



Policy Forum Guyana

## PRESS RELEASE

### CALL FOR NEW CARICOM RESPONSE TO HUMANITARIAN DISASTERS

The devastating consequences of hurricanes Irma and Maria call for a major re-orientation of attitudes in the Caribbean, primarily to ensure that all Caribbean lives are seen to matter equally. In this spirit, a recent meeting of Guyanese civil societies to review the humanitarian disasters is calling on Caricom to appoint a Special Caricom Representative for Humanitarian Affairs to develop a regional policy that identifies the principles, values and standards which humanitarian responses must meet.

This decision echoes the sentiments expressed by Chairman of Caricom, Prime Minister Mitchell of Grenada, to the effect that “*Caricom, the individual sovereign states and all the institutions of Caricom must fashion a new discussion and a new methodology to deal with the challenges posed by disasters*”. Such a discussion should be a major priority engaging the civic, business and political leaderships of Caribbean territories, not primarily technical agencies.

The starting points of the proposed conversation are three-fold. In the first place the disasters underline that our time-table for addressing global warming is too complacent. Secondly, while the outpouring of compassion to provide immediate relief are all-embracing, the prolonged recovery phase is beneficial to far fewer people. The third starting-point is that responses to extreme devastation require political decision-making and cannot become a monopoly of those who deliver technical assistance and resources.

All of our territories have repeatedly signed up to accepting ‘common and differentiated responsibilities’ in global Climate Change agreements. Operationalizing these responsibilities whether in emergencies or normal times has now become an urgent governance priority, across the Caribbean.

Widespread mobilizing of generosity across the Caribbean is a well-established response in the relief phase. However, those who recover most quickly are the sectors, particularly the business networks, best positioned to call on insurance and financial relief. Very large numbers of small farmers, informal businesses and householders, on the other hand, never recover since they do not attract the attention they deserve.

Without wishing to suggest that the personal and civic compassion reflected in relief efforts are consciously discriminatory, the possibility of some sectors being overlooked is obvious and it is the role of governments to anticipate such short-comings. In particular, governments must be vigilant that relief efforts are guided by the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality, non-discrimination and neutrality in order to avoid, eliminate or compensate for inappropriate forms of political or ethnic discrimination which may favour some sectors over others.

In light of the severity and numbers affected, it is imperative that the recovery phase of reconstruction of these societies be guided by rights-based considerations. Such approaches reflect the ethical urgency of eliminating suffering that violations constitute in contrast to standard ‘development’ approaches.

Human rights claims on governments, such as Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), for example, are not suspended because of emergencies: “*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services*” (Article 25 UDHR). Similarly civil and political rights to participate in decisions affecting oneself and one’s family also need to be protected. One of the hazards of the politics of compassion is that the moral ownership of tragedy which rightfully belongs with victims gradually passes to those providing relief and resources.

A particularly pressing rights-related concern is to protect disaster victims from the harassment too frequently experienced by Caricom citizens in other Caricom territories. A principled and uniform legal approach to people fleeing disaster is urgently needed as part of the urgent review called for by the chairman of Caricom.

Such normative considerations were first raised in civil society circles with respect to the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, a concern which has been temporarily side-lined by the disasters in the Northern Caribbean.

A starting point for a civic response is being proposed in the recommendation outlined below.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

**Civil Society Organizations listed below are calling on Caricom to appoint a Special Representative on Humanitarian Issues charged with the following tasks:**

- Adopt a common rights-based framework of principles and standards for humanitarian disasters to be implemented by governments, civil society and international forces.
- Create clear and compassionate model legislation in accordance with international norms governing refugees and persons internally and externally displaced by humanitarian crises.
- Operationalize the ‘common and differentiated responsibilities’ of governments and civil society ratified in all Climate Change agreements.

## **ENDORISING ORGANIZATIONS**

Anglican Diocese of Guyana  
Church Women United  
Guyana Society for the Blind  
Guyana Human Rights Association  
Jesuits in Guyana  
National AIDS Committee  
Rights of Children  
Ursuline Sisters in Guyana

Benab (Youth)  
East Coast Clean-Up Committees  
Guyana Environment Initiative  
Guyana Organisation of Indigenous Peoples  
Policy Forum Guyana  
Red Thread  
Transparency Institute Guyana Inc.

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