Additionally, migrants, many of whom work in informal employment, were among the first to suffer from COVID-19 lockdown restrictions with many suffering loss of income and therefore no longer able to send remittances to their families. The IOM representative underscored that the contributions of migrants to economic resilience and recovery must be recognized and encouraged states to include migrants in health and social services regardless of migratory status including, but not limited to, access to the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available.

53. Rosmond Adams, the PANCAP representative, confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic had made it more difficult for the subregion to reach the targets set out by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) due to service disruptions. To ease the burden of COVID-19, he called for all vulnerable persons to be protected and to have equal access to vaccines.

54. In closing panel 1, the moderator noted that all groups of vulnerable persons face distinct challenges and only by analysing, understanding and addressing these different impacts can we ensure that the COVID-19 response and recovery leaves no one behind.

3. Panel 2: Adapting policy responses and services to pandemic affected societies

55. This segment of the meeting was moderated by Alison Drayton, Director of the Subregional Office for the Caribbean, UNFPA. The four panellists were: the Honourable Dean Jonas, Minister of Social Transformation, Human Resource Development and the Blue Economy of Antigua and Barbuda; the Honourable Delma Thomas, Minister of Social Development, Housing, Community Empowerment and Hospital Services of Grenada; the Honourable Frank Anthony, Minister of Health of Guyana; and Franz George, Americas and Caribbean representative to the Commonwealth Youth Council.

Panellist 1: The Honourable Dean Jonas, Minister of Social Transformation, Human Resource Development and the Blue Economy, Antigua and Barbuda

56. The Minister indicated that Antigua and Barbuda had not observed a surge in gender-based violence due to the pandemic as has been noted in some other countries. This is probably due to the fact that Antigua and Barbuda has not had a significant incidence of COVID-19. Nevertheless, support services and facilities are in place for women and girls who do become victims.

57. The Government of Antigua and Barbuda have implemented strict measures to contain the COVID-19 virus, including the deployment of international disease specialists, robust testing, and increased funding for the Ministry of Health. The Government are also continuing to address other health issues like the dengue outbreak.

58. Concerning the social and economic impact of COVID-19, the Minister indicated that the tourism industry had been greatly affected. As one of the biggest contributors to Antigua and Barbuda's GDP, disruptions to the tourism industry affect the whole economy. The Minister outlined some of the measures the Government has implemented to deal with the social and economic impact of the pandemic. These include monetary measures such as reduction in the cost of utilities and suspension of disconnections, a home renovation incentive, a feeding program and suspension of taxes on essential items.

59. The Minister asserted that many persons had suffered job losses in tourism and related industries, but social protection programs and economic diversification have offered some relief. He cited the development of an aquaponics¹ industry in Antigua and Barbuda which was providing employment to persons that had previously worked in tourism, including persons with disabilities. Additionally, the Minister indicated that, within the education sector, there has been promotion of digitization and remote learning, and a partnership with the national telecom provider offering low cost options to enable students to participate in remote education.

Panellist 2: Chrissie Worme Charles, Acting Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social Development, Housing and Community Empowerment, Grenada (on behalf of The Honourable Delma Thomas, Minister of Social Development, Housing, Community Empowerment and Hospital Services, Grenada)

60. The Permanent Secretary reported on several different categories of caregivers in Grenada and how they were supporting vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 lockdown: caregivers at geriatric homes; carers for persons with disabilities;² and early years caregivers.

61. Geriatric care workers attended work during the lockdown with the Government of Grenada providing transportation services to and from all geriatric homes (and also for those caregivers at children's homes and women shelters). Caregivers reported that there was a great deal of camaraderie and mutual support although some care workers who had to work during the lockdown could not supervise their own children. Some care workers had difficulties supporting their children's remote learning while some faced food insecurity. Caregivers were not recognized as essential workers by the authorities, unlike those such as police and nurses, which meant they did not receive preferential treatment at, for example, supermarkets.

62. For the caregivers at the Grenada National Council of the Disabled, the Permanent Secretary stated that burnout was reported due to understaffing and resources being stretched during the lockdown period when a greater number of home visits were required. Concerning mental health, the Permanent Secretary asserted that the situation was especially stressful for single parents who had to juggle work and child supervision. Mental health problems such as depression and anxiety were reported, in response to which the Ministry of Social Development provided support through their helpline.

63. The Permanent Secretary then described the experience of caregivers who provide early childhood support. She stated that many of these caregivers/educators were not computer literate, had no access to the Internet and, due to financial hardship, found it difficult to provide high quality nutrition for themselves and their families. Being isolated from their co-workers and the mutual support they provided also affected their mental health.

