

Feature Address of the Hon. Oliver Joseph
Minister for Economic Development, Trade, Planning, Cooperatives and International
Business. Grenada

at the Official Launch of the OECS Regional Strategy for the Development of Statistics
(RSDS)

under the theme

Revolutionising our Statistics | Developing our Societies

Fort Young Hotel, Roseau, Dominica

11 April, 2017

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Afternoon.

I am most delighted to be here with you today at the official launch of the OECS Regional Strategy for the Development of Statistics (RSDS), a very important milestone for each of our Member States and for the OECS Economic Union as a whole.

I am here today not only in my capacity as a policy-maker and Minister of Government, but as a Member of the OECS Economic Affairs Council.

In November 2016, the EAC endorsed the OECS RSDS and directed the Commission to move deliberately and speedily to implement it.

Noting this achievement, permit me to bask in this success by elaborating its significance from the perspectives of national imperatives, regional aspirations and global agendas, understanding that each level influences each other upward and downward.

The global imperatives and influences would be my starting point as they invariably determine how we, as developing countries, respond at the national and regional levels.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Ladies and gentlemen, by now, we should all be acquainted with the ambitious global agenda for sustainable development. A set of 17 goals and associated 169 targets have been defined to stimulate action over the next fifteen years.

These actions are framed as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development or SDGs for short. The international community describes it succinctly as a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity.

It recognises eradication of extreme poverty as the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.

For this reason, and more, the 2030 Agenda calls for all countries and all stakeholders to act in collaborative partnership to implement this plan, and to take the bold and transformative steps that are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path.

This shift is informed by and assessed with statistics and data.

The Agenda recognises this imperative for statistics and data and dedicates a target that attends to:

- enhancing capacity-building support to Small Island Developing States like ours; and
- increasing significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.

I wish to proudly announce that the Dr. Rt. Hon. Keith Mitchell, Prime Minister of Grenada, was recently appointed as the Chairman of the World Bank Small States Forum for two (2) years (2016-2018). He has put forward a seven-point agenda for support for SIDS.

SIDS face unique challenges in their pursuit of sustainable development due to their small size, narrow resource and export base, and exposure to global environmental challenges and external economic shocks.

Compounding these features are natural disasters, something we in Grenada know too well with the passage of Ivan and Emily. Recently Dominica experienced Erica and St Lucia was taken by surprise by tropical storm Tomas. We take a few steps forward and one heavy rainfall sets us back 5 years!

These are events and characteristics of our Member States with which we are all too familiar. These are the factors that have us, the policy-makers, juggling scarce resource among demanding and competing public services.

How much do we spend on roads? How much do we allocate to health services? To education? And yes, how much should or can we allocate to statistics? We take loans to build bridges and road, the rain come and wash it away but the loans must be repaid.

I can certainly attest to this daily challenge, having a portfolio for Economic Development, Trade and Planning. My decisions and policy proposals are hindered without evidence - timely and relevant data.

So, the Prime Minister's appointment as Chairman of the Small States is therefore as celebratory as it is obligatory. It gives visibility to our challenges and resource constraints such that our development partners would be inclined to channel resources to us.

His appointment also bestows on us heightened responsibility to use these resources smartly so that we can continually address those structural and external challenges that interrupt achievement of sustainable development.

I attended a forum in Paris last year on the 2030 Agenda and the implications for SIDS. We discussed what stood in our way to equip our statistical operations to deliver on the SDGs and the modalities we can design to overcome the obstacles.

Three related challenges stood out for me:

- SIDS development are often driven by external agendas and efficiency concerns;
- There is a divergence between global and national views about what statistics to collect and use for policy;
- Unpredictability of funding for statistical activities; which makes our statistics ad hoc, untimely and perhaps inadequate and of narrow scope.

The question then becomes, how can we, the policy-makers and decision-makers support our Member States, individually and collectively, to overcome constraints and confront the challenges to develop, produce and disseminate statistics?

That is, statistics data that businesses, society and our development partners expect and demand?

Grenada is committed to the SDGs. We have joined other Governments at the Third International Conference on SIDS to reaffirm our commitment to the sustainable development of SIDS; and we have adopted the new Sustainable Development Agenda.

