

**OPENING REMARKS BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE ACS TO THE INAUGURAL COOPERATION CONFERENCE**



# XXII REUNIÓN ORDINARIA DEL CONSEJO DE MINISTROS

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Honourable Vice Minister of Cooperation, Foreign Trade and Investment of Cuba, Ms. Ileana Nunez , my distinguished Co-Chair,

Honourable Ministers and Heads of Delegation of the Member States, Associate Members, Observer Countries and Founding Observer Organisations of the Association of Caribbean States,

Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Esteemed Specially Invited Guests,

Members of the Press,

Friends of the ACS,

It is my pleasure to join the distinguished Vice Minister of Foreign Trade and Investment of Cuba, Ms. Ileana Nunez, on this International Women's Day, in bidding you all a warm welcome to this, the Inaugural Cooperation Conference of the Association of Caribbean States.

Even as the ACS sees this event as the ceremonial inauguration of what will be a long tradition of dialogue and planning encounters, we recognise that, in its 22 years of existence, the ACS has been fortunate to sit at the table at the bilateral and multilateral level with many of you to plan and make critical development projects a reality. We therefore thank you all for your attendance, as we begin to formalise a space for a wider and deeper dialogue with and amongst you, the membership, founding observers, observers and new and longstanding partners of our Association. This conference is crucial and timely, for as our organisation continues to grow, it has become ever more necessary to create spaces for engagement. We now boast 25 Members, 9 Associate Members and

24 observer countries from Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa, and we intend to strengthen our network through focal points in every Member and Associate Member in the Greater Caribbean on each of our projects. In other words, we are an organisation well positioned to become the cooperation coordinating mechanism for the Greater Caribbean that our founders envisaged.

As you all know, cooperation is one of the very *raison d'être* for the creation of the ACS. In the preamble alone of the Convention establishing our ACS, the word cooperation is mentioned 4 times. Our founding fathers were convinced, and I quote: "that enhanced cooperation among the States, Countries and Territories of the Caribbean...will contribute to the future cultural, economic and social development of their peoples transcending their separateness of the past". Development is the desired outcome in everything that the ACS undertakes, and as an entity comprising varied membership and stakeholders, we understand almost intuitively that to achieve sustainable and meaningful development we must widen and deepen our network of collaborators.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Inaugural Cooperation Conference of the ACS will become the space to strengthen old alliances and commence building new networks. We must dialogue, and this is the space to confer, to consult, to coordinate and to concur on the way forward. I must thank the Government of Cuba for the foresight in providing us with the opportunity to open that space to us all.

You will note that the focus of this first edition of our Cooperation Conference gives pride of place to our Association's efforts to safeguard the sacrosanct patrimony of our Region- the Caribbean Sea. This is not by chance. At its inception the ACS is founded on the nucleus that is the Caribbean Sea. We have to put the Caribbean Sea back at the heart of the ACS. The Convention establishing the ACS, signed on 24th July 1994, recognises the importance of the Caribbean Sea as the 'common patrimony of the peoples of the Caribbean' and acknowledges the "role it has played in their history" as well as the "potential it has to operate as a unifying element in their development". Our reliance on this resource is not only important to us collectively on a macro-regional level, but to each individual member state and the millions of coastal peoples who create livelihoods from this seascape- from artisanal fishermen, to small tourism operators and craftspeople.

The opportunities for regional cooperation centred on the Caribbean Sea are even more important when the impacts and risks of Climate Change are taken into account. Climate change directly impinges on tourism, the frequency and intensity of natural disasters, transport, and trade environments, through its impacts of sea level rise, augmented vulnerability to natural disasters, warming ocean temperatures and other related phenomena, such as bio-diversity loss. We are convinced that results driven cooperation to protect it will not only ensure the physical and cultural integrity of our Caribbean Sea, but also our Caribbean Civilisation.

