

## **Guyana's Opening Statement to the United Nations Committee (CESCR) on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – Geneva, Switzerland – 2015-09-28.**

Honorable Chairman, distinguished Members of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Guyana is honored to participate in the 56<sup>th</sup> Session of the CESCR. The Report submitted by Guyana in 2012, which combines the second, third, and fourth Periodic Reports, covers an 18 year period from 1995 to 2012.

I am pleased to provide an introductory statement which I hope will elucidate our country's experiences, progress and challenges in a period which has witnessed many changes, not only in Guyana's economic strategy, but also in its priorities and developmental thrust.

On behalf of H.E. President David Granger, our Prime Minister, the Hon. Moses Nagamootoo, and the newly elected Government, and people of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights in the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide and to reaffirm our commitments to our United Nations treaty obligations under:

- ICCPR International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- CERD The International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
- ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention
- CRC The International Convention on Rights of the Child
- CEDAW The International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
- CAT The International Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment
- CMW The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
- CRPD The International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Details of the various measures that have been undertaken by Guyana towards a progressive realization of the commitments enshrined in the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights were presented in the periodic report and supporting data are available in the public domain in keeping with the country's Freedom of Information Act 2011. It would be remiss of me not to take a moment to point out that there are a few very subjective comments of the past government in the submitted Report which the current government does not endorse.

As you may be aware General Elections were held on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015 and were contested by 6 political parties. The results of these elections declared the APNU/AFC coalition Party as the winner and Brigadier (Ret'd) David Arthur Granger was sworn in as the 8<sup>th</sup> Executive President of Guyana and Head of State and Government. This change came after twenty-three years of government of the PPP/C, the party that submitted the Report in 2012. I respectfully wish to point out that both time and circumstances have overtaken some aspects of the Report.

Never the less I will, confine my remarks to the broad developments that have taken place over this period and the focus of the new Government in ensuring the attainment of the economic, social and cultural rights of every Guyanese.

The most important political development that has taken place during the reporting period which directly impinges upon the economic, social and cultural development of the country is the 1999 Act of Parliament which established the Constitutional Reform Commission. This Commission successfully completed its tasks and submitted its report to the National Assembly by the due date of 17th July, 1999. The Commission made 171 recommendations for constitutional amendments; most of which have been passed into Acts of Parliament. Amendments to the Constitution therefore improved protection for the following rights of the Guyanese people: The right to work with technical and vocational guidance and training, the right to steady economic, social and cultural development and full and productive employment, the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to adequate food, clothing and housing and to continuous improvement of living conditions.

Since that time there have been observances of the limitations of the revised constitution in serving the broader interest of the country. As such the current government has appointed a Committee to prepare us for another round of constitutional reform with the full participation of the people. The emphasis of this new round of constitutional reform will be to have a reduction of the powers of the President, defining and deepening our inclusive democracy, and making the Legislature more representative and meaningful. Likewise the checks and balances that are necessary for the improved integrity of the State apparatus and its protection of the rights of the people will be further enhanced with these changes. The rule of law, the vanquishing of corruption and the significantly increased transparency of governance mechanisms are all priorities of this new government that will positively impact the rights of the Guyanese people.

This is especially significant because the state is seeking to firmly establish an inclusionary democracy by providing increased opportunities for the participation of citizens and their organizations in the management and decision-making processes of the state.

Deepening of democratic processes is clearly desirable as an end in itself and also holds the potential for more effective realisation of economic rights for the Guyanese people at large. The benefits of a good life in the country of their birth is a right for all Guyanese.

This government intends to create a green economy, one which has as its foundation the respect for and preservation of our environment whilst utilizing our natural resources in a sustainable manner. Our aim is to ensure the equitable distribution of benefits and the safeguarding of the country's patrimony for future generations.

Guyana has made many strides over the decades to institutionalise the protection of economic, social and cultural rights and many pieces of legislation, policies and programmes have been created to this end. Of special note, The Women and Gender Equality Commission was established to promote national recognition and acceptance that women's rights are human rights and to urge respect for gender equality and the protection, development and attainment of gender equality. This brought an extremely important step towards women's empowerment and in making their voices heard in the design and implementation of key economic and social interventions.

The creation of a domestic violence policy response was also key to the empowerment and national recognition of women's rights. The country is now focused on the review and implementation of this policy and efforts are underway to create a gender policy that would address issues of gender relations in the context of an ever changing world and particularly in a Guyanese context where such issues are notably prevalent.

Cognizant of the fact that significant inequality in gender responsibility, opportunity and influence still exist the Government recognizes that greater gender equality and empowerment are essential ingredients for the eradication of poverty in Guyana. Therefore, the government intends to introduce policies to encourage the rebuilding of Guyana's family structure, the sharing of caring tasks between mothers and fathers as well as mentoring and financially supporting Guyana's children.

The protection and fulfillment of cultural rights in Guyana is perhaps best exemplified by the continuous efforts being made to raise the national profile of our indigenous peoples; the recognition of Amerindian land rights; the establishment of the month of September to celebrate the culture of the nine tribes and the revitalization of efforts within the education sector to not only preserve the languages but to ensure that the content of education is culturally relevant and beneficial. It is apposite to note as well that earlier in September, 2015, a Social Cohesion Roundtable was convened and saw the participation of hundreds of Guyanese of every diversity - to discuss ways of achieving greater respect for, and celebration of, our cultures.

Guyana's model of inclusionary governance facilitates the participation of indigenous leaders and people in the political landscape, free to determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development. Amerindian elected leaders and communities are included and participate in all major national strategic, legislative and developmental forums.

The promotion and protection of human rights of minorities, indigenous peoples, women and children continue to be an imperative of government's programmes in accordance with the Constitution, laws, policies and treaty obligations of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana. The enactment of several pieces of children legislation, the establishment of a Childcare and Protection Agency and the development of a Sexual Offences Act that is Gender neutral have all over the past six years advanced the protection of the social rights of all Guyanese.

The Office of the Ombudsman, the Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC), the Women and Gender Equality Commission (W&GEC), the Indigenous Peoples Commission, the Parliamentary Sectoral Committee on Social Services, the Judicial, Public and the Police Service Commissions establish a framework for protection, promotion of human rights and complaints mechanism for redress by citizens with regard to rights as enshrined in the Constitution and laws of the country, and, the conventions ratified by the Cooperative Republic of Guyana.

The High Court of the Supreme Court of Guyana has established a special Constitutional and Public Law Court in 2011, which deals exclusively with constitutional and public law matters. This has allowed for constitutional motions to be addressed expeditiously. The establishment of the Family Court has been long awaited and overdue. Efforts are ongoing to select the necessary staff and finalise the protocols for operation. This will certainly enhance the protection of the rights of the people especially children and the more vulnerable in our society.

In 2013, the Food and Agriculture Organization's Director- General José Graziano da Silva recognised Guyana as one of the 38 countries that met internationally-established targets in the fight against hunger, chalking up successes ahead of a deadline set for 2015.

Guyana has met the following Millennium Development Goals 2015:

- Reducing poverty and hunger
- Universal primary school enrollment
- Gender parity in the enrollment and attainment of education
- Reduction of HIV, TB, and malaria cases and offers free health care for patients of these diseases.
- Guyana has significantly reduced levels of infant mortality, child mortality, and maternal mortality and will continue in our efforts to make progress.

Guyana is well endowed with natural resources, fertile agricultural lands and extensive tropical forests which cover more than 80 percent of the country. Guyana has one of the lowest deforestation rates in the world and 90 percent of Guyana's forest remains intact. Most of the country's indigenous population lives in forests on which they depend for their livelihood and the growth in the mining industries have meant that interior locations are being developed daily.

However, like most small developing countries, Guyana faces a number of challenges which have impacted its development and by extension the provision of economic, social and cultural rights of its citizens. The country's economic fortunes have been mixed with Real GDP growth slowing in 2014 (3.8 percent).

Real GDP growth is projected to fluctuate within the range of 3 percent to 5 percent during 2015-2018. Inflation is expected to remain relatively subdued. However, the fluctuation of world commodity prices has had a restricting influence in a country where we are heavily dependent on oil for electricity generation, and where our major exports are raw materials, such as rice, sugar, bauxite and gold. It is the government's intention to counter these challenges with sound social and economic policies that can withstand the global fluctuations and present a stable economy within which all Guyanese can flourish.

The Guyana Basin has been described as the second most attractive under-explored basin in the world with a potential of 15.2 billion barrels of oil; production targets would be estimated at 50 million barrels per year. The recent discovery by Exxon Mobil that confirms the existence of large reserves of oil has galvanized the new government's efforts to plan for the future to guarantee the benefits from any revenues to be garnered from oil exploration reaches future generations. Efforts to establish a Sovereign Wealth fund and other policy initiatives are well underway.

The new government intends to ensure that the focus of the new economic drive is on job creation. In keeping with our commitment to break with the past and bring a fresh approach to governing in the best interest of Guyana and all her people, we must acknowledge that our young people are one of our most valuable resources, especially since some 60 percent of Guyana's population is under 35 years of age.

The number of capacity building programmes for youth created by the previous administration though meaningful was not married with a national plan to propel youths into the job market. Training programmes are now to be planned based on market demand, the burgeoning oil and gas industry, and the growing focus on greening of our economy. We will need a highly skilled, educated work force that is capable of responding to

these new demands to drive the economic and social transformation of our country. Teachers are critical to this process and a new project has already commenced to present each of our teachers with a laptop computer to aid in the delivery of a higher and more modern standard of education.

We are very aware of the threats and challenges to holistic growth and development such as violent crime, high rates of unemployment, ugly instances of corruption, and prolonged ethnic divisions. The results of these ills have been some of the highest rates of migration of both skilled and unskilled labour in the world. Mr. Chairman, I offer you our government's assurance that every effort is being made to address these challenges so as to ensure that there is a good life for all of Guyana's citizens.

Guyana wishes to take this opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to fulfilling its obligations to the International treaties which it has ratified. In the context of a tumultuous world where rights can easily be trampled in the name of political expediency and the most vulnerable can become mere statistics, we understand the challenges and we see quite clearly that the response must be to enhance democracy, develop peaceful communities, and eradicate poverty through policies that place the needs of the people as the centre of any development agenda.

As such, and in keeping with the Manifesto commitments of the new administration, the Government shall promote the achievement of the post 2015 Development Goals and design public policies so that all our people have universal access to health services, education, housing, and other Social Services as a means of maximizing the generation of our social capital, fostering social inclusion and giving all communities access to the productive sectors.

Honourable Chair and esteemed Committee members, please accept the assurances of our country's highest consideration; together with our solemn commitment to the fulfillment of the enjoyment of rights of all our people.

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