



NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF BELIZE

(The House of Representatives and The Senate)

Hon. Laura Tucker Longsworth, MSN. RN. OBE.

Speaker of the House of Representatives

Chairperson of the Inter-Parliamentary Committee on Education and Health of FOPREL

OPENING REMARKS

VI Meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Committee on Education and Health (CIES) and IX Meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Committee on Municipal Affairs (CIEAS) of FOPREL

Thursday, 27th August 2020

On behalf of the National Assembly of Belize and FOPREL I welcome you all to the sixth meeting of Inter-Parliamentary Committee on Education and Health, and the ninth meeting of the Committee on Municipal Affairs.

I extend our condolences and express solidarity to all the families who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our vulnerable populations are experiencing tragedy, uncertainty, and drastic changes in their lives. Measures taken by governments to control the pandemic have resulted in closure of businesses and restrictions of movement, creating hardships and food insecurity for our citizens.

We are cognizant of the tremendous efforts of health professionals, and other frontline workers, for their work in caring and keeping us safe in the era of the COVID pandemic. Although they work in high-risk areas and are vulnerable to becoming COVID infected, they demonstrate high levels of commitment and professionalism, in the fight against COVID-19.

Our people are experiencing great challenges to their social and economic stability. Health systems are burdened with managing a highly infectious disease without a vaccine, and without specific treatment for COVID-19. Countries are forced to invest in high cost equipment of ventilators, protective equipment, and other supplies. In our region and globally, shortage of skilled health professionals threatens the stability of overburdened health systems. In the midst of a severe health crisis, citizens are further impacted by limited access to healthcare services for chronic non-communicable diseases. This is worrisome and we can expect to see an increase in morbidity and mortality related to uncontrolled diabetes, hypertension, heart and other conditions. In addition to health and economic problems, we are further burdened by an increase in gender-based and sexual violence in homes as a result of forced confinements related to COVID-19.

Worldwide our children and young people have been out of schools for six months due to COVID-19 subjecting them to social isolation and interrupting their educational development. Educational systems are now working feverishly to reinstate the education system while at the same time keeping students safe from the ravages of COVID-19. The pandemic has exposed inequalities in education, the deficiencies of distance learning, the cost of the digital divide, as well as the essential role played by schools in the health and well-being of students. We have had to re-examine our education systems in order to address these challenges. How do we strengthen the capacity of our education systems so that they can respond to the humanitarian crises? How can we ensure safe and inclusive access of children to the education system? Our priority today is to define actions or programs that will guarantee the Right to Education for all children in our region.

Today I am very pleased to know that we will have the participation of Emerson, a teenager from El Salvador, who is 9th Grade student. He will be presenting to us, from a young person's perspective, the impact of the pandemic and the challenges posed for education. For us, this is important because, as members of FOPREL, we ensure that the initiatives we promote are attached to the realities of our countries. The active participation of the key players is very crucial. I want to congratulate Emerson for lending his young voice to our conversation today.

This meeting is being held within the framework of the "Regional Agenda for the Prevention/Response to the Adverse Impacts from COVID-19 and other Epidemiological Events", which is an instrument with a medium and a long-term vision. It seeks to have the participation of all our parliaments at the regional, national and international level. We will examine the impacts of this pandemic on our children and the challenges to their Rights to Education. I look forward to hearing from my fellow parliamentarians.

Today's meeting is being held as part of the "Common Agenda between SICA-FOPREL". I would like to applaud the important steps being taken to consolidate the inter-institutional work between both regional bodies. I had the opportunity to be part of the renewal of the "Memorandum of Understanding between FOPREL and SICA". I am sure that significant results will emerge from the synergy between these two bodies.

I would like to acknowledge the organizations that are present today, in particular: Save The Children, SICA, UNESCO, and Belize's Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sports. We are pleased to recognize our guests: UNICEF, AECID, IOM, PLAN International, UNDRR, UNHCR and UN WOMEN as well as organizations that are associated, with the issue of education. Thank you all for your invaluable technical and financial support, and for the processes that we are going to develop.

I end by reiterating once again FOPREL'S commitment to ensure that we provide our children and adolescents with the necessary tools to deal with current and future challenges of this pandemic. Let us continue the work within our parliaments to ensure a fair, inclusive, and quality system that ensures the Right to Education.

THANK YOU.