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“THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION’S EFFORTS TO
DEEPEN U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE CARIBBEAN”

Introduction

Chairman Sires, Ranking Member Green, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The United States and our neighbors in the Caribbean remain strong partners with shared values and interests. For the past 16 years during the month of June, we have celebrated these values and the countless contributions of the Caribbean-American diaspora community as part of Caribbean-American Heritage month. And we look forward to deepening these ties in the months and years ahead.

Our partnership with the Caribbean is based not only on shared culture and values, but also on the understanding that what affects one of us, affects all of us.

USAID remains steadfast in our commitment to building a stronger and more prosperous Caribbean. For decades, and thanks to the strong and bipartisan support of this Committee, we have worked alongside our partners in the Caribbean to promote disaster preparedness, health, education, economic development, and citizen security.

Disaster Preparedness

While June is a time for celebration, it also marks the beginning of hurricane season. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is forecasting an active 2021 Atlantic hurricane season, predicting 13-20 named storms, including three to five major hurricanes.

USAID stands ready to respond, with a team of disaster experts and pre-positioned emergency relief supplies strategically located throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. USAID currently has more than 100 surge staff deployed across the Caribbean, poised to quickly assess conditions on the ground, and help the Agency prioritize humanitarian needs during major storms and other emergencies. Further, and due to the added complications of COVID-19, USAID is pre-positioning two senior disaster response experts to The Bahamas and Barbados this hurricane season to work with local response agencies and mobilize swiftly in the event of a disaster.

USAID also maintains emergency relief items and non-perishable food supplies at its warehouses in Miami, Houston, and across Haiti, that can be deployed at a moment’s notice.

While hurricane preparations are critical, USAID is also anticipating and responding to new and developing humanitarian needs across the Caribbean. As the security crisis worsens in Haiti, the Agency is supporting the World Food Program and the International Organization for Migration to use pre-positioned stocks to provide food and relief items to more than 2,000 people who have had to flee their homes in response to recent security challenges. In Guyana, USAID is providing \$30,000 to procure and transport supplies, including cleaning and personal hygiene items to respond to recent floods that have affected more than 36,000 families. And in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, USAID has provided approximately \$4.7 million to assist more than 20,000 people affected by the April 22, 2021 eruption of the La Soufriere volcano, including support to meet needs in health, water sanitation and hygiene, shelter, food, and logistics. Through a long-term volcano monitoring program, USAID, in partnership with the U.S. Geological Survey, provided equipment that helped monitor the seismic activity of the volcano ahead of the eruption, allowing local officials to give early warnings and evacuate more than 20,000 people in at-risk areas to prevent loss of life.

Climate Change and Resilience

Like other low-lying island nations around the world, the Caribbean remains extremely susceptible to natural disasters. 2020 broke the record for the most named storms in Caribbean history. Rising sea levels and dwindling rainfall make water scarcity a real threat to lives and livelihoods. These environmental shocks are having devastating impacts, as many of these countries' economic gains are tied to industries vulnerable to the effects of climate change, such as tourism. As climate change intensifies natural hazards, making them more frequent and catastrophic, we must support countries in their efforts to build resilience.

Thanks to the Congress' strong bipartisan support, USAID has been a committed and dedicated partner to the Caribbean. In particular, our work with the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre has enhanced the region's data capture architecture and network at lower costs. Through a public-private partnership, USAID helped facilitate the region's acquisition of the region's first owned LiDAR instrument, thereby expanding Caribbean nations' access to seascape and topographic data.

USAID also supports countries' ability to better forecast and disseminate climate information and trends. For example, USAID partnered with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), to help the Caribbean Institute for Meteorology and Hydrology (CIMH) acquire formal accreditation as the world's first Regional Climate Center. Due to this certification, CIMH now generates long-range forecasts, early warning systems, and improved weather modeling capacity for the Caribbean region. With this data, governments and other organizations are better equipped to make decisions related to disaster risk management and climate change.

