



**9TH MEETING OF THE FORUM OF THE COUNTRIES OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN ON  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

**Side-Event: "Advancing Regional Integration in a Fragmented Global Economy: From Commitments to  
Implementation"**

**ECLAC Headquarters  
Santiago, Chile**

**13<sup>th</sup> April 2026**

**11:00 am to 12:30 am**

**Statement by panelist:**

**Mr. Benito Wheatley**

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Latin America and the Caribbean**

**Vice Chair of UN ECLAC, Vice Chair of the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee &  
Vice Chair of the Regional Conference on South-South Cooperation in Latin America and the  
Caribbean**

H.E. Jose Manuel Salazaar, Executive Secretary of ECLAC

H.E. Dr. Carla Barnett, Secretary-General of CARICOM

Excellencies

Distinguished delegates

A pleasant good afternoon.

Let me first thank the Executive Secretary and Dr, Miosotis Rivas Pena, Director of the ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean, for the kind invitation to participate in this panel and for ensuring that there are opportunities such as this within the framework of the Forum to highlight the experience of the Caribbean.

I am also very pleased that the distinguished Secretary-General of CARICOM H.E. Dr. Carla Barnett has joined us virtually which greatly enriches our discussion.

Friends, this is an important occasion for dialogue on regional integration as we consider its utility against the backdrop of the economic shocks of war in the Middle East and their impact on the sustainable development of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Of course, we must also grapple with how our region navigates the geopolitical and economic turmoil of the fraying international order that is now at our doorstep and has the potential to cause disruptions to our societies.

What does regional integration offer to Latin America and the Caribbean in the current context?

I think the value proposition is fairly clear: *Regional integration offers the opportunity to achieve greater resilience and prosperity in the face of rising global instability, economic uncertainty, and climate insecurity.*

It can help the countries of Latin American and the Caribbean to better withstand and recover from external shocks and the pressures we are witnessing today, as well as the shocks we anticipate that will continue well into the future such as those emanating from the climate crisis.

It can also accelerate the economic and social transformation of the societies concerned.

And we are not the only ones thinking about regional integration as a buffer against global instability and as a driver of economic growth and development.

The European Union (EU) has expressed the need to deepen European integration even further to respond to the international and global pressures they are experiencing.

The potential benefits of regional integration to Latin America and the Caribbean are well known: lower transaction costs, lighter administrative burdens, access to a bona fide regional market, higher volumes of intra-regional trade, greater access to capital and investment, more people to people contact and cultural exchange, and greater economic weight in the world.

The process can also be a means of embedding South-South cooperation into intra-regional frameworks for deeper integration.

The Caribbean experience is an interesting case of regional integration in the Global South.

The subregion has several layers of regional integration that are driven by both solidarity and necessity.

At the subregional level there is the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and its Economic Union. Member States citizens enjoy free movement, use a common currency and share a single central bank and court system.

At the CARICOM level you have the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME). There is now free movement between four Member States: Barbados, Belize, Dominica and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. While this level of integration involves just four Member States at this stage, it is a significant step in the full regional integration of CARICOM.

Finally, you have the construct of the Greater Caribbean within the framework of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) whose membership comprises CARICOM Governments and those of the Latin American states bound to the Caribbean Sea that include Mexico, Columbia, Venezuela and the nations of Central America.

There are some issues and sectors where a Greater Caribbean approach makes sense, such as conserving the Caribbean Sea, regional transportation and shipping, among other things.

At the macro-regional level, you have three major markets: CARICOM, Dominican Republic and Cuba. Between them there is some level of regional cooperation, but not regional integration.

In the long run, however, it is difficult to see how Cuba and the Dominican Republic would remain outside of the regional integration project if the intent of regional integration is to enable the Caribbean is to meet its full potential as a player in the Western Hemisphere and world affairs.

The pace and forms of regional integration in the Caribbean are reflected in the various differences between the countries and Territories of the region.

The key question is this: What is the optimal level of integration for the economic and social transformation of our societies?

Is it the free movement of people, goods, services and capital among just a subset of countries of similar size and economic profile as practiced by OECS?

Is it the CARICOM vision of regional integration that provides a comprehensive framework for the integration of the entire region?

Or is it the loose regional cooperation promoted by the ACS on select economic and environmental issues?

Regardless of level, the Caribbean experience tells us a few things about what is required to successfully advance regional integration.

- Astute political leadership is absolutely critical. The political will must be there and some minimal commitment and alignment of the countries involved.
- There must also be a solid legal framework that guides the process. The Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas and the Revised Treaty of Basseterre are good examples such a framework.
- And of course, regional institutions that are adequately resourced are needed which serve as the administrative machinery that supports coordination and implementation.

And even with all of these things, more is required.

The extent and pace of regional integration will really depend on whether there are sufficient internal and external conditions to politically advance the process.

Lowering and eliminating existing barriers to trade and the free movement of people, goods and capital across borders is an emotive issue and there economic imbalances between states that cannot be ignored.

Getting the buy-in of relevant stakeholders may even require incentives of different kinds.

In this regard, a state or group of states must be willing to underwrite the regional integration process to make it work. Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Barbados and Guyana have traditionally played this role with others subsequently helping to share the burden.

The Caribbean's regional integration project continues to move forward, but not at the pace originally envisioned.

This is simply because the conditions necessary to move at a faster pace are not there.

Thus, full regional integration remains a dream deferred.

This is the Caribbean experience from which the wider region can draw lessons.

Friends, there is no doubt that regional integration has the ability to help unleash the immense potential of Latin America and the Caribbean and to make our region more resilient in the face of global instability, economic uncertainty and climate insecurity.

The Caribbean's experience with regional integration can serve as a useful guide on the most critical elements of the process that the wider region can consider in these uncertain times.

I thank you.