Good Morning,

The Employers’ Consultative Association of Trinidad and Tobago is deeply honoured to be a part of this workshop which has come at a time when the Global economic and Financial crisis have exacerbated the challenges for governments regionally and internationally. The International Labour Organization in its working definition defines Social Dialogue to ‘include all types of negotiation, consultation or exchange of information between representatives of governments, employers and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy.’ It can exist as a tripartite process, with governments as an official party to the dialogue, or as bipartite relations between representatives of labour and on one or more employers.

The Theme for this workshop is, “Towards People-Centred Development: Social Dialogue as the key driver” and has as its primary objectives:

a. To establish a multi-partite operational framework in which to engage social partners and
b. To build commitment and trust among social partners

Among us today, are representatives from organisations which have had rewarding experiences with the implementation and execution of a framework where tripartite partners have used the medium of social dialogue to achieve socio-economic development and national prosperity, including effective crisis recovery responses.

According to Jonko Ishikawa in the ILO publication - Key Features of National Social Dialogue, Social dialogue at the national level has become an important component of good governance in many countries. Tripartite social dialogue in economic and social-policy making has a fundamental role to play in furthering democracy, social justice and a productive and competitive economy. The association of all three parties concerned in the design and implementation of economic and social policies facilitates consensus building with a balance between demands of economic development and social cohesion. It also provides the best possible scenario for the effective and sustainable implementation of the policies concerned, minimising the risk of industrial and social conflict. Moreover, Social dialogue provides social partners and other key stakeholders with the opportunity to participate in deciding their future.

END OF QUOTE.

In order to place my opening remarks in its proper perspective, I took some time to look at the pathways that would have led to those rewarding experiences in countries like Singapore and Barbados among the many others, so as to get a better understanding of what we would need to do as a nation in order to experience similar levels of success.
What I discovered is that there is a common thread which speaks to the key drivers that motivated and influenced the decision by those countries to take ownership for their future, by securing the participation, involvement and commitment of tripartite partners to engage in a process that would have led to the achievement of socio-economic development and prosperity.

- That common thread was the need to “SURVIVE” driven by the desire for wealth creation, economic and social progress, social security, stability and equity. - a better life for their citizens.
- A period of industrial unrest in the early sixties and an industrial relations climate, characterized by the adoption of adversarial and confrontational positions
- High unemployment, which may be attributed to poor economic and social conditions
- In the case of Barbados - the introduction of the International Monetary Fund structural adjustment program

Here in our beloved Nation, though we have much more to be thankful for when we compare our economic performance with our regional counterparts, we need to keep in mind that the medium term economic prospects for the region continue to be uncertain. While we have many more options than our regional neighbours, given the uncertainty surrounding our natural resource endowments and the increasingly more difficult global economic environment, we would need to undergo considerable social and structural transformation, if we are to maintain or even increase the relatively high standards for which we have become accustomed.

**In short, time may not be on our side and the time for action is now!**

What is encouraging is that we do not have to reinvent the wheel. There are quite a few proven and tested successful models from which key learning’s can be had. Quite a lot has been said about the Singapore model and bringing it much closer home - the Barbados model. Briefly, what are some of the key success factors from the Singapore model?

- Strong leadership with a Global mind set. **The country’s first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who served for 30 years, was a strong, decisive, visionary leader, who enabled a corporate governance model which had at its foundation, sound ethical principles, which everyone had to practice.**
- The Agreement by tripartite partners to a shared vision through a process of consensus building
- High levels of collaboration, cooperation, understanding, mutual respect and trust between social partners.
- The willingness to put country first
What is even more interesting was the very structured approach with clear definitions of roles and responsibilities for every member of the tripartite social partnership. Underpinning the shift toward sound and harmonious industrial relations that started with the establishment in 1972 of the tripartite National Wage Council, which brought tripartite partners together to formulate wage-related guidelines through social dialogue to achieve orderly and realistic wage adjustments.

Social Dialogue and reform was also used, by Barbados in the early 1990s. Based on a series of social partnership agreements, the IMF prescription of devaluation was avoided, and the parties focused on improving competitiveness and productivity and accepted wage freezes until the corresponding productivity gains were achieved. Social dialogue facilitated implementation of difficult economic decisions in Barbados and achieved stabilization and economic growth.

