



LAUNCH OF GUYANA'S LOW CARBON DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

BY

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June 8, 2009
Guyana International Conference Centre

Colleagues of the Cabinet
Leader of the Opposition
Other Members of Parliament
Members of the Diplomatic Corp
Special Invitees, Leaders of the Amerindian Community in Guyana
Ladies and Gentlemen

In December last year, I spoke here of my belief that the people of Guyana can play a leading role in addressing one of the most important challenges facing the world – the need to avert catastrophic climate change. I spoke of how the international community will meet in Copenhagen in December 2009 to forge a global deal to stabilise the world's climate. I set out why it will be impossible to avert human misery on a scale never seen before if this global deal fails to stabilise global temperatures so that they do not increase by more than 1.3 degrees above today's average. And I outlined why this will be mathematically impossible unless the global climate deal includes effective measures to deal with deforestation which causes 17% of the greenhouse gas emissions which are the dominant cause of climate change.

I said in December that I believed that the people of Guyana would be willing to show how tackling deforestation in a comprehensive way is not only necessary, but possible. I said that we might be willing to place almost our entire rainforest under long-term protection. And I promised that all members of our society would have a chance to engage in national consultations on how to take this vision forward, once the

Government completed initial technical work to facilitate the consultation. This technical work has now been completed, and I want to talk with you today about how we can now proceed.

At the core of the consultation is a key question: as our country embarks on a second generation of economic reform and infrastructural development, how can we do this in a manner which aligns our national development needs with the global need to combat climate change?

This question is grounded in the fact that too many people around the world continue to see combating climate change and promoting national development as conflicting objectives. The draft Low Carbon Development Strategy which you will receive today lays out the key elements of how we might change this paradigm in Guyana, and how we can provide a model for rainforest countries across the globe.

There is a lot of information contained within the strategy, and it covers a very wide brief. It will take time to digest and many people may need help in familiarising themselves with what it contains. For these reasons, I want to emphasise that this is just the beginning of our consultative process, and that there will be plenty of time and more materials to enable all Guyanese to engage with the strategy as we move forward.

Some may ask: why Guyana? Why should we take on something as ambitious as trying to help solve a problem of such global scale, particularly when we played no part in creating the problem? Some might suggest that we have enough day-to-day problems of our own without also trying to provide leadership to the world in solving a challenge as large and as complex as climate change.

I have two responses to this. One – even though we didn't cause it, climate change is our problem. Beside where we are meeting today, hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens live below sea level with the sea just a few metres to our north. To the south, billions of gallons of water which irrigate much of our country's productive land are held back by a one hundred and thirty year old earthen dam. Changing weather patterns mean that the physical infrastructure which protects us is being put under ever increasing strain. Nobody needs to tell the citizens of Guyana that climate change is occurring – in 2005, the worst flood in our history caused damage equivalent to 60% of our GDP, and every year we experience some flood-related damage in parts of our country. In other parts, this year it seems as though we are experiencing drought-like conditions. So the evidence is there that addressing climate change needs to be transformed from being seen as an environmental issue into a core development issue that we cannot shy away from or ignore.

My second response to those who question why Guyana should seek to take a lead is a more optimistic one. It is a belief that I have been expressing for many years, which is that the people of Guyana don't just want to complain about climate change – we want to do something about it. And we know that our pristine rainforest is a world class asset that is badly needed by the rest of the world in the fight against climate change. If we

can find a way to deploy this rainforest to combat climate change without slowing down our national development or compromising our people's sovereignty over the forest, then I believe that we should be willing to play a part in global efforts to avert climate catastrophe. And if we do this, we can provide the world with badly needed reassurance that solving deforestation is possible.

The rainforest we speak of starts just two hours drive from where we are today. It is part of some of the most valuable real estate on the planet – but this is not just value that can be measured in dollars and cents. Tropical forests sustain half of all life on earth, about 6 million species of living creatures. They provide the world with most of the sources for medicines which prevent disease and save the lives of hundreds of millions of people. They generate the rainfall without which the agricultural industries of North America, Europe and elsewhere would not be able to survive. They regulate our climate – by storing much of the world's carbon and preventing climate change from being even worse. And to many people, including Guyana's Amerindian citizens, forests are also a spiritual home and source of well-being which can never be valued in monetary terms.

