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Speaker 1 Excellencies.

The global spread of the coronavirus disease in 2020 created an unstable economic situation, especially for my country and other tourism-dependent countries across the world.

The United Nations Economic Situation Report 2021 reminds us of the devastating impact of COVID-19 on the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. Not only did it virtually erase progress made by many of us following the worldwide recession that started in 2007-2008, but sadly, too many of our families lost loved ones.

My friends, for many of us this pandemic induced crisis has also led to further setbacks regarding the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially in relation to the elimination of poverty and hunger.

What does this pandemic have to do with a conference that focuses on food systems? My friends, the relevance lies in the implications for national food security and food sovereignty.

The pandemic immediately led to disrupted global supply chains. This forced many governments, including my own, to accelerate food production efforts and or to devise new systems that were critical in order to ensure our citizens could have access to food and affordable food at that.

In a previous forum, I made mention of the April 2020 meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community, which led to the approval of the COVID-19 Agro Food Risk Management Framework and Action Plan. At the time, most of our planning efforts were based on a short to medium term expected duration of this virus. Well, we now recognize the need to have more long-term, sustainable and resilient systems in place to guarantee: 1) that we significantly reduce the six billion US-CARICOM food import bill and; 2) that we can provide sustainable amounts of healthy food and nutrition lest we starve.

And let us not forget, healthy eating is critical because where does the pandemic hit our citizens and all of us the most? With comorbidities, many of which are as a result of chronic non-communicable diseases.

So I ask you how best we address the challenges of this global nemesis?

To begin with, I always remind my fellow Barbadians that the experience of the pandemic is more likely to be characterized by a marathon or as a marathon, I should say, rather than a 200 meter or 100 meter sprint. While our immediate response will focus on the things that we all know well: vaccination and observing protocols, a longer term response to survival will require the promotion of economic resilience and diversification by repositioning the food and agricultural sector at the center of the socio economic development of the region.

But it is not just because of the pandemic. It is also because of the climate crisis and the reality that hurricanes and floods and droughts will seriously disrupt our capacity to produce food globally and particularly for us within our region. And if we want our people to

start concentrating on the production of food, we can't tell them that we only need you for a pandemic or for a climate crisis. It therefore must be in the context of a policy framework that is equally sustainable and equally nurturing of those persons in our community who are simply seeking: 1) to provide enough food for their communities and their country while at the same time earning a living for their family. They cannot do this if they are literally going to face an onslaught of imported produce more cheaply produced and sometimes not as better produce because of the inclusion of chemicals and pesticides.

I therefore want to suggest as I end, that any serious effort at achieving sustainability in our agrifood systems will require a focus and deliberate attention to a number of things: 1) yes, food and healthy lifestyles. Agricultural production must be linked to healthy lifestyles. It is not only important to grow, but let us grow healthy food that will allow our citizens to keep healthy as far as possible. Let us eat what we grow as a matter of urgency; 2) that, we must focus on science and technology. High productivity in agricultural production systems can only be achieved through the use of high technological inputs based on research and innovation; 3) climate crisis actions. Agricultural systems must be built on the production of drought tolerant varieties, effective soil management and pest management, improved water management strategies including irrigation and water capture system, and my friends, the use of solar energy systems; 4) agriculture and tourism linkages. If our domestic agricultural sector must be repositioned to supply at least half of our food needs in the tourism sector, we would then be able to save vital foreign exchange and also lead to the creation of new and creative talents, both in production, distribution and, of course, in marketing. Then, of course, policy space, because if we don't have the policy space to protect our farmers from the onslaught of cheap imported foods, they will not be able to produce for us when it is most needed, as we have seen from the pandemic and the climate crisis. And finally, the Global Food Security Development Fund. I repeat the need for the establishment of a global food security development fund in cooperation with the international financial community, because this is what is needed to be able to allow many of our farmers, and in many countries, we are not in a position to provide the level of support to our farmers that is needed to be able to ensure that they can withstand that onslaught of cheap produce that literally floods our markets.

My friends, if we are capable of achieving these things, then, my friends, the future of ensuring that our people can have basic access to food will be secured. That, I believe, is the purpose of this summit.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this distinguished forum.