Building upon this work, USAID is currently employing several approaches to combat climate change and promote greater resilience, including improving disaster risk reduction, promoting biodiversity conservation, and increasing energy resilience. Under the framework of the U.S.-Caribbean Resilience Partnership, USAID's disaster risk reduction interventions are strengthening the ability of Caribbean countries to respond to emergencies while also helping communities adapt to the impacts of hurricanes, earthquakes, and droughts in the long term.

To do this, USAID is working at the regional, national and local levels. For example, USAID awarded \$4.5 million to the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency to strengthen local, national, and regional plans and approaches to mitigate and build resilience to natural disasters. This includes training local first responders, coordinating disaster preparedness standards across the region to provide more cohesive responses, and strengthening operational readiness and recovery systems. We are improving risk and damage forecasting and the ability to predict floods and droughts throughout the region through a \$1.8 million award to the aforementioned CIMH. USAID is also partnering with the Inter-American Foundation to strengthen community-led disaster preparedness by channeling direct, flexible funding to grassroots organizations and mobilizing matching local resources.

The Caribbean region has some of the world's highest energy costs and is predominantly dependent on fossil fuels, which contributes to the region's high cost of doing business, increases its vulnerability to external sector shocks, and constrains economic growth and competitiveness across most Caribbean economies. However, the islands have great potential in energy efficiency and renewable energy sources including solar, geothermal, and wind, making the sector ripe for reform. USAID is building energy resilience across the region by helping island energy sectors bounce back more quickly from both environmental and market shocks. Through our \$25 million, five-year Caribbean Energy Initiative (CEI), USAID is diversifying the energy sources used in the region's grids and the locations from which they originate, strengthening infrastructure to withstand major weather shocks and earthquakes, and enhancing the ability of utilities to manage their grids for resilience. Under this initiative, USAID has signed a co-financing agreement with the Jamaica Energy Resilience Alliance (JERA) to invest up to \$50 million in renewable energy in Jamaica. JERA works with local and international firms to increase knowledge of clean energy options, make financing easier, and is also launching a commercial solar and battery storage pilot -- all aimed at increasing uptake of renewable energy in Jamaica's tourism sector and other essential industries. In St. Lucia, we are helping the country's electricity regulator develop a new draft grid code, which lays out the technical specifications for how new, renewable energy power generators can connect to the St. Lucia grid. Expanding and providing reliable energy also means boosting security in the energy sector. Through CEI, USAID is also offering utility-specific technical assistance to host country nations and the private sector to address cybersecurity threats to the region's power grids.

COVID-19

Of course, the most pressing issue facing the Caribbean today is one that has also heavily impacted us here at home: COVID-19. The timeline for the Caribbean's recovery from the pandemic, like in many places, continues to be uncertain. The International Monetary Fund estimates that tourism-dependent economies in the Caribbean contracted by over 10 percent on average in 2020, with the economic contraction reaching upwards of 19 percent last year in some Caribbean countries.

As we know, the impacts of COVID-19 stretch well beyond the health sector. COVID has reduced education outcomes, devastated local economies, and jeopardized citizens' livelihoods. And with the generosity of the Congress, USAID stands ready to help address these challenges.

To date, we have provided more than \$28 million in health, humanitarian assistance, vaccine support, and economic growth funding to the region to respond to impacts of the pandemic.

Through our health support, the Agency has provided much-needed personal protective equipment, laboratory diagnostic capacity, clinical management training, and risk communication activities. We have worked with 12 multilateral, bilateral, and local partners to rapidly mobilize support to the Caribbean region. To strengthen national COVID-19 responses, we continue to increase access to testing and surveillance tools, improving clinical management capacity by training health workers, and developing triage protocols to respond in a timely manner to COVID patients.

USAID continues to monitor the pandemic's trajectory to be responsive to surges. To address an acute problem with the oxygen supply to hospitals in Haiti, for example, USAID recently provided their Ministry of Health with 50 oxygen concentrators. The Agency also is providing technical and clinical training to ensure proper maintenance and care of these concentrators and related materials.