But even as we acknowledge that ultimately the value of the rainforest is incalculable, we must also face up to another reality – we are part of a global economy that values the timber that rainforests supply and more critically, the agricultural produce that can be grown on the land after trees have been cleared. Put simply, the world economy sees forests as worth more dead than alive. And this is the main reason that every day, at least 32,000 hectares of rainforest disappear in countries across the world.

It is easy to caricature deforestation as capricious Third World governments colluding with corrupt logging companies. And undoubtedly, this is sometimes the reality. But most deforestation is caused by individuals, companies and communities pursuing legitimate social and economic goals. It is not just illegal loggers, it is also the African mother who needs charcoal to cook for her children, the Asian farmer who produces palm oil to earn money and the South American soya business-person who provides employment for thousands. These people cannot be expected to voluntarily give up their livelihoods to help countries in Europe, North America and elsewhere deal with pollution caused in those countries.

So the only way we can halt deforestation for the long-term is by providing productive economic and employment alternatives in rainforest countries, and at a scale which out-competes the current drivers of deforestation. This has been at the core of Guyana's vision since we started advocating for an effective deal at Copenhagen.

I know that some people feel that to bring rainforests down to the level of harsh economic logic is to diminish their special role in the planet's health and people's well-being. Sadly, global evidence does not support this point of view – for decades people have sought to deal with forestry protection through philanthropy and well-meaning conservation attempts. This has played a critical role in biodiversity preservation and knowledge gathering in some areas but ultimately these approaches have been

unsuccessful because they have not stopped us losing or degrading half of the world's tropical forests in the last forty years.

Yet even if some may wish that economic incentives were not necessary to save forests, I think all of us can take heart from the fact that the emerging carbon market provides us with a historic opportunity to use the global economy to save the world's rainforests by putting a value on them. However, while this opportunity is welcome, it will only become a reality if both rainforest countries and the rest of the international community act to make it one. As I have said many times before, three things need to happen – and each of these is critical to Guyana.

One, for the reasons I have already outlined, the international community needs to address deforestation within the climate agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol of the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change. This will require proper incorporation of incentives to reduce and avoid deforestation within the Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation mechanism, commonly known as REDD. Two, the new climate regime must establish REDD at the scale required – where forestry payments are not only included within the post-Copenhagen agreement, but are also capable of generating the amount of finances needed to out-compete the current international drivers of deforestation. And three, any REDD proposals must attract and sustain the support of the people of rainforest nations, including those who live in and depend on the forests.

My first point – that REDD has to be included in the agreement reached at Copenhagen – is based on the fact that business as usual global economic growth – even taking into account the real possibility of a prolonged and severe global recession as a consequence of the current crises – will result in global catastrophe as temperatures soar beyond 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels, which according to analysis by the world's leading scientists in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is the maximum we should contemplate. To stand a chance of avoiding this, the world needs to act in four ways. We need to improve energy efficiency, we need to transition global energy supplies to clean energy, we need to improve agricultural productivity and we must slow down net deforestation. It will be mathematically impossible to reach climate stabilisation unless the world moves quickly on all four fronts. Much of the world seems to be waking up to the essence of this point when it relates to energy efficiency and clean energy. But the importance of land use, in other words agriculture and forestry, still remains unclear to many. Changing this reality is vital and must happen quickly to make international policy-makers realise that including REDD in the post-Copenhagen agreement is essential.

My second point is that REDD needs to be supported at the scale required to solve the problem. Even if it is included in the carbon market or other financial mechanisms post-Copenhagen, if this results in under-valued payments for forest services, then it will not generate the necessary willingness to participate from enough rainforest countries. We need to face up to the need to act at scale - estimates of what it will take to make the global forestry sector carbon neutral by 2030 vary, but US\$50 billion per year by 2020 is

broadly in line with many international estimates as well as our analysis here in Guyana. Aside from the fact that this investment is of existential importance for our planet's future, we need to debunk the myth that we cannot afford it. In the past year, developed countries have found trillions of dollars to deal with the global financial crises and to rescue and nationalise financial institutions. This has been justified by saying that the institutions were too big to fail, and that their collapse would pose systemic risk to the global economy. Well, the planet is even bigger still, and climate change poses a far greater systemic risk, not just to our economy but to life itself.