Co-operation built around this shared resource therefore, connects each of the priority areas of cooperation of the ACS- disaster risk reduction, transport, trade and sustainable tourism. It behoves me to emphasize that, notwithstanding the focus of this Inaugural Cooperation Conference on the critical issues of climate change and transport, cooperation in each of the five priority areas I just listed is critical to the sustainable development of the Caribbean. While time does not permit the focus on our other key functional areas, we should be reminded that it is only through targeted but synergistic interventions in each of those interlinked areas that we will really be able to positively impact the daily lives of our people, strengthen revenue generating industries and protect the sea and landscape of our Caribbean. The dossier of projects prepared for today's meeting gives insight into ACS projects in each of these areas, and it is our hope and expectation that, in the coming weeks, we will be able to meet again with you to discuss in greater detail how best to move these projects from the planning to the implementation phase, leaving of course space to improve and enhance project concepts in order to effectively attain the objectives identified in them. In the

dossier you will find details on Increasing the Competitiveness of Tourism Destinations in the Greater Caribbean through the Implementation of Sustainable Tourism Certification; on Trade Capacity Building and Knowledge Enhancement for the ACS Member States and Associate Members, and a number of other exciting and pertinent projects.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I am of the firm belief that to engender results and consequent sustainable development, our cooperation must be substantive and substantial. It must be grounded in well-designed projects, committed partners and predictable resources. Ours must be joint initiatives that create immediate, short and long-term dividends for all stakeholders- tangible benefits for our beneficiaries- our people and governments- and visibility and value added for our investors. We are committed to providing these three deliverables and requesting your ongoing and heightened support in this regard. To this end, even the simple act of filling out the questionnaire that is part of the documentation distributed for this meeting will provide us with tools for evaluating how best to improve our processes.

This is why our Association is actively pursuing projects that align with the priorities outlined in the national development plans of our Membership and the undertakings contained in the consecutive Declarations and Action Plans issued by the Summits of the ACS- most recently those of Havana in 2016, Merida in 2014 and Petion-ville in 2013, and of course the 2030 Development Agenda.

Of interest is the fact that going forward we will ensure that our projects include a gender and youth mainstreaming component, a job creation component, a communication component and an institutional strengthening dimension so that we produce results that last, that are sustainable. We must have an impact on the least of our citizenry. Let us be more innovative in the conceptualization of projects.

Ladies and gentlemen, the list of needs and the list of aspirations of the ACS are equally long. If our Region's development efforts have been successful thus far it is because we know that to fulfil our needs and attain our aspirations, we must unite amongst ourselves, network with others and jointly find a way around potential challenges.

We knew from the outset that in our arrangement, where our countries ranged in physical size, population and economic resources, finding equitable ways to share burdens and costs for the cause of common development would be challenging. Yet this coming together of disparate groups of nation-states and divergent power resources has survived 23 years because the larger members of our family have provided a helping hand upward becoming veritable development partners in the process- donors as it were to the south-south cause. Yet, we have also survived because our smaller members have courageously upheld the principles that are the moral bedrock of our Association - the principles that give character to our Association, not least, the principles of equality and solidarity. They have given voice globally to many of our concerns and their voices have been heard and acted upon, as was the case with climate change and its impact on our region. They have been at the forefront of the call for climate finance and the ACS must find its way to the table to decide how these funds can help in the preservation of the Caribbean Sea. We have survived because our partners have listened carefully and responded to the internal dynamic of the ACS in kind- with both helping hands and principled support. Today we celebrate that network of assistance and principle as we chart the way forward.

The ACS is ready and willing to innovate to ensure that its cooperation produces real results and you are all here because you have all signalled and demonstrated a willingness to do the same. Creative financing, creative project design, creative partnerships for development are all part and parcel of the new age of cooperation in which all countries and regions find themselves at this time. This inaugural conference is the space for us to explore creative, collaborative options together.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are here today not as guests but as part of the extended ACS family whose opinions and inputs are valuable to our ACS. Our time is short and our agenda substantial. Come let us reason together as has been our practice, and let us produce together as is our aspiration.

I thank you