At the same time, we are expanding vaccination efforts in the region. On June 6, the White House announced its plans to purchase and donate 500 million doses of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccines to eight member states in the African Union and 92 low-and lower middle-income countries and economies party to Gavi's COVAX Advance Market Commitment, including Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The Latin America and Caribbean region will soon also benefit from excess doses from the U.S. domestic supply, including from the 80 million pledged by the White House. USAID's support for vaccine efforts in the Eastern and Southern Caribbean includes distribution planning, policy, and coordination; supply chain and logistics technical assistance; data management, communication and advocacy; and community engagement.

Caribbean countries need more than just health assistance to recover from this pandemic, which is why we are also providing support in areas such as economic security -- including education, and resuscitation of the tourism sector, which is so vital to the region's recovery. In the Dominican Republic, USAID is promoting sustainable economic livelihoods through ecotourism activities in the northern part of the country and along the Haitian border. Our efforts help preserve endangered mangroves, diverse ecosystems and other protected areas while also helping communities along the border region earn sustainable incomes.

When COVID-19 prompted school closures in Haiti, USAID acted quickly to maintain student learning during the crisis. Working in partnership with the Haitian Ministry of Education, the Agency developed radio-based French and Creole reading lessons and episodes for children in pre-school, first, and second grades. To facilitate remote learning in an insecure environment where families frequently lack access to regular electricity, the Agency distributed more than 15,200 solar-powered radios to families, enabling more than 36,000 students to continue their studies.

Promoting Security, Crime Prevention, Democracy and Justice

The Caribbean remains one of the most violent regions in the Americas. With 47 homicides per 100,000 people, Jamaica has one of the highest homicide rates in the Latin America and Caribbean region.

To address this, USAID has provided more than \$249 million to improve citizen security over the past ten years, reduce crime rates, and promote safer communities through the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI).

USAID is helping communities become safer by working with our Caribbean partners to provide youth in high-crime communities with educational, economic, and social opportunities that will guide them on a path to more productive, peaceful lives.

Since 2015, USAID has reached nearly 200,000 at-risk young people across the Caribbean through crime and violence prevention programs. As a result, approximately 60 percent of Eastern and Southern Caribbean youth who completed workforce development programs secured new employment in retail, hospitality, and tourism sectors.

We are also helping Caribbean governments develop and implement their own crime and violence prevention initiatives. For example, as a result of USAID programming under CBSI, eight countries in the Eastern and Southern Caribbean have developed regional standardized crime indicators and seven have piloted digital police data collection and analysis systems that will allow regional comparisons and the identification and implementation of best practices.

With USAID's support, in Barbados and Grenada, digital police information systems have been incorporated into 100 percent of police stations. USAID also supported the foundation of the Sub-Regional Crime Observatory (SRCO) in Barbados to inform host-country governments' decisions on key policy issues. The Observatory is now the region's leading data collection unit for crime and violence statistics. In 2020, the SRCO created its first, region-wide report that compares crime statistics in each country — a significant milestone. With this information, countries can now identify the root causes of youth violence and crime, perform crime forecasting, and develop regional and country-specific policies and programs to decrease crime and violence.

Our security and crime prevention efforts are paying off. In Guyana, surveys in target communities measuring residents' perception of safety showed an increase from 44 percent in 2018 to 50 percent in 2020 following USAID interventions. And in St. Kitts and Nevis, they increased from roughly 54 percent in 2018 to almost 70 percent in 2020.

USAID also supports critical justice, governance, and anti-corruption measures throughout the region. For example, in 2019, USAID supported legal and mediation services in the Dominican Republic, reducing national criminal and civil case backlogs by 38 percent. Over the past five years, it is estimated that USAID support for these services has saved the country more than \$36 million. These savings have since freed up resources for the national court system to address more serious and complex crimes.

