

SVG: A functioning Society, and Working Economy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

On Thursday June 25, 2020 the Ministry of Health, Wellness and the Environment issued a press release informing the nation that Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, had achieved zero active recorded COVID-19 cases. This means that all 29 positive tests have fully recovered and are medically cleared. From the date of our first recorded positive test on March 11, 2020, this country has conducted over 840 tests, the bulk of which were done at the CARPHA lab in Trinidad and Tobago. However, approximately 150 tests were conducted locally thanks to our enhanced capacity that now allows us to do in-country testing.

Before any Caribbean island recorded a positive COVID-19 case, SVG put the necessary protocols in place based on the advice of the WHO and PAHO, that included partial bans on travellers from specified countries including China, screening at ports of entry, and advisories detailing proper hand hygiene, social distancing and other measures necessary to prevent the spread of the virus. All countries implemented quarantine measures for visitors arriving from certain locations, with this country being the first in the region to actually execute the quarantining of new arrivals. It was not long before COVID-19 impacted the entire region, as member state after member state of CARICOM confirmed positive cases.

Countries had to act swiftly to prevent the situation from spiraling out of control. Measures included the closure of exit and entry ports, the issuance of stay at home advisories, complete lockdown, and in the cases of Jamaica and Saint Kitts/Nevis, states of emergency. These measures implemented by our Caribbean neighbours brought economic activity to a standstill; schools were closed and citizens were locked in their houses unable to move about freely, in some cases facing the possibility of arrest for venturing outside for anything other than essentials. These measures had a crippling economic effect, with some countries' revenue projected to drop by as much as 80% as in the case of Antigua and Barbuda, forcing delays of central governing payment including salaries! It not difficult to imagine the social, psychological, and other terrible consequences of this halt on national economies. Simply put, countries in the region had not just stopped working, they had stop functioning! In SVG, the ULP government led by a man with an indomitable spirit in whose breast hope springs eternal, refused to entertain the idea of putting the country to sleep, regardless how temporarily.

SVG Never Stopped Functioning

Exposing the panic-laden and unwise consistent calls of the Dr. Hon. Godwin Friday-lead NDP to shut our borders, and institute “Chinese-style draconian measures”, that would have all but crippled normal functioning of our society, PM Gonsalves poured scorn on this irrationality; and, determined to proceed without histrionics, cognizant of and believing in the resilience of our people gave the assurance and demonstrated that our economy can continue to function. The ULP government then, with soberness and maturity, being scientific and very caring proceeded with purpose, showing the region and the world we are very mindful of the virus, but would be forced in perilous inertia by it.

The government took all protective measures. Schools were closed one week earlier with the Ministry of Education making relevant arrangement to ensure the continuous learning of our students. Needless to say, Dr. Friday allowed opposition politics to cloud reason urging that schools be closed, not to return until 2021. Making every effort to reassure the society at large that the safety of our children was paramount, the government met with stakeholders, and with Ministry of Transport and Works including BRAGSA to look at ways to safely restart face to face learning. By the end of May, there was a phased re-opening of schools, beginning with students writing exit exams, with all measures to ensure full and complete safety of our students. All Grade 6 students were able to write their CPEA on June 25th and 26th.

There was also the accelerated roll out of the universally praised PRYME program, offering grants to small businesses, with over 160 successful applicants obtaining sums from \$2500 to \$40,000. The agriculture sector received an injection of over \$12 million. All the while SVG continued its regular shipment of produce to Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados, keeping our farmers and traffickers employed while helping our CARICOM sisters. Some businesses scaled back activities, while offering special relief incentives to customers who may have difficulty servicing their accounts. But by-and-large, businesses kept their doors open. The vendors at the vegetable and fish markets as well as street vendors continued to ply their trade, securing their livelihoods. Imagine the economic disaster that may have ensued if this ULP government had abandoned reason and courage adopting the ill-conceived non-idea of Godwin Friday’s NDP to shut down the country, effectively bringing the functioning of our society to a halt! But wisdom triumphed once again over childlike fear! Thanks to which not just our economy but indeed society never entered a coma.

Conclusion

Keeping our Vincentian society functioning and our economy working during the COVID-19 pandemic underlines that SVG has a government lead by a Prime

Minister who constantly applies his heart to wisdom, consulting the professionals and following the science. But more than anything, a man who truly cares for all, but first and foremost the least fortunate. He knows they must be cared for! Our people are blessed with wise, innovative, creative and caring leadership. We see this repeatedly through the actions of this ULP government. The most important take away from the way SVG managed the Covid-19 pandemic is, that while the rest of CARICOM is trying to figure out how best to get their economies and countries working again, we proudly boast, SVG NEVER stopped!