MESSAGE FOR INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Senator Floyd Morris, PhD
CARICOM Special Rapporteur on Disability

Theme: *Leadership and Participation of Persons with Disabilities Toward an Inclusive, Accessible and Sustainable Post-COVID-19 World*

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused devastating consequences for individuals and countries across the world. It has impacted in a significant way, more than others, persons with disabilities. The crisis has exacerbated old problems that have served to restrict and isolate persons with disabilities from mainstream society. This has been the experience for the majority of persons with disabilities in the Caribbean.

Notwithstanding the challenges that this pandemic has caused persons with disabilities across the Caribbean, we must dig deep in our inner reserves and face the future with optimism. We have to strengthen the resolve that come what may, we are going to continue to advocate for the inclusion, participation and non-discrimination of persons with disabilities in mainstream Caribbean society. This is why the theme for this year's observation of International Day for Persons with Disabilities 'Leadership and Participation of Persons with Disabilities Toward an Inclusive, Accessible and Sustainable Post-COVID-19 World' is so important.

Persons with disabilities have to become masters of their own destiny and as such, they have to assert themselves and demand participation and inclusion in the post-COVID-19 world. The experiences of the pandemic for persons with disabilities in the Caribbean have demonstrated that if we are not included and allowed to participate in the development agenda of the region, further marginalization of the community will take place. Therefore, focus has to be placed on visionary and assertive leadership from members of the community of persons with disabilities, to consistently place on the development agenda, issues that are pertinent to the wellbeing and advancement of this community in our societies. Using the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Declaration of Petion Ville as a guide, persons with disabilities in the Caribbean must demand from their government, greater inclusion, accessibility and a sustainable future in their country. In this context, greater inclusion and participation in education and training; increase access to employment opportunities; access to health care; inclusion and participation in the community; accessible transport and public facilities are some of the issues that must be given priority by governments in the region in the post-COVID-19 Caribbean for persons with disabilities.

At the core of our advocacy, we must adopt a human rights approach to sustainable development. We must ensure that individuals understand that we are human beings and as such; are subject to the fundamental rights and freedoms entrenched in diverse international treaties. Thus, we must ensure that specific legislation is put in place to sustainably protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities and this must be done with members of the community of persons with disabilities. We must seek to reinforce our global mantra *'Nothing About Us, Without Us'*.

As the CARICOM Special Rapporteur on Disability for the Caribbean, I pledge my fulsome support to the leadership and participatory efforts of persons with disabilities in the Caribbean. I will be relentless in my pursuit and mandate to pressure all the stakeholders in the Caribbean to make the region more inclusive, accessible and sustainable for all persons with disabilities. The Caribbean cannot claim development status and have a whopping 15 per cent of its population living on the margins of society. The development must be inclusive, accessible and sustainable and as the Rapporteur for the Caribbean, I am committed to working with you to achieve these noble objectives. Have a progressive International Day of Persons with Disabilities.