My third point is that REDD must attract and sustain the support of people in rainforest countries, including those who live in and depend on the forest. This is a hugely important point, which is frequently mis-understood. It is important on two levels. On one level, no national commitment to REDD is possible without long-term, broad-based domestic support for its implementation – determining the nature of this support in Guyana is the purpose of our national consultation on our Low Carbon Development Strategy and I will discuss this more in a few moments.

But the second level in attracting and sustaining support for REDD addresses the need for the international community to see rainforest countries not as passive recipients of aid, but as equal partners in the search for solutions to deforestation. I am very worried that many people do not understand this point – many global institutions are limited by what they know, and are reducing REDD to simplistic approaches where for example, well-meaning people within the international community think that support for so-called capacity building programmes and other tools from the aid industry will work in solving deforestation. This is deeply concerning – especially because it ignores the fact that for years, thoughtful citizens and leaders of rainforest countries have been setting out positive proposals to address deforestation. These are grounded in actual experience, and are far more strategic in nature than the theoretical and mechanistic solutions now being suggested by some people who do not understand the opportunities and challenges in rainforest communities and countries. This mismatch leads to REDD being dragged down by a level of minutiae that does not afflict other climate mitigation options. This was evident last week in Bonn where climate negotiators focussed on the reasons why REDD is difficult, whereas when they looked at other climate mitigation solutions, they took a far more strategic perspective and focussed on creating frameworks for success.

Not giving REDD the same solution-orientated focus as other climate mitigation options is creating a deadlock that the world cannot afford. It means that rainforest countries are hesitant to commit to the long-term re-orientation of their economies that solving the problem requires – because they are unsure of the scale and predictability of forest payments. The rest of the international community is hesitant to support forest payments at the scale required – because the disproportional emphasis on potential problems with REDD makes them unsure that solutions exist for deforestation and this also leads them to fearing that rainforest country governments may mis-use the money that accrues to their nations.

We must hold the world's focus on the fact that exclusion of a properly designed and resourced REDD from a global deal is not an option. It would inflict climate damage that would impact billions of people over generations – the world must not be permitted to hide behind an excuse that deforestation is too difficult to solve. It is no more difficult than devising new technology for clean energy or smart grids, or than building the infrastructure for carbon capture and storage. These areas have just as many technical issues that need solving as REDD. Solving deforestation is possible - but requires a global partnership that respects the reality that solutions to deforestation are far more likely to emerge from within rainforest countries than from well-meaning policy teams working in isolation in the capitals of the developed world.

Where we see that this global partnership is possible, Guyana will not be found lacking in our commitment. And I am delighted that in recent months, we have managed to partner with others who share our view that urgent action is essential and possible – in particular, I am very pleased that Norway and Guyana are now working very closely to determine how to generate performance-based compensation for forest climate services which will support the implementation of our Low Carbon Development Strategy. Prime Minister Stoltenberg and the Government of Norway have led the world on forestry – they quickly grasped the necessity of early action and they are playing a valuable role in advocating for an international REDD architecture that meets the needs of both rainforest countries and the rest of the international community. I am also heartened by the depth of the ongoing partnership between our people and Britain's Prince Charles and his Rainforest Project. Just two month's ago, Guyana was one of only three non-G20 countries invited by the Prince to meet with the leaders of the most powerful countries in the world to examine possible solutions to deforestation during the G20 summit in London. It is hard to over-state the political significance of this meeting – for the first time in history, the issue received the first-order political attention it badly needs, where the Presidents and Prime Ministers of the world's most powerful economies focused on generating a solution. It is vital that this first-order attention is sustained, and translated into policy direction for the G20 climate change negotiators. Towards this end, I very much welcome Prime Minister's Berlusconi's commitment to placing deforestation on the upcoming G8 agenda, and support the insightful comments made by Secretary Clinton when she pointed out how addressing forestry can also help accelerate a greater global understanding of the need for action on the broader climate change agenda. Guyana looks forward to making our contribution to devising solutions through the working group which the leaders established. President Clinton's Climate Initiative has also been a very valuable partner in recent months, as has McKinsey and Company who provided the country with a level of analytical capability that we rarely can access. All of these partnerships show that there are individuals and organizations around the world who share our view that solving deforestation is possible.

