

**Keynote Address by Hon. Senator Carla Barnett, Minister of State in the
Ministry of Labour, Local Government and Rural Development**

At the Conference on Labour and Social Protection

Best Western Biltmore Hotel, February 25, 2019

Good morning:

UNICEF Representative, Dr. Susan Kasedde

CEO, Ministry of Labour, Local Government & Rural Development, Mrs. Sharon Young

CEO, Ministry of Human Development, Ms. Judith Alpuche

Solicitor General, Ms. Elisa Montalvo

CEO, Social Security Board, Dr. Colin Young

World Bank Representatives, Mr. Dino Merotto and Ms. Asha Williams

International Labour Organization Representatives, Mr. Diego Rei and Mr. Ariel Pino

Labour Commissioner, Ms. Ann Marie Thompson

President National Trade Union Congress of Belize, Mr. Marvin Mora

Executive Director, Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Ms. Kim Aikman

Executive Director, EDC, Mr. Ishmael Quiroz

Executive Director of the National Committee on Families and Children

Ladies and Gentlemen, good Morning.

Let me add my own words of welcome to all of you for being here.

I took the time to enumerate all these partners who are here today because I wanted to make the point that this is a broad collaboration that we are involved in today. The issues we are dealing with are tough to handle and require all hands-on deck.

Thanks especially to our UNICEF Representative Dr Susan Kasedde for your kind words and for ensuring that UNICEF works in such close collaboration with Government on issues affecting Children, and works very closely with our Ministry of Labour, Local Government and Rural Development on making our municipalities more child friendly. Through this project we are supporting the greater involvement of our children - through the Child Advisory Bodies that are now functioning in each municipality - in informing the design and implementation of projects and programmes

- That address their need for safer and more secure environments,
- That create spaces which allow their creativity to bloom and
- That address the peculiar challenges they face as they seek to grow up to be strong and fearless leaders and members of their communities.

Thanks also to the representatives from the International Labour Organization with whom our Ministry has a very close working relationship and thanks to the World Bank as well. I know that these two agencies have been working hard with our staff and with the staff of the other Ministries and Departments to ensure that this particular conference is productive and meaningful and contributes to the medium-to-long term development objectives of Belize.

The fact that we have both the ILO and the World Bank with us, working on this critical issue of social protection is a reflection of the fact that both institutions, in their individual work programs and in the formal partnership that they have forged, focus on the need to fight poverty and income inequality. Indeed, almost 3 years ago at the UN General Assembly then World Bank President Kim said, “Social protection is a means to reduce poverty, achieve greater gender equity, reduce economic inequalities, and promote good jobs. ... [and] It is profoundly significant that we have come together collectively to help countries close these coverage gaps.”

Much of what we have done so far in Belize to begin to build a national system of social protection, grew out of collaboration by government through the Ministry of Human Development with the World Bank. We very much appreciate the work that the World Bank has been doing with us and we recognize that although this work has been positive so far – so that our BOOST and Pantry programs have been recognized at home and abroad as fairly successful - there is a lot more work to be done. So, let us see how we can continue to work together to strengthen our Social Protection framework. There should be a presentation on the BOOST programme during this conference so there will be an opportunity for agencies that interact with persons who benefit from that program to make suggestions about how we can continue to make that particular intervention better.

We look forward to broadening of the work on social protection in Belize to include the role of the labour sector, for that is really what we are setting out to initiate here over the next 2 days. In this, we know that we can count on the support of the UN agencies such as UNICEF in this effort, in whatever ways may be possible. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 1.3 calls for nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all by 2030.

But just what is social protection?

Social protection is concerned with protecting and helping those who are poor and vulnerable, such as children, women, older people, people living with disabilities, the displaced migrant populations, the unemployed, and the sick. There are different opinions about which interventions can be classified as social protection depending on how they work. But social protection is commonly understood as “all public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against risks to their livelihood

and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized; with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalized groups” (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004).

Social protection increases capacities and productive assets of households thereby contributing in the long run to breaking the cycle of poverty. By contributing directly to people - by providing food, skills, services and cash - households are enabled to invest in their own upliftment.

Social protection may take many forms, from ‘Safety nets’ which help people to meet immediate basic needs in times of crisis – such as the loss of a job or falling ill – to interventions that are based on higher level goals, such as equity, empowerment and human rights.

The ILO gives even greater specificity to these things by defining social protection to include a variety of things: adequate cash transfers for all who need them, especially children; benefits and support for people of working age in case of maternity, disability, work injury or for those without jobs; and, of course, pensions for all older persons. This protection can be provided through social insurance, tax-funded social benefits, social assistance services, public works programs and other schemes that guarantee basic income security. The idea is that all *“all in need have access to essential health care and to basic income security which together secure effective access to goods and services defined as necessary at the national level.”* (ILO)

Social protection, therefore, would also include policies and programs designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by promoting efficient labour markets, and enhancing people’s capacity to manage economic and social risks, such as unemployment, exclusion, sickness, disability and old age. These are the kinds of policies and programs that will be the focus of your discussions and sharing of knowledge over the next 2 days.