What therefore should inform the process that we should adopt?
- Continued demonstration of strong leadership with a Global mind set
- Agreement of a shared vision through the process of consensus building, collaboration, cooperation, mutual respect and trust
- The willingness of social tripartite partners to fully commit themselves to that shared vision
- A commitment to the discipline of cooperation and collaboration
- The acceptance that trust and social capital formation is a key driver to increase competitiveness and productivity in a global economy, and that trust is the CRUCIBLE for the creation of social capital and, it is a cultural attribute with economic value

At the ECA our mandate is to provide employers with quality representation at the organizational, national and international levels in order to ensure the strength and success of the employer community for the socio-economic well-being of the nation. This mandate can only be achieved through a process of meaningful social dialogue.

We have worked with stakeholders on Convention 144 which speaks to Tripartite National Consultation and believe that the time has come for the tripartite social partners to fully commit themselves to “operationalizing” the tripartite approach.

Our hope today is to see tripartite social partners tangibly demonstrate their commitment to move the social dialogue process from concept to reality. There will be challenges, it is not going to be easy sailing, but the ECA is encouraged by the fact that the hosting of this workshop is a sign of the determination and an unwavering commitment by the Government to act and act now.
We all know that Social Dialogue structures and processes have the potential to resolve important economic and social issues, encourage good governance, advance social and industrial peace and stability and boost economic progress and I am sure from looking at the agenda that the Ministry has a line of distinguished speakers over the next two days who will speak to us on the importance and relevance of moving our social dialogue process forward.

As the employers’ representative, the ECA looks towards the interest of employers on a national level and we wish to reiterate our commitment to the process of Social dialogue as the key enabler to provide a framework for the engagement of social partners.

We remain dedicated and committed to building a partnership on the National level as we see our role as critical to the process of nation building. Moreover, economic prosperity, stability and social progress cannot be achieved by governments, employers or workers acting alone. This quote from Abraham Lincoln reminds us that Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.

Having said that, we must be mindful that, in order for businesses to be able to provide jobs, they must become competitive and with the ability to compete globally.

In closing, when one looks at the different countries who have successfully implemented and executed the Social Dialogue process and compare them to Trinidad and Tobago, It is very noticeable that they do not have the abundance of natural resources with which we have been blessed. They had to rely on the development and investment in their human capital.

The theme today is “Towards People-Centered Development: Social Dialogue as the Key driver”. “Our people are our greatest asset; the quality and talents of our people are our key competitive differentiators.

Taiwan is a great example in this regard. Taiwan is described as a barren rock in a typhoon-laden sea with no natural resources to live off. It even has to import sand and gravel from China for construction, yet it has the fourth-largest financial reserves in the world. Because rather than digging in the ground and mining, whatever comes up, Taiwan has mined its 23 million people. So too has Singapore and Barbados who have had success with these models – there is a strong education and development thrust that focuses on people; their talent, their energy and their intelligence. Moreover, Taiwan has been able to develop the habits and culture of honing the skills of their people which turned out to be the most valuable and only truly renewable resource at their disposal.

As we focus on people we must pay special attention to our youth. The Global Economic and Financial Crisis have intensified the challenges around youth employment making it a real crisis.
The global statistics are very compelling and pose a tremendous global challenge for policy makers, both at the national and global levels. We should keep in mind that our future leaders, professionals, entrepreneurs and employees will come from this pool of young people, who comprise the very future of tripartism for which we are now laying a foundation.

If you remember one thing I say today, it should be that time is not on our side. We need to act and act now. Meaningful social dialogue is no longer an option if we are to fully operationalize the theme of this workshop- “Towards People-Centred Development; Social Dialogue as the key driver.

This is all about change, and, as L.W LINETH said, “the most effective way to cope with change is to help create it”. This is what we are being called upon to do today. It is about our future, let’s act responsibly as we seek to create and take ownership for our future.

Finally, these words from our Honorable Prime minister in her address to the nation on the Cabinet reshuffle should seek to reinforce the behaviors that are required.

“there is no room for personal egos, no time for personal agendas, and no opportunity for self glorification. This is not about us, it is about the people.”

The ECA commends the Minister of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development, Mr. Errol Mcleod, and his team for this initiative and I give my full support, as we move forward in the development of the Social Dialogue process.

I thank you.

Keston Nancoo
Chairman