64. The Permanent Secretary suggested that caregivers were generally under-appreciated and pointed out that their salaries are among the lowest in Grenada. They often have to balance their professional responsibilities with caring for their own families. Consideration should also be given to how social protection systems could support caregivers, for example through housing support, food support and/or psychosocial support. The Permanent Secretary concluded by highlighting how priority access to mental

¹ Aquaponics is a food production system that combines aquaculture (fish farming) with hydroponics (cultivating plants in water) in a symbiotic way.

² Through the Grenada National Council of the Disabled and the Mental Health and Psychosocial Unit of the Ministry of Social Development.

health services was particularly important given the high demands placed on caregivers which often results in burnout or ill-health that in turn affect the well-being of their own families.

Panellist 3: Franz George, the Americas and Caribbean representative for the Commonwealth Youth Council

65. The youth representative extended thanks to ECLAC for the invitation to participate in the panel discussion and the opportunity to bring the youth perspective to the dialogue. He indicated that the information gathered to inform his statement was based on research and consultations with other young persons.

66. Regarding the pandemic and mental health, he echoed the findings of the earlier panellists. He stated that as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns, there have been increased reports of mental health problems among young people such as anxiety, irritability, depression, loneliness and suicidal thoughts. In many instances, this has been a result of isolation due to remote learning and working. Many young people live in communities with violence and crime that affect their mental health and well-being and now, the youth representative added, many victims of abuse can no longer escape to the safe spaces previously provided by school or work. Fear and anxiety related to contracting COVID-19 and the hardships related to losing loved ones from the disease has also impacted mental health. Some young people reported effects on physical health due to inactivity, poor diet, stress and either the unwillingness or inability to obtain treatment for other health care needs. The youth representative noted that these challenges were by no means unique to young persons.

67. Regarding intergenerational inequalities, the youth representative reported that there was a consensus among young people that these inequalities had been exacerbated due to the current economic recession caused directly by the pandemic. Young people expressed concerns about debt and not being able to enjoy the standard of living they enjoyed prior to COVID-19. Despite the advancements in technology, education and employment, many still felt disadvantaged and that their parents and grandparents had better and easier opportunities to generate wealth and achieve milestones such as getting married, purchasing a home and starting families. The young people reported that the pandemic also threatened the passing on of intergenerational wealth as in many cases families were losing assets due to job losses or business closures.

68. The youth representative called for improvements in the quality of Internet access across the subregion, especially in rural areas to facilitate better access to online education. Additionally, there is a large gap regarding access to, and the provision of, digital devices to facilitate online education. He suggested that where it is not possible to provide devices or connectivity, an alternative would be to provide physical learning materials. The representative emphasized the need to restructure education, curriculums and training in response to changes in the labour market which is becoming more digitized. With the rise in unemployment, equipping young persons with entrepreneurial skills is also important to make them more employable and to enable them to create employment.

Panellist 4: The Honourable Frank Anthony, Minister of Health, Guyana

69. The Minister of Health of Guyana thanked ECLAC for the invitation to share his country's experience in responding to COVID-19. The Minister re-emphasized the seriousness of the pandemic and its disruption of the health system. He described how Guyana's initial response was to deploy resources, reprioritize resources and build capacity to deal with COVID-19. However, he explained that this action resulted in compromising the delivery of other health services, particularly sexual and reproductive health (SRH).

70. Now that testing, response and treatment for COVID-19 is more established, the Minister stated that they are now able to refocus on other services that had been suspended or downscaled. A special facility has been designated for hospitalization of COVID-19 patients so that other regular services can resume.

71. The Minister went on to indicate that sexual and reproductive health services had been curtailed. He explained that many persons were not accessing the services at the health centres or clinics due to fear of the virus or fear of breaching curfew restrictions. Additionally, these clinics were not staffed with adequate personnel as a result of reassignments in the initial stages of the COVID-19 response. Therefore, it was necessary to develop new means of reaching those who need sexual and reproductive health services and providing them with assurances about the safety of the facilities and information about how they can be accessed.

72. In addition to this challenge, Guyana was also affected by the global disruption in supply chains for sexual and reproductive health products such as HIV testing kits. This resulted in shortages, even with a reduced number of clients coming into the facilities. This disruption had a detrimental effect on the provision of health services although the situation has now stabilized somewhat and stocks have been replenished.