But helpful as it has been to work with such leading international figures and organizations, the success or otherwise of our strategy is ultimately up to us Guyanese, and this brings me to the second level of building the support for REDD that I spoke of a few moments ago – the need for the engagement of the people of rainforest countries. Without this, long-term domestic commitment to avoiding and reducing deforestation will

not be possible. As we seek this support from rainforest countries, it is essential that the rights of those who live in and depend on the forest are not overwhelmed by a national commitment to protect forests. Determining how to do this in Guyana is the goal of the consultation which will carry on for the next three months, and it is to this I now wish to turn.

To assist the consultation, the Low-Carbon Development Strategy which you are looking at today sets out a pathway to a new economy which builds future prosperity that is low-deforestation, low-carbon and climate resilient – in other words an economy that can address the three elements of the climate change challenge in Guyana. Some parts of the strategy are new, and its focus on low carbon growth is breaking new ground in clarifying some of the choices that we face as a nation.

It is important to remind ourselves that our National Development Strategy recognized the need for sustainable growth many years ago, and put sustainable use of our forest at the centre of our national vision for a socially just and prosperous Guyana. This was the product of one of the largest consultation exercises in our nation's history, and has informed the development of much of our national policy ever since. The National Competitiveness Strategy took prioritized aspects forward, outlining key growth opportunities for our country. But these strategies were prepared when the importance of low carbon economic activity was not understood, so our Low Carbon Development Strategy seeks to bring certain aspects of them up-to-date and to augment them with new action to address the challenges and opportunities presented by climate change.

Chapter 1 of the strategy describes today's challenges and opportunities in more detail. Guyana is at a key point in our national development, and we now have some choices to make as a nation. For the past two decades, we have focused on establishing a free-market, multi-party, democratic society. We have reformed our constitution to create one of the most modern and inclusive constitutional frameworks in the world. We have restructured our economy to place private sector development at its heart - strong fiscal and monetary policy have enabled us to reduce our national debt so that now, our external debt less than half of what it was in the early 1990s and servicing this debt costs a fraction of what it did then. While not wishing to diminish the very real problems caused by the global financial crises, and in particular Clico Trinidad's insolvency and the consequent impact on Clico Guyana, our financial system is fundamentally sound. Our currency is stable and inflation is under control, and we are investing unparalleled sums in our social sectors – with over a third of government revenue now going to the Education sector alone. More Guyanese own land and homes than ever before in our history and the legal framework for investment has been completely reformed to protect private investment. In parallel, we have upgraded most of our strategic economic infrastructure – for example, through improvements to the national road, river and air networks. In recent times we have completed the Berbice Bridge to bring the people of Berbice closer to the rest of the country. The bridge across the Takutu now joins our people and economy to the economic powerhouse of Brazil, and through Brazil to the rest of South America.

We should therefore take pride in how far we have carried our national development to date, and learn from it that we Guyanese have the capacity to adapt in the face of changing global realities. That will be particularly important as we start to implement the next generation of economic reforms and strategic infrastructure development. We need to open up new land for agricultural development, remove our dependence on imported oil for electricity generation, and improve our digital infrastructure to create new employment opportunities. We need to expand into new economic sectors and we need to deal with significant climate change adaptation challenges to protect our people and productive land. Addressing this next stage of our national development will be particularly challenging because we need to start doing so in the midst of one of the most difficult international economic environments of the last hundred years.

Chapter 2 of our strategy squares up to how we can generate the investment needed for this next phase of development. It recognises the reality that our pristine rainforest is our country's most valuable asset and that it would be economically rational to choose to harness the forest to generate the investment we need. The majority of the forest's 15 million hectares is suitable for timber extraction and post-harvest agriculture and mining. A fact-based assessment by McKinsey and Company estimated its value - known as Economic Value to the Nation or EVN - to be the equivalent of an annual annuity payment of US\$580 million. However, generating EVN in Guyana, while economically rational for us as a nation, would have significant negative consequences for the world. The deforestation that would accompany this development path would reduce the critical environmental services which Guyana's forests provide to the world – such as bio-diversity, water regulation and carbon sequestration. Conservative valuations of the Economic Value to the World – or EVW - provided by Guyana's forests suggest that, left standing, they contribute US\$40 billion to the global economy each year.