In Jamaica, USAID's anti-corruption efforts are taking root. Building on the passage of a Political Party Registration Act passed in 2014, USAID programs have supported key policy reforms, including the passage of two additional laws: the Integrity Commission Act and Campaign Finance Regulation Act. Both laws helped increase public discourse around corruption and transparency, resulting in the resignation of several high-profile ministerial leaders. Over the past six years, Jamaica has seen a steady improvement on the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, improving its rank, from ranking 83 out of 176 countries in 2016 to a ranking of 69 out of 180 countries in 2020.

In Guyana, USAID is building the capacity of the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative Secretariat and civil society to encourage better governance related to the extraction of natural resources, such as oil, gold, and timber. In Guyana, the oil industry alone is valued at over \$80 billion, compared to the country's 2019 Gross Domestic Product of \$5 billion. With our assistance, the Secretariat is now better equipped to publish information on tenders in the oil sector -- an important action to promote greater transparency in a sector often mired by corruption. Now, citizens, local organizations, and journalists will be able to access current and historical tenders to keep the government accountable.

To combat trafficking in persons, USAID is providing technical support to governments across the region to address recommendations from the State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report. For example, we are helping the Government of Barbados institutionalize victim identification for law enforcement officials, prosecutors, and judges; supporting the creation of an anti-trafficking policy manual; and training law enforcement on identifying, referring, and protecting potential trafficking victims.

In the Dominican Republic, USAID trained more than 200 Dominican National Police officers to better detect signs of gender-based violence and provide enhanced support to victims. As a result of this USAID support, the number of enforced arrest warrants for gender-based violence cases in a suburb of Santo Domingo increased from 13 to 60 percent, providing a model for other jurisdictions.

Addressing Instability in Haiti

As we all know, the current situation in Haiti is both challenging and complex. Political instability, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic and a deteriorating security situation, threatens the safety and health of Haitians and democratic institutions. COVID-19 also has further weakened an already fragile economy.

The United Nations estimates that 6.5 million people in Haiti are currently in need of humanitarian assistance. Food insecurity remains one of the largest concerns in the country. To help address these needs, in FY 2020, USAID provided \$34 million in Haiti to address emergency food security needs and prevent malnutrition, reaching over 580,000 Haitians. USAID has leveraged a combination of tools, including Title II in-kind commodities procured in the United States, for hurricane preparedness and food vouchers that allowed the most food-insecure families access to locally produced nutritious foods while supporting local businesses. While this will help address immediate needs, USAID also continues to focus on combating child malnutrition in the longer term by providing nutrition support to more than 662,000 vulnerable children under five years old and 213,000 pregnant and lactating women in 2020.

Despite the ongoing instability in Haiti, we have made important gains. Over the past 15 years, infant mortality has dropped, from 80 to 59 deaths per 1,000 live births; and under-five mortality has dropped from 119 to 81 deaths per 1,000 live births. In 2020 alone, USAID supported the vaccination of more than 75,000 children; 22,800 births were attended by skilled providers; over 31,000 women received antenatal care; and nearly 70,000 mothers and newborns received postnatal checks.

We also have seen significant improvement in the agricultural sector thanks to USAID interventions. In the last decade, USAID's agriculture and reforestation programs in Haiti have increased product yields and incomes, mobilized investment, improved irrigation systems, and resulted in the planting of over

seven million trees. USAID investments have supported 105,000 farmers to adopt new technologies, generating nearly \$30 million in agricultural sales.

Conclusion

While the challenges before us are great, our commitment to the Caribbean remains strong. Where other countries’ assistance models further dependence or unsustainable debt, the United States’ model is one of partnership with the governments, civil society, and private sector in countries in which we work. Our development assistance promotes a country’s own development path, consistent with U.S.-supported universal values and interests. USAID remains steadfast in our commitment to working with the Caribbean people to build a better future for themselves and their families.

Again, thank you for your commitment to the Caribbean and I look forward to your questions.

CLEARANCE PAGE FOR TESTIMONY

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