

MINISTRY OF PUBLIC TELECOMMUNICATIONS

CANTO ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2019

Guyana Marriott Hotel

Sunday January 28, 2019

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Minister Catherine Hughes

Salutations

Let me first welcome all of you to our beautiful Cooperative Republic of Guyana, and let me also say how wonderful it is to see many of you again, this time on my turf, and what a privilege it is to be speaking to you this evening.

Regional telecommunication operators, as they look to the future of this industry, surely do recognize the need to constantly engage with each other and with related partners for strategic planning and development. Thank you, CANTO. In this Caribbean region, you have always made this process easier!

It is clear from your agenda that the next four days will be filled with presentations, workshops and a range of critical discussions regarding the current state, the development and growth of this important facilitator of economic development.

The theme for this year's AGM, "**Transitioning to a Digital Region: Opportunities and Challenges**" is as important as it is timely. Most of the countries in the Caribbean and Latin America are at a crossroads when it comes to national development and economic advancement.

I have no need to convince this gathering that the Industries we have traditionally depended on for so many years no longer have the scope and functionality that the region requires to support our national, economic and developmental growth. It is certainly not lost on us that we must diversify ... diversify quickly, and most importantly, diversify into those sectors and industries that geared for this modern intellectual world.

Most importantly, the diversification must provide opportunities for real economic transformation. A strong digital agenda allows us to do just that.

I have taken note of the rationale for this year's theme.

It is clear we all are experiencing the challenges and realities of transformation. One of those realities is that our customers'/users' needs are changing every day as a result of the rapidly emerging pace of technology and innovation.

Our citizens are demanding faster internet speeds; businesses are aggressively broadening their global reach via Information and Communication Technologies; our academic institutions are pushing hard for modernity, for more students, bigger populations, regardless of geographic location; we are streaming content live online, regardless of what it is; and everyone wants to communicate by any means in the fastest possible way.

And ... Governments of course, are on **your** backs demanding that you provide these services at the highest levels, at the lowest possible prices, and as quickly as is feasible.

This is now in my third year as the Minister of Public Telecommunications. A new Ministry was created in 2016 which President Granger gave me the privilege to manage on behalf of his administration and the people of Guyana.

**In my travels throughout Guyana and in the region, I continue to be amazed by the innovative work coming out of the imagination by our Caribbean citizens, especially our youth. I have seen robotic applications, mobile and web apps for Agriculture, apps for public incident reporting, tax collection, soil testing and other solutions ... all of them by our own youths in Guyana. Their vision is as broad as ours, i.e. to address the real requirements of our people. We in the Ministry continue to work assiduously to ensure that the potential of these bright minds is realized.

Critical to the success of these endeavours is the assurance of an enabling environment that will foster their growth and evolution. There is a need to move their ideas and concepts from conception of thought to completion ... and that must include access to financing to facilitate their start up businesses! This is the main role that we undertook as part of our mandate over these past three years.

Today in Guyana, there are approximately 173 Community ICT hubs that provide **free internet access** in most of our inland/rural and hinterland regions, and in many disadvantaged communities. We have hosted Hackathons and Code Sprints generally to spot and support emerging talent. We have hosted regional ICT conferences and in 2018, the CTU's (Caribbean Telecommunications Union) ICT Roadshow was held here in collaboration with the ITU and the FAO. The main objective was to ensure that as many citizens as possible come to understand how critical knowledge of ICTs is to their own and the nation's future.

In the beginning, we had to acknowledge that Guyana was lagging behind our sisters and brothers in the region. I'm happy to say that today Guyana has all of our Government ministries connected, along with over 300 Primary, Secondary and Tertiary institutes including the University of Guyana. Now ongoing is the connection of our hospitals and other medical centers, Regional administrative offices, police and other law enforcement stations and locations, private and public educational, health, social welfare and environmental facilities across the country. By 2020, the whole government will be online.

In 2016 we began to implement an aggressive strategy to bring our citizens – all of them – to computer literacy AT LEAST. This strategy was to create then build a national ICT-ready workforce. We are working on positioning Guyana to become a significant Regional ICT hub.

On the Legislative side, we have begun to modernize old laws as we develop new laws to support a sustainable, productive knowledge sector that should contribute to the economy in terms of wealth, employment and revenue generation.

We have developed a draft of the National ICT Plan which is now ready for public consultations. This Plan articulates the vision of our nation, i.e. a fully transformed country defined by an empowered population, prosperous businesses, capable people and an agile, responsive government.

In 2019 we have two projects to take us in this direction:–

- ✚ ***The National Broadband Expansion project that will add to the current eGovernment network - which includes a Safe City component, online learning opportunities, Smart classrooms and telemedicine***
- ✚ ***ICT Access project that specifically targets Hinterland, Poor and Remote communities across our 83,000 square miles; it provides community access to free Internet and it is blended with renewable energy solutions (solar)***

These do not come without specific challenges. The landmass of Guyana, you would appreciate, is large compared with some Caribbean countries. We have broad savannah lands and our interior regions are populated by small groups in expansive geographical locations. You would appreciate therefore, how expensive it is for us to bring ICT connections and services to these disparate communities.

In a few short years from now, Guyana will become a player in the Oil & Gas industry, at least in the region. I don't have to remind you of the clear nexus between Oil & Gas and ICT which behooves the Government to do much more in terms of preparation of our people for the advent of oil.

I share this with you this evening to highlight the numerous synergies at work in Guyana as we build our knowledge industry to partner with the rest of the region. We have been collaborating more and more as partners in the technological development of this Caribbean region and farther afield to Latin America, and it is our sincerest wish that our collaborations continue.

You in the Private Sector have primarily a commercial interest. You have shareholders who demand performance, perfection and profit with less patience than they had in the past.

I represent the public interest, with the population yearning for (often demanding) more bandwidth, more accessibility, more protective legislations, more of everything we owe them for their recreation, entertainment, education, health and work. They want a single ICT space in the region with seamless roaming, and some are advocating an end to roaming charges.

Both citizens and the Government have our respective challenges so it makes sense for us to continue to explore and find the ways we can work together to resolve every issue, every challenge for the greater good.

We thank you to recognize that, given the exponential pace of technological development, we are immensely pressured to provide it faster and cheaper, but we do have that obligation and we intend to keep on fulfilling it.

I am looking forward to participating in your deliberations over the coming days. I have to say that it is always gratifying to see Regional players come together to share knowledge and create conditions that support the advancement of technologies.

I do hope that despite the hectic schedule of this AGM, you find the time to enjoy some of what our country has to offer. We have a regional (and dare I say international) reputation for being the most friendly and hospitable people in this hemisphere. So, take advantage of your visit – kill several birds with one stone (not literally of course since Guyana’s birds are a national treasure), then you can return home with a better understanding of the reasons why Christopher Columbus was sure he had found El Dorado when he landed here sometime in 1492.

Finally, I wish to express our deep gratitude to the many people in this room who support our programmes and initiatives, especially GTT for sponsoring this event.

I wish you a productive AGM.

Thank you.

Catherine A. Hughes MP
MINISTER