Nobody should interpret this as a threat that we are going to cut down our forests unless the world pays us. But if future governments are to be able to reconcile the trade-offs between development and forest protection, they must be able to realize value for the services provided by the forest to the world and not just rely on our national desire to help the world, sincere as that may be.

History shows that economically rational deforestation is the norm in countries at our stage of development – for example, the United States of America actively encouraged deforestation as a way to open up the Western States to investment and economic activity. Similarly, the United Kingdom lost almost 90% of its ancient woodland as a consequence of economically rational development. And this is not distant history - almost half of the forest that existed in Britain in 1945 was deforested between then and the end of the 20th century.

This is why we need to work through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and REDD to change these long-established economic dynamics, and to lay the groundwork for forestry carbon services to be progressively integrated into the global economy via the carbon markets after 2012. This will enable forests to be worth more alive than dead, allow Guyana to invest in our next generation of economic reforms and infrastructural development, and still avoid emissions of 1.5 Gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent by 2020 that would have otherwise stemmed from an economically rational development path.

Creating the incentives to enable this to happen will take time – and this can only happen if the world’s historic polluters make meaningful commitments to reduce emissions at Copenhagen. If the current economic crisis is used as an excuse to pull back from these commitments, it will send a disastrous signal to the developing world that action on climate change can only take place during times of prosperity. However, if the countries of the developed world accept their responsibilities, I believe that Guyana and other rainforest countries will recognize that the build-up of payments for forestry carbon services will take some time. Our LCDS sets out our expectations of how this might happen, and how even though the carbon market will not be able to out-compete EVN for many years to come, if an internationally supported REDD fund emerges in the interim, this can provide strong enough support for us to start re-orienting our economy while waiting for the long-term emergence of REDD. This is a complex and controversial subject internationally – and I hope that our strategy sets out how a practical and pragmatic approach from rainforest countries and international partners can deliver progress.

Chapter 3 addresses the second element of our new economy –how to combine the stimulation of low deforestation economic activities with further long-term climate change abatement through a concentrated effort to move our economy onto a low carbon trajectory. At the top of Guyana’s priorities in achieving this will be to use forestry payments to catalyse the building of the Amelia Falls hydro-power plant. We can also build the necessary infrastructure to take economic and employment pressures away from our forest by opening up non-forested parts of the country to investment. Most notably we can open up the Canje Basin and the Intermediate Savannahs to enable private sector investment in high-potential low-carbon sectors, such as fruits and vegetables and aquaculture. We can enhance our digital infrastructure and generate high quality employment for our graduates and others in new fields like business process outsourcing. With these in place, we are building a foundation for future productive economic activity and employment which does not depend on forested land.

Put together, these activities will enable Guyana to generate economic growth at or in excess of projected Latin American growth rates over the coming decade, while

simultaneously eliminating approximately 30 percent of non-forestry emissions through the use of clean energy.

Moving our national economy onto a low-deforestation, low-carbon path does not mean stopping all economic activities in our forest. Mining and forestry will continue but they must be done to standards that are compatible with our international obligations and our low carbon development vision. In areas which are vulnerable to illegal activities, properly managed sustainable forestry and mining is often the best form of protection for forests because they create positive incentives for their operators to ensure that illegal activities do not encroach on their areas.

We have some of the strongest forestry laws in the world, and they were recently upgraded through the Forestry Act which received unanimous support in our National Assembly in January of this year. As we move forward, we will need to constantly update our laws and our ability to enforce them, and I want to see regular inspections of our forestry, mining and other land use practices – if we are deploying our forests to provide services to the world, it is essential that our partners have confidence in the quality of our forestry standards and the enforcement of those standards. To start this process and in order to establish an internationally accepted fact-base about Guyana's forestry practices, I asked the Norwegian Government to engage an international organisation to carry out an independent assessment of our forest practices and law enforcement capabilities. This work started several weeks ago, and their report will be ready by the end of September.

