

# Need to engage youth more critical than ever

**Pierre Cooke Jr**



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GUEST COLUMNISTS

**A**UGUST 12 was International Youth Day, which commemorated the publishing of the Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes in 1998. The theme for 2020 was “Youth Engagement for Global Action” and aimed to celebrate the many ways that young people are engaged in formal institutions at the local, regional, and global levels while also highlighting areas for improvement.

The need to engage youth is critical now more than ever as Caribbean leaders, in collaboration with key stakeholders across diverse sectors, including civil society, map out plans to effectively manage and rebuild from the COVID-19 crisis. These initial conversations and the eventual “build back better” blueprints will determine the legacy that will be left to future generations, and a critical voice – the youth voice, our voice – should not be left out. After all, how can we build a future without the voice of the future?

The small island developing states of the Caribbean have been particularly vulnerable to the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 due to the presence of an ageing population, a high prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and the considerable dependence on foreign imports and tourism to economies. As the region grapples with the pandemic and explores strategies to manage associated ramifications, it is imperative that we address these vulnerabilities. Once we are ready to effectively rebuild, there is a need to ensure that the legacy passed to current and future generations is a society that is stronger and more resilient than ever before, effectively not just building back, but building back better. In managing the pandemic now and making plans for such a society, it would be remiss of stakeholders to exclude our voices. After all, we will be carrying on the legacy of today’