73. The Minister also confirmed that there had been an uptick of gender-based violence in Guyana that can be attributed to everyone being at home in lockdown and under curfew. He indicated that the Ministry of Human Services and Social Security as well as a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were collaborating with the Ministry of Health on gender-based violence prevention.

74. He described how the disruptions caused by COVID-19 in the health sector as it relates to sexual and reproductive health can result in a number of consequences. The unwillingness or inability of persons to access SRH services will lead to an increase in unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions and, in the worst case, maternal mortality and morbidity, as well as an increase in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and/or untreated STIs.

75. To address these risks, a number of measures have been put in place by the Ministry of Health such as extending prescriptions for contraception, flexible working hours, mobile teams, free condom distributions and clinic hotlines. To address the stock shortages, the Minister called for support from regional organizations to help secure more reliable and timely medical supplies.

76. He concluded by noting that one of the lessons learned has been that in responding to the pandemic, other areas of health cannot be ignored and he reaffirmed the importance of providing the full range of health services to the public.

Panel 2: Discussion

77. The moderator thanked the panellists for their contributions. She commented on the logistical costs associated with bringing medical supplies into the subregion which she indicated had increased dramatically. She also commended the governments of the subregion for their broad, comprehensive and integrated response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

78. Cecilia Martins, representing the Organization of American States (OAS), indicated that the Inter-American Committee of Education was implementing an action plan for educational continuity, paying particular attention to vulnerable populations. In their research, they have highlighted what has worked well in the region, seeking improvements in areas that have posed challenges, and recommending solutions. She referenced a forum the OAS hosted in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology under the theme of “Envisioning Education to Create Resilient and Responsive Systems in the Face of the Pandemic”. The forum addressed mental health for children and teachers; strategies to reach those in rural areas; issues faced by women, girls, children and adults with disabilities; and pedagogical approaches. She hoped for a closer relationship with the subregion to broaden the impact of this work.

79. The OAS representative also touched on the issue of school feeding which has been disrupted due to the pandemic. She indicated that the OAS, in collaboration with PAHO, is working on guidelines and strategies for healthy school feeding and physical activity in the context of the pandemic. She also called for greater focus on remote learning for persons with disabilities.

4. Closing remarks

80. The Director of the UNFPA Subregional Office for the Caribbean highlighted two issues that had been mentioned by a number of panellists: the mental health impacts of COVID-19 and the additional barriers created for persons with disabilities.

81. The Director of the ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean reaffirmed that the Caribbean subregion had been relatively successful, so far at least, in containing the spread of COVID-19, but this dialogue had revealed many, either anticipated or unanticipated, impacts of the response measures, and their effect on vulnerable groups in particular. She predicted that the measures put in place to manage COVID-19 would continue for some time and commended subregional governments on their efforts to mitigate the negative population impacts as far as possible.

82. The Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean concluded the virtual dialogue, relaying thanks to the panellists and moderators for their contributions and thanking all participants for their attendance and interventions.

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Annex II**PROGRAMME**

- 09.00 – 9.30 a.m. **Opening of the meeting**
- Paulo Saad, Chief, Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE) - Population Division of ECLAC
 - The Honourable Olivia Grange, Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport, Jamaica
 - Alison Drayton, Director, Caribbean subregional office, UNFPA
- 09.30 – 10.45 a.m. **Panel 1: Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable population groups**
- Moderator: Abdullahi Abdulkadri, Coordinator, Statistics and Social Development Unit, ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean
- The Honourable Cynthia Forde, Minister of People Empowerment and Elder Affairs, Barbados
 - Honourable Member of Parliament and Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Social Services and Urban Development, Michael Foulkes
 - Velda Octave-Joseph, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Equity, Social Justice, Local Government and Empowerment, Saint Lucia
 - Floyd Morris, Director of the Centre for Disability Studies, University of the West Indies and CARICOM Special Rapporteur on Disability
- Discussion
- 10:45 – 12.00 p.m. **Panel 2: Adapting policy responses and services to pandemic affected societies**
- Moderator: Alison Drayton, Director, Caribbean subregional office, UNFPA
- The Honourable Dean Jonas, Minister of Social Transformation, Human Resource Development and the Blue Economy, Antigua and Barbuda
 - Chrissie Worme Charles, Acting Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social Development, Housing, Community Empowerment and Hospital Services, Grenada
 - The Honourable Frank Anthony, Minister of Health, Guyana
 - Franz George, Americas and Caribbean representative for the Commonwealth Youth Council
- Discussion
- 12.00 p.m. **Closure of the meeting**
- Diane Quarless, Director, ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean



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