At this point, I want to make it clear that we have to continue supporting development in non-forested parts of our country. This is one area where there has been much inaccurate speculation in recent weeks, in particular about whether we are going to prevent investment and employment in the Rupununi Savannah. As with our forest, what we are seeking to do in the Savannahs is to find the right balance. Towards achieving that balance and in line with our national commitment to place 10% of Guyana's territory into conservation areas, contiguous protection zones will ensure that the eco-system and bio-diversity of the Rupununi Wetlands are protected. But people should also be reassured that as well as protecting bio-diversity, appropriate areas of the Rupununi will be opened up for jobs and investment in agriculture and other sectors where we have competitive advantage.

In parallel with moving our national economy onto a low-deforestation, low-carbon path, we must also create the opportunity for forest communities to choose how they will participate in this new economy. Toward this end, our Amerindian citizens will be asked if they wish to opt in to the national forest protection programme. I will outline some more details of how this can be done in a few moments, but first I want to re-emphasise

several points that I have made before about the rights of our Amerindian citizens to choose whether and how to participate in REDD, or to choose not to do so.

The first point to emphasise is that the Amerindian Act gives Amerindians jurisdiction over the forests in all their own titled lands. In its current form, the proposal to place Guyana's forest under long term protection excludes forest lands under Amerindian jurisdiction. This is in accordance with the Government's commitment to only include these lands after communities have engaged in appropriate consultation to decide whether and how they wish their lands to be included. Their decision to participate will likely be based on whether participation will lead to improved access to opportunities and services for forest-based communities. Exactly how the benefits of REDD will be shared to enable communities to access these opportunities and services will be decided in consultation between communities and the government. Based on proposals from representatives of Amerindian communities during the preparation of our strategy, this may involve setting up an indigenous people development fund with forest payments that are for Amerindian land, where some payments would flow directly to individual villages, and the balance would fund a broader Amerindian Development Fund. Examples of what this could enable include the expansion of social services including health and education, the provision of low-carbon energy sources since most villages are not on the national grid, and support for new economic activities that do not threaten the forest.

My Government is proud of our record on working with our Amerindian citizens to title and demarcate their land – over the past decade, the amount of land under Amerindian ownership has grown from about 6% of Guyana's area to about 14% today. Ninety-six village communities including satellite villages now have title for their lands, eight of these communities have had extension of their land and another nine have requested the same. Few countries in the region or globally have such a track record. But there is still more work to do – nine villages are now awaiting titling. These requests are now being processed by the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs and individual communities in line with the process set out in the Amerindian Act which allows communities to request titled lands. This is very costly work, and I am hopeful that if REDD and other forest payments materialize, then we will have the resources to complete this work more quickly than otherwise would have been the case, and then these communities will also be able to decide whether and how to opt in to the national forest protection scheme. Over the coming three months, consultations will take place to discuss how this might happen but there will no deadline imposed as to when forest communities choose to "opt in" to the overall framework.

I welcome the Toshias who are present here today. As the elected leaders of our Amerindian communities, you and your predecessors have played a vital role throughout an intense period of reform, as the formulation of the Amerindian Act and the demarcation process for titled lands involved a heavy work-load. I am conscious that the upcoming consultations will give you yet more responsibilities. As you know over the

next 3 months, we will have a series of consultations in Regions 1, 7, 8, 9 and 10 where Amerindians mainly live, and we will facilitate a national meeting which will bring together all the elected leaders of our Amerindian peoples. I know you will continue your hard work and deep commitment on behalf of your people and all our forests, for which I thank you. I also wish to thank you for your initial ideas on creating an indigenous fund with REDD and other forest payments, and the idea that we can use REDD to accelerate the demarcation programme. Reconciling REDD with indigenous rights is a very difficult issue globally, so the leadership you are giving in Guyana can also be valuable to others across the world.