The Economic Affairs Council understood that SDG mainstreaming of national development plans was an inescapable undertaking for this new world order for sustainable development.

In endorsing OECS RSDS, the EAC insisted that it attended to producing data to monitor the SDGs.

This brings me to the national context and imperatives for the requisite statistics to monitor not just the SDGs, but also those statistics that are required for national growth and development plans.

The National Context and Imperatives

Ladies and gentlemen, it is indisputable that statistics are the bedrock for sound policy-making and a participative democracy.

As a public good, statistics are indispensable to an open society. They are unassuming objective descriptions of our people and society, yet they have tremendous power and influence on our actions and decisions.

I have no doubt that you are beginning to appreciate that we cannot escape our respective roles and responsibilities to create, nurture and sustain a society that is rooted in facts and figures.

The reality is statistics touch on two aspects of a country: government accountability and social participation.

When citizens can freely access quality statistics and use them to measure government's performance, trustworthiness is achieved and the wheels of the democratic process turns unhindered.

When this happens, people are encouraged to participate by providing data when requested, as they feel included and empowered to put forward better proposals; or to question, challenge those that are proposed by their government.

This virtuous cycle of participation helps governments to design better policies. Policies that are evidence-based, targeted and timely.

At the national level, we need to break the silos that characterise our Government structures and which tend to impede collaboration and cooperation generally, but specifically and quite notably for statistics.

This phenomenon of excessive silos has many symptoms. Foremost among them are poor communication; lack of a common vision; little appetite for shared-responsibility; inefficiencies; to name a few.

Ultimately, disharmony leads to departments, ministries and statutory authorities perceiving themselves as competitors rather than complementary providers of public services in an inter-dependent system.

The public sector configuration of our Member States are similar more than they are different. As such, the constituents of the national statistical architecture are more or less identical.

There are several entities collecting and collating statistics whether through surveys, such as business and household surveys; or through administrative records, such as those kept at civil registration, police or schools.

This configuration of statistical actors, or the national statistical system as it is called, is, according to the UN Statistics Division, the "ensemble of statistical organisations and units within a country that jointly collect, process and disseminate official statistics on behalf of national government."

Interestingly, national statistical legislation did contemplate the requirement for coordination of among these entities. It provides for the authority of the national statistics office to coordinate the collection, analysis and dissemination of statistics.

In fact, I am told that the statistical legislation for Antigua and Barbuda and for St. Vincent and the Grenadines each use the term "national statistical system". These laws were enacted in 1975 and 1983 respectively.

Grenada is currently revising its statistical legislation to make it amenable to the realities and demands of a facts and figures society.

We need now to link these constituents of the statistical system through functional programmes for official statistical activities. These would involve choosing methodologies, tools and procedures for conceptualising, collecting, processing, analysing and disseminating statistics.

To be transparent and accountable, Member States should embrace a national coordinating mechanism that guarantees the statistical business process the benefit of professional independence and trust in the resulting outputs. We need to get our stakeholders to understand the CPI.

Committing to the 2030 Agenda requires countries to use “a broad alliance of people, governments, civil society and the private sector all working together to achieve the future we want for present and future generations”

The Economic Affairs Council understood this imperative, and in endorsing the regional approach for statistical development directed the Member States to each establish a national governance arrangement for statistics.

Such an arrangement, with the attendant authority and legitimacy, would be a representation of society (government, opposition, trade unions, business associations, NGOs, academia, media, statisticians and others) that assemble as a directional and advisory body to discuss the future we want and the key indicators to design it and to measure it.

A mechanism such as this would significantly improve the quality of our political and social debates and by extension the endowment and complexion of our democracy.

As the 2030 Agenda advocates, countries are now mainstreaming the SDGs in their national development plans, a process that depends on input and participation from a wide cross section of society.

A national collaborative mechanism supports this function in ways that gives voice to the needs and concerns of representative groups of society. In Grenada, we have the Committee of the Social Partners that is chaired by the Prime Minister.