All of this is very timely for us in the Ministry of Labour. We have been considering how we can more effectively support the objective of economic and social development. That is: how we can more strategically contribute to the development outcomes set out in our Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy, particularly reducing poverty and inequality.

We have in our Ministry a Public Employment Unit staffed with Employment Officers – only 11 in total and spread across the country. This unit is tasked with the responsibility to provide three main services to jobseekers. The first is to provide training or advice in (i) identifying their (job seekers) skills; (ii) setting employment goals; (iii) preparing a resume and cover letter; and (iv) preparing for and sitting for an interview. The second is to provide referral services to vocational training centers and groups (e.g. women’s groups for craft making), where jobseekers can learn a trade for employment or self-employment. The third is to match jobseekers with suitable vacancies.

For this work to be effective, we need to be sure of several things:

First and foremost, we need to be sure that the staff we are expecting to do this work is adequate – in both skills and numbers – to do the job that is expected of them.

Secondly, and equally important, we need to be sure that the staff has the information that they need to do this work:

- what skills are in demand?
- which vocational training centers provide courses in the skills that are in demand, and what is the schedule and cost?
- are scholarships available and from where?
- what are the qualifications for participation in the courses?
- where can job-seekers get advice and assistance for self-employment?
- what job vacancies exist and what are the qualifications required?

To fill any information gaps which may exist, there is a need for cooperation and collaboration among the training centers (whether operated by the government, an NGO, or a statutory body), the private sector through its organisations or business owners themselves and the Labour Department. Without that kind of collaboration, we will not be able to fill that knowledge gap to enable any system that is designed to bring jobs and job seekers together to work efficiently. Collaboration is essential.

Thirdly, we need to ensure that the staff of the Unit has the administrative machinery – work processes, IT systems, whatever is needed – to do this work.

Fourthly, we need to ensure that both job-seekers and businesses with vacancies are aware of the system and the service it provides and find it convenient and helpful.

If we can do this, if we can fill these gaps, we can put in place a system that will be very helpful – to our young people in particular – to be able to match skill with jobs that are available.

This is an area which is calling out for attention and we have committed ourselves to urgently complete a review of the work of this Unit with a view to strengthening it. In this effort, we will invite support from and collaboration with our partners because we are convinced that this is one area in which we can strengthen the role of labour in social protection. It is an area in which well-crafted investments can yield positive returns in increasing employment and contributing to economic and social development and poverty reduction.

Allied to the work of this Unit is the development of a proper Labour Market Information System. There have been several discussions of this over the years, and several attempts to start to put together such a system. It has proven, so far, expensive and complicated matter in the past because it implied significant costs for IT systems and designer software. But over the years, as IT systems have become more cost effective, software has become less purpose built and more online and cloud-based systems have made access so much easier, it would appear that less costly and more effective solutions are possible.

Imagine, as a youngster looking for a job, you could access, from your phone or your computer, a website or an App where you can upload your information. And imagine as an HR manager or business owner you can also access this same website or App where you can share information on available jobs. And imagine this App has the main objective of matching available jobs with jobseekers in the database. You know where I am going with this. It can be done. It is not as difficult as it used to be, but it will take investment, it will take support and collaboration.

This is a priority because of the need to increase the ability of the unemployed to find jobs, increase productivity and earnings and thereby address some of the social problems that often accompany high unemployment. Fundamentally, the objective of the Labour Market Information System and the work of the Employment Unit will be to improve efficiency in the labour market.

So, this matter is firmly on the table and am sure CEO Ramclam Young will share with you how we intend to approach this in the near future. This work is being placed in the context of developing a well-articulated and strategic National Labour and Employment Policy which will go beyond the labour market information system to place it in the context of the future of work, focus on the imperative of decent work for all and help to identify and/or prioritize actions to improve healthy and safe working conditions with all that entails.

As you discuss these weighty matters during today and tomorrow, I want you keep in mind that the purpose of all this is to improve the quality of life for all, but especially for the vulnerable and the marginalized among whom women and children are the majority. That is the core purpose of this exercise. That is the reason we come to work every day - to improve the quality of life for all, but especially the vulnerable and the marginalized.

I wish you all a productive 2 days. I look forward to the reports of this conference and the series that comprise the Social Protection Conference Series. And I hope that we continue to work together on these matters that are so critical to the sustainable development of Belize.

And I look forward with some optimism because as I look around and see all the collaborators in this room – Government through the key Ministries, the key agencies, private sector, the unions, the NGO community – we are all here present and accounted for. All we need to do is: to do the work.

Thank you very much.