

## The United Nations 2021 High-level meeting of the Development Cooperation Forum

### Setting the scene remarks by Dr. Joy St John

The CARICOM region is one of the best examples of a vulnerable region needing support in this pandemic. One of the most Tourism dependant regions in the world, our small populations are struggling to keep illness and death at bay, with insufficient access to vaccines, even as the effects of circulating variants challenge overstretched health systems.

Largely made up of SIDS, the Caribbean is blessed with beautiful landscapes, warm weather and welcoming people. However for 6 months of the year, the hurricane season and severe weather events over the years have repeatedly induced loss of property, infrastructure and development gains, thus sending us back to start rebuilding all over again. Add to that one of the worst chronic disease burdens in the world, and you understand why our health systems are in an almost never ending cycle of rebuilding, mitigating, and strengthening.

- The COVID-19 pandemic is a challenge but also a blessing in disguise. CARPHA, the Caribbean Public Health Agency, was approached by the EU to bring forward the project for Health Systems Strengthening in the context of Health Security from 2021 to early 2020. Further, they changed the financing arrangements from two separate disbursements of 3 million and 5 million euros to one disbursement of 8 million Euros, with an emphasis on providing support for
- the funding of vaccines and other treatments to the tune of **€3,006,000.00**
- Procuring Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for CARPHA Member States and for CARPHA - **€820,000.00**
- Procure equipment for CARPHA's Laboratory and CARPHA Member States to support testing for COVID-19 and other Communicable Diseases - **€600,000.00**
- Procure test kits, reagents and consumables for diagnostic testing for COVID-19 and other Communicable Diseases in CARPHA Member States and in CARPHA - **€410,000.00**

In late 2019 and early 2020, the World Bank had serendipitously signed agreements with CARPHA and 4 of our OECS Member States in health systems strengthening. The World Bank has provided direct support to CARPHA's regional response to the pandemic by facilitating the procurement of much-needed equipment and reagents to support diagnostic testing for COVID-19 at CARPHA's laboratory. The agreements had Contingency Emergency Response Components which facilitated the procurement of much needed supplies to bolster the national response to COVID-19. The overall project is supporting the construction of hurricane resistant SMART infrastructure.

It should be noted that the EU, World Bank and IDB also relaxed some of their procurement rules to allow CARPHA to fast track procurement of key items in this time of dire need.

Our partners continue to support the development and delivery of our flagship CR-FELTP which has helped to strengthen human resources in health in the region - many graduates are at the forefront of the national response to the pandemic across the region.

The framework of the longstanding Caribbean Cooperation in Health, fourth iteration and the current and upcoming CARPHA Strategic Plans, all have Health Security and Health Systems Strengthening as key pillars for action. The fight against COVID-19 is contextualised by this focus on building back better, in order to further the progression of CARICOM Regional development.

The Regional Coordinating Mechanism for Health Security (RCM-HS) allowed us to bring our MS, IDPs and the Public Health Agencies with interests in the region together, to set the policy context

for the implementation of the public health activities to prevent avoidable illness and death from COVID-19.

As a CARICOM Institution and a member of the Security Cluster , CARPHA worked in concert with the diplomacy, and resource mobilisation outreach of the CARICOM Secretariat and benefited from access to the Conference of the Heads of Government which gave CARPHA Regional mandates for action with a whole of society perspective.

Multiple interactions with many sectors supported developing protocols to safely return to economic activity.

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CARPHA is very proud of the COVID-19 Tourism Task Force which has brought TOURISM and Health together to strengthen the Tourism sector even as we battle the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Thank you for this opportunity to share how CARICOM is weathering the COVID-19 storm.