For instance, Grenada is in the process of designing a National Strategic Development Plan which will be aligned with the SDGs and will incorporate some of the recommendations of the SAMOA Pathway.

We also well on our way to establishing a national statistics council. This arrangement will benefit the planning and implementation process as it will solicit the insights and expertise from those who are closer to the issues and those who can contribute to the solutions.

Ladies and gentlemen, though we are sovereign countries, the OECS Member States recognise the benefits of being part of an Economic Union, and one that already boasts a common currency.

Moreover, the fact that we are SIDS necessitates that we galvanise in a manner that extracts economies of scale and scope that benefits us individually and collectively.

Our progress toward full integration requires comparable statistics based on methodologies harmonised among countries. If we are pursuing joint policies and common programmes, these by definition, must be informed by statistics that are

created from identical processes. Calculation of per capita income is a good example of how critical accurate data is.

This imperative is what has led to crafting an OECS Regional Strategy for the Development of Statistics. The OECS RSDS revives and brings order to our agenda for statistical development.

It is a regional catalyst with propitious timing as it coincides with a period of increasing focus on and demand for data and statistical information.

The Economic Affairs Council noting this new paradigm, endorsed the draft OECS RSDS 2017 to 2030 as the tool to determine and timetable for the statistical requirements for economic, social, human and environmental development; and to measure development and integration progress of the OECS Economic Union – nationally and regionally;

Regional Context and Aspirations

Our Member States, can claim success with the design and implementation of common policies and joint programmes. For instance, the OECS Common Tourism Policy and the OECS Education Strategy are currently being implemented.

The mandate for pursuing joint programmes and common policies is provided in our Revised Treaty of Basseterre. We are confident then, that our successes encourage and provide us the confidence that the OECS RSDS will also perform well.

The OECS RSDS's time frame of 2017 to 2030 is aligned with the 2030 Agenda, signalling a deliberate intention to remain in-step with sustainable development of people, prosperity and the planet.

From my perspective, there are three key benefits from a regional approach to statistical development:

One, we can achieve consistency of outputs within a framework that regulates and binds us to agreed methodologies, standards and tools;

Second, we can also achieve efficiency in the production of statistics by not reinventing the wheel and instead looking to each other for best practices;

Third, centres of excellence can emerge such that we can help each other knowing that our respective context and experiences are similar, and our pursuits for growth and development are aligned.

The EAC expects the OECS RSDS to be implemented through an inclusive, participatory and transparent process, and endorsed the OECS RSDS Steering Committee as the body for direction and oversight.

In Conclusion

As I conclude, I wish to place on record and acknowledge your contribution to building your respective country and by extension the OECS Economic Union, through your unshakable resolve to make improvements in the field of statistics.

I am inclined to let you know that we, the policy-makers, the Government, are very grateful. We do notice and we do care, and we do understand the constraints and challenges.

We all want to see our people gainfully productive; communities with the services and infrastructure they deserve; businesses that grow and develop; all because of the evidence-based policies that your work in statistics will and can help us to achieve.

You may not all be statisticians, but each of you is a vital part in preparing your country's national development plan.

Without hesitation, I acknowledge and express profound gratitude for the ongoing valuable support from our development partners not only for helping us realise this milestone, but also for the initiatives that have already been implemented and those that are in the pipeline.

For instance, the World Bank's support to help our statistics office transition from paper to computer devices to collect data is quite notable. In Grenada we are using tablet computers that reduces the time and cost of data collection.

Other active initiatives such as the Enhanced Country Poverty Assessment Project funded by CDB;

Statistics Canada's PRASC that is supporting several areas under household surveys, business surveys, advocacy and communication.

Our partners in statistics are numerous. Among them are the European Union, UNDP, CARTAC, UNFPA, UNECLAC, UNICEF, UNSD, UNESCO, UNWOMEN, ILO, PARIS21 (Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century), Department for International Development (DfID) CARICOM Secretariat, ECCB, and many others.

On behalf of all the Member States permit me to thank you for making significant contribution to shape and resource our respective national statistical architecture.

I look forward to receiving updates and celebrating the achievements as we implement the OECS RSDS 2017 to 2030.

I thank you.