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Key Issues for Caribbean Employers

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The members of the Caribbean Employers' Confederation are all small countries, with only two, Jamaica and Trinidad, having populations of more than 1 million. We lack substantial domestic markets, have economies that are dominated by a few sectors or large players, and are thus highly vulnerable to external shocks.

Furthermore, with the rise of a globalised economy we are now forced to compete with much larger, more efficient economies. Some sectors, including but not limited to, manufacturing and agriculture, are especially at risk. All of our countries have recognised that economic growth and the provision of sufficient and sustainable decent jobs will be driven by the private sector, with government acting as regulator and facilitator.

All of our countries have declared the intent to diversify their economies by expanding the range and increasing the value of services offered. Caribbean employers are cognisant of the need to adapt to the new reality but are concerned by several common issues that hinder our ability to meet the challenges and capitalise on the opportunities.

Broadly speaking, our main concerns centre around workforce productivity and competitiveness, government bureaucracy and red tape, and the generally high cost of doing business. Employers perceive that a significant cause of low workforce productivity and lack of competitiveness lies in the existing systems of formal education that do not impart the required skills and attitudes. In addition, the cost of training new recruits has proven burdensome.

Complex and expensive bureaucracy is also a major concern and the efforts to make governments more efficient and business-friendly have proven slow and frustrating. Keeping compliant with all the taxes, licences and the myriad laws and regulations is most often a time-consuming and costly process, and a disincentive for businesses to become formalised. There are other issues that concern employers including the high cost of capital, crime and corruption, and weak social safety nets that add to the burden of doing business and negatively impact competitiveness.

The Employers' Organisations (EOs) in the individual countries, and the Caribbean Employers' Confederation (CEC), leading the regional effort, have a major role to play in addressing many of these concerns. We have to ensure that these are dealt with expeditiously and efficiently.

We recognise tripartism as an effective means of having the employers' concerns dealt with and see the need to improve the ability of the EOs to make meaningful contributions. Building the capacity of EOs and CEC to better assist their members and gather useful information is a vital initiative that has to be continuously pursued. The International Labour Organisation (ILO), through its Caribbean office, has provided invaluable assistance the EOs and CEC in training, capacity building, and enhancing social dialogue and the tripartite arrangement.

It is notable that the relationship between employers and the labour movement, once fraught, has improved in recent years, and is no longer a primary concern for Caribbean employers. Hopefully this is indicative of a growing realisation, shared by the social partners and encouraged by the ILO, that creating an environment that enhances sustainable businesses and decent jobs is good for everyone.