Chapter 4 of the strategy addresses the third element of the climate challenge in Guyana – building better climate resilience into our economy by upgrading our defenses against climate change-induced flooding. 39% of our people and 43% of our GDP are in regions exposed to significant flooding risk. Yet our drainage and irrigation infrastructure is not up to the challenge of dealing with the changing weather patterns we are now experiencing. However, many of the most severe threats from flooding can be addressed – and while our strategy sets out how about US\$1 billion will be needed to address our long-term adaptation needs, it also sets out a portfolio of urgent, near-term investments in the highest priority areas. These include maintaining and reinforcing the sea wall, repairing the conservancy, and support for switching to flood resistant crops. We are still working to establish the climate change adaptation needs of the hinterland regions but these are likely to include empowering communities and building new river defenses. As well as protecting Guyana’s people and productive land, this investment will enable us to reduce the equivalent of 10% of GDP which could accrue to Guyana on average each year without the damage caused by this flooding.

Chapter 5 sets out the administrative arrangements for the LCDS and then Chapter 6 outlines at a high level how the national consultation we start today will proceed. The co-ordination of the consultations will be done from the Office of Climate Change, with the support of the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs and the REDD Secretariat at the Guyana Forestry Commission. Today’s event is being carried by the national TV and radio channels to ensure that we are communicating across the whole of Guyana. The formal component of today’s proceedings will be followed by breakout sessions where further details will be shared about how the next three months will provide the opportunity for all our people to offer their view on the strategy and make suggestions for its improvement. Individual, dedicated consultations will be supported at a national level, and also in all regions of Guyana. The strategy will be tabled for parliamentary discussion by the elected representatives of our citizens. Today, break-out sessions for the mining community and the forestry sector will start to shape how the interests of all involved in these key sectors can be aligned with the strategy. As I have already mentioned, Tashaos will be supported in seeking to explain and gather input on the strategy amongst Amerindian communities. And while the Government will support specific consultation events throughout the country, I urge individuals and other groups to make their own efforts to discuss the strategy and offer suggestions for improvement

– from debates at the University of Guyana to discussions in schools across the country to events hosted by non-governmental organizations and the private sector. I hope that the media will inform themselves about what the strategy contains and encourage information sharing and opinion formation across the country.

Consultation on a matter of such national and international importance is not easy, and it is important for us to ensure that our consultative process adheres to well-established local and international standards. For this reason, I asked the Government of Norway to engage an independent institution to work with us to ensure that our consultation is of the quality we need. This institution helped in the preparation of the consultative process I have just outlined, and will provide ongoing advice and guidance throughout.

Yet even if our process is in accordance with the best international standards, that does not mean that there will be unanimity – in no democracy in the world would an issue like this attract unqualified consensus. Similarly, we are seeking to reconcile many competing interests, especially as we work to align all our land use policies including forestry and mining. Therefore, I hope that all involved will respect that there are multiple views, and all should be heard. But I also urge that views are respectful of the fact that ultimately choices will have to be made, and that these must be grounded in fact-based analysis. And all involved must recognize that we are all learning here – what we are trying to do in Guyana has never been tried anywhere in the world, so expecting perfection from the beginning is unrealistic. That said, I can assure all Guyanese that my Government remains fully committed to continuing to find a way to make Guyana's continued progress towards a socially just and prosperous future compatible with protecting our forest as we would all like to see.

So to conclude, ladies and gentlemen, the choice is ours as a people. I hope that you will read the Low Carbon Development Strategy and form your own judgement on the overall vision it sets out. I also hope that you will provide input to improve the strategy – I wish to once more emphasise that it is a draft for consultation. Today is the launch and the breakout sessions which follow this address are to help provide more information and points of clarification. You can then take the strategy and digest it over the coming months. The details for how you can provide feedback, as individuals or through representative bodies from civil society, will be communicated through the media and local representatives on an ongoing basis.

Last December, I spoke of my confidence that the people of this country would show the world that Guyana possess world-class vision, creativity and innovative capability, coupled with a sincere commitment to a global good that is bigger than all of us. I said that we could apply these deep-rooted qualities to the problems of climate change, and be a beacon for the world. This confidence in the people of Guyana remains as strong today. I want to once more thank the opposition parties for their support to date. They have rightly seen that this strategy represents a vital new opportunity for our country, which will long outlast the incumbency of any President or Government.

Combating climate change is no longer just a campaign, it needs to become a programme for meaningful action. I hope that our consultation proves that the people of Guyana stand ready to carry our load. We look to the rest of the world to do the same.

Thank you.