

**Statement by Miss Joy-Marie King, Director of International Trade: Side Event 9th
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Distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, good day.

I think our discussion here today comes at a rather pivotal time both for the Caribbean and the global community. The multilateral architecture continues upon a trajectory of uncertainty marked by the shifting of old alliances, emergence of new powers, and the rules that once governed trade, finance, and cooperation are increasingly under strain.

In this evolving framework, the questions before us are both urgent and unavoidable: how can the Caribbean advance regional integration in a fragmented global economy? And more importantly, how do we move from well-crafted commitments to meaningful, sustained implementation.

The truth is, the Caribbean is not without achievements. In fact, we have built one of the most enduring and sophisticated integration movements among small island developing states anywhere in the world. Our regional institutions have provided a platform for coordination, dialogue, and collective action. Through them, we have amplified our voice on the global stage. A major occurrence is the global leadership Antigua and Barbuda has shown and continues to do so in advancing the development interests of SIDS including the hosting of the 4th International SIDS Conference in 2024. This conference bore witness to global leaders endorsing a renewed 10- year action plan dubbed the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS- geared towards achieving resilient prosperity through helping SIDS withstand external shocks while promoting social equity and environmental sustainability.

Another major outcome from the SIDS engagement is the establishment of the SIDS Centre of Excellence, which Antigua and Barbuda deems as a central instrument for advancing sustainable development across SIDS. This flagship institutional mechanism is a ‘by SIDS for SIDS’ approach structured around four pillars including the Island investment forum, Debt sustainability Support Services, A global data hub and innovation and technology mechanism.

A major role for the regional integration construct in the realisation of the above, could possibly involve the development of a national and regional implementation roadmap linked to the ABAS, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the SIDS Centre of Excellence.

Additionally, our economic integration efforts have also laid important groundwork that have opened space for trade, facilitated the movement of skilled people, and created opportunities for regional e businesses. At the same time, our tradition of functional cooperation—whether in public health including the OECS Pooled pharmaceutical procurement or disaster response through CDEMA—have shown that practical collaboration can deliver real results for our citizens.

These are not minor accomplishments. They are the foundation of Caribbean integration, and they must be preserved and strengthened.

But while we acknowledge our progress, we must also confront our shortcomings with honesty. Too often, our integration process has been characterized by a gap between intention and

action. Decisions are made at the regional level, but implementation at the national level remains slow, uneven, or incomplete.

This is the central challenge we now faced with.

If we are to move forward, we must transition from a culture of agreement to a culture of execution. This requires stronger accountability mechanisms, clearer timelines, and a renewed commitment by member states to treat regional decisions not as optional, but as obligations. Integration cannot succeed if it remains aspirational; it must become operational.

At the same time, we must recognize that the global environment in which we operate has fundamentally changed. The Caribbean can no longer rely on traditional economic models that depend heavily on tourism and a narrow range of exports. These sectors remain important, but they are increasingly vulnerable to external shocks—from pandemics to geopolitical tensions to climate-related disruptions.

What is required is transformation!

We must invest in building regional value chains that allow us to produce more of what we consume and export more of what we produce. We must strengthen food and nutritional security, reduce our dependence on imports, and explore new opportunities in services, agro-processing and light manufacturing. We must also embrace the digital economy—developing our capacity in areas such as digital services, fintech, and innovation-driven industries.

Integration must become a tool not just for cooperation, but for building economic resilience and transformation.

In doing so, we must also adopt a more flexible approach. Not all member states have the same level of capacity, resources, or readiness to move at the same pace. A model that allows for “coalitions of the willing”—where some countries move ahead in specific areas while others join when ready—can help to accelerate progress without undermining unity.

Externally, the importance of a coordinated regional strategy cannot be overstated. We are navigating a world shaped by major powers, including the United States, China, and the European Union. Engaging these partners individually may bring short-term gains, but it risks weakening our collective leverage. A unified approach will ensure that the Caribbean speaks with one voice, negotiates from a position of strength, and secures better outcomes for all.

Equally important is the need to deepen digital and financial integration within the region. In a world where commerce, communication, and finance are increasingly digital, the Caribbean must not be left behind. Harmonizing regulations, enabling cross-border digital payments, and building a shared digital infrastructure are no longer optional—they are essential components of modern integration.

And we cannot speak about the Caribbean’s future without addressing climate change. For our region, climate change is not an abstract concept—it is an immediate and existential threat. Rising sea levels, stronger hurricanes, and environmental degradation affect every aspect of our economies and our societies.

Our response must therefore be collective. Climate resilience must be embedded at the core of our integration agenda. This includes pooling resources for disaster response, investing in resilient infrastructure, and developing a unified strategy to access climate finance on fair and equitable terms.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must bring our people into the integration process. For too long, regional integration has been perceived as a project of governments and institutions, distant from the everyday experiences of the Caribbean citizens.

This must change.

We must create opportunities for entrepreneurs, support small and medium-sized enterprises, and remove the barriers that limit the movement of people, skills, and ideas. We must also foster a stronger sense of Caribbean identity—one that transcends borders and reinforces our shared destiny.

Because integration, at its core, is not just about policies or institutions. It is about the people.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The path forward is clear. The Caribbean does not need to reinvent its integration project. What we need is to implement what we have agreed, to strengthen what we have built, and to adapt our strategies to meet the demands of a changing world.

We must move from aspiration to action, from fragmentation to cohesion, and from vulnerability to resilience.

In a global economy that is increasingly divided, the Caribbean's greatest strength remains its unity. If we act together, with purpose and determination, we can not only navigate the challenges ahead—we can shape a more secure, sustainable, and prosperous future for our region.

Thank you.