

2007 AGM Feature Address



I consider it a tremendous honour to be asked to address this 2008 Annual General Meeting of the National Centre for Persons with Disabilities.

The National Training Agency of which I am Chairman values its partnership with the NCPD as a training provider that works with a special group of citizens of the Republic – those who display one form of disability or another – striving to, as stated in the NCPD Mission “enable and empower them to enhance the quality of their lives and promote their integration into the wider community.” I should also say that as someone who has an immediate family member who is autistic, I am quite aware of the challenges you face in meeting the commendable targets expressed in that Mission Statement.

In an effort of developing this partnership with the NCPD and other stakeholders in TVET, the NTA has, over the past few months, been engaged in a strategic review

exercise the results of which will soon be seen in the form of a more positive engagement of stakeholders by the NTA.

Tonight I bring you other news on developments at the NTA that would, no doubt, bring benefits to your clientele who seek vocational certification. I note in this regard that the NCPD offers training in several vocational areas: Agriculture/ Horticulture, Beauty Culture, Book-Binding, Food Preparation, Garment Construction, Office Practice, Pre-Vocational, Printing, Welding, Woodwork and Upholstery. Successful candidates are awarded the NTA's TTNVQ certificate in these respective areas.

The first bit of good news is that the NTA will soon be launching the Caribbean Vocational Qualification (CVQ) system that will ultimately replace the TTNVQ. The CVQ is a VQ qualification, similar to the TTNVQ, that is recognized Caribbean wide and administered by the Caribbean Association of NTAs (CANTA). The CVQ system has several advantages over the TTNVQ. Apart from this international recognition, the CVQ brings the prospect of international mobility through the provisions of the CSME. In addition, when fully implemented, anyone with a CVQ can work in their skills area in other CARICOM nations without the need for a work permit. Finally, the CVQ is already being used in secondary

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schools in Trinidad and Tobago as part of the CXC qualification framework. This brings the significant benefit of equivalence, consistency and uniformity in the range of certification available to the public.

The NTA is also aggressively embarking on the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition programme (PLAR) which facilitates workers with the requisite skills, knowledge and experience, but who lack any form of formal qualification, to become assessed and certified against approved national occupational standards. The PLAR was initially launched in the construction sector as part of a strategy to address the strong local demand for suitably qualified individual to teach and work within the construction sector. On successful completion of PLAR assessment, participants are awarded the Trinidad and Tobago National Vocational Qualification (TTNVQ). Interestingly enough, the first two cycles of PLAR candidates will graduate this Saturday June 14th.

The NCPD has worked tirelessly for the community of persons with disabilities to achieve a higher level of recognition by society at large, challenging the status quo that viewed this community as useless and a burden to the society. In striving to meet its mission statement, it has contributed significantly to the dissolution of that mindset to the point

where society is less attentive to the sometimes obvious differences in physical and mental dispositions but more focused on what citizens can actually do, what skills they bring to the fore.

This change in mind-set could not happen at a more opportune time and while I am elated at the benefit it brings to persons with disabilities I must point out that there is a perspective that should, perhaps, be considered as a higher priority motivating factor in the operation of the organisation.

Quite simply put, the Republic needs the support from ALL citizens. It needs its citizens to be competently skilled in a diversity of areas, citizens who are eager and willing to play their respective roles in making this nation work thereby securing a bright future for those who will come after us. And because we are relatively small we must of necessity be more demanding on the capability and performance of our citizenry than the more developed nations with whom we so often compare ourselves. Indeed, without the conscientious and determined contribution from all citizens – and this MUST include the body of citizens who are challenged in some way or another - the highly commendable goals of Vision 2020 will never be achieved.

The need for increased participation

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of the NCPD clientele in the building of the Republic becomes even more urgent when one considers the innate challenges the nation faces in achieving these goals. Some of these challenges are as follows:

1. As discussed above, the small population base places greater demands on the population to perform.
2. The fact that the education system seems to be in need of dramatic reform to produce graduates who are truly empowered to contribute to national development. Indeed, at UWI we are seeing some signs of a decay in the standards of high school graduates and I have proposed to the UWI administration that UWI should take a more proactive role in engaging other education stakeholders in this matter. It is my hope that the introduction of the CVQ system will factor significantly in a reformed education system.
3. The apparent breakdown in societal mores as evidenced by reckless driving habits and the wanton criminality that exists, not just among those who live in "impoverished" communities but among the supposedly more educated as witnessed by the recent revelations of fraud in the CAPE and CXC examinations.
4. The fact that despite our current wealth we really need to aggressively pursue the development of a more

innovative culture, one that knows how to leverage our intellect and skills for commercial gain, and one that would serve the nation in good stead when the income earning potential of our natural resources decreases. The pinnacle of achievement of such a culture building initiative would be a more robust economy in which income earning activities (business ventures, companies, even whole industries) are continually nurtured and created to replace those that lose viability over time. The G-Pan and the other initiatives of the Steelpan Initiatives Project have certainly generated a lot of interest and discussion over the past year. The work we are doing on the steelpan is extremely important. For many it is a matter of national pride. However, for me it is first and foremost a matter of long term national survival in the context of the aforementioned strategy of building an innovative culture. Our studies of the history of industry and commerce in the island suggest that while we do have more than our share of creativity, we have not been overwhelmingly successful at capitalizing on our creative initiatives. This is one major feature of first world nations that we should make every effort to copy.

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As a nation we need to be doing more to address these challenges.

Many of the clientele of the NCPD are, at this point in our nation's history, poised to make a very significant contribution to national development. I say this from my vision of a human mind that has to overcome the challenges faced by persons with disabilities for every 24 hours for every day of the rest of their lives sometimes just to be able to survive. When one considers the development impact of knowing that one has successfully surmounted these challenges, one cannot help but wonder about the value of the support that these minds can bring to the national effort.

On this note, let me close with an example of two individuals that I came to know during my high school high years at Presentation College, San Fernando. These two gentlemen had some form of physical disability and left an indelible mark on my memory. One was Mr David Benjamin, the NCPD president, the other Mr. Frederick "Freddie" Bowen. Neither of these individuals allowed their challenges to impede their academic development nor, as I recall, their sporting ability. Indeed, they were both more active and more capable on the field than I was. However, their most memorable facet was the high level of confidence they had in themselves. It is this aspect, no

doubt fully or partially triggered and enabled by their respective "disabilities," that I suspect can be the most valuable contribution the community of persons with disabilities can bring to the nation.

Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the NTA I say congratulations to the Board of Directors of the NCPD and its administrative and support staff for a job well done in promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the social fabric.

Professor Brian Copeland

Chairman

National Training Agency

Wednesday 11th June 2008