



CIPRIANI COLLEGE OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

The Necessity for Conversation on Social Justice

As the Cipriani College of Labour and Co-operative Studies is embarking on an inaugural and historic activity which will be marked by a book launch (*Contemporary Issues in Caribbean and Latin American Relations*) and the presentation of its first issue of its journal (*Caribbean Social Justice Forum*), I feel it necessary to put the event in context. This has become necessary as some have enquired why the College is engaged in international relations, and the answer is simple...we live and work not only in Trinidad and Tobago, but are connected to, and participate in regional and international affairs.

The College has historically engaged its national and regional stakeholders in a myriad of activities inclusive of teaching and learning, and other collaborate activities. But the new direction is to get more involved in robust and critical research that will benefit all in the region, and this has been conceptualized within the ambit of social justice and social dialogue. The College is committed to engaging all stakeholders in conversations about the issues that impact our lives, inclusive, but not limited to, meaningful, descent and fair work, equity, justice, social dialogue, the critical evaluation of governance systems, social protection, co-operatives and community empowerment, industrial relations, education, and other social issues.

In order to effectivity fulfil this mandate, the College has engaged numerous institutions at the regional and international levels to develop its capacity to serve the stakeholders at the highest level of professionalism and guarantee an enhanced level of performance. This necessarily manifests itself in an extensive research agenda which incorporates numerous facets to ensure robust and targeted research that will serve not only the academics, labour and co-operative communities, but also assist policy-makers in formulating sustainable and research-driven policies. This will ensure that policies that affect our citizenry will be founded on a scientific approach and have a higher probability of being successful, while at the same time, having increased buy-in from the stakeholders, all of whom stand to benefit from such an approach.

To be sure, there will be nay-sayers, and the road will be long, but it is imperative that some action be taken to increase the levels of conversation nationally and regionally and give the population a chance to engage in meaningful discourse that is honest, open, non-confrontational, diverse in orientation and perspectives, and open to critical evaluation and criticism.

Such is the confidence that this method is conducive to sustainable development and the empowering of all people, ensuring that open dialogue and respect will bring new ideas to the table, ideas that will propel us from insular and defensive thinking and help us develop into a more open, communicative and advanced society here in the region.

Trinidad and Tobago, along with the rest of the region is accustomed to punching above its weight in many areas, covering a plethora of issues and disciplines which is evidenced by our

presence in the international arena where our contributions have been acknowledged and lauded. Why then can we not take it to the next level and do the same for ourselves in our own backyard? The lack of proper people-centred governance structures has hampered development in the region for too long, and has had the impact of negatively affecting the lives and livelihoods of our people. With this in mind, the College is embarking on a long-term, research-driven journey to not only assist in the evaluation and formulation of policies, but also to engage the general populace in the aim of involving them in conversations on issues that affect all facets of their lives.

Fortuitously, this is coming on the heels of the debilitating and often frustrating COVID-19 pandemic. While there is much debate on this issue, we seek to put it in the context of the survivability of the region, we seek to interrogate the long-term effects, not only on the workers and businesses, but also on the people, the one group that really matters in this equation. We need to locate people at the centre of the debate, and politics and platitudes aside, this is a serious issue that is constantly reshaping our landscapes, social, cultural, economic and political. With this in mind, one can beg the questions, what are we doing to secure the future of our youth, to what extent are we equipped to protect our elderly who have built this region, and what systems do we have in place to protect our most vulnerable groups? I submit that these questions are hard ones, that call for levels of personal, institutional and systemic introspection, none of which come easy or seem to be a part of our political cultures here in the region. Regardless of that fact, the time has come for us to do just that, evaluate our choices, past, present and future with the distinct aim of moving from a mode of reactionism to one of pro-actionism which is anchored in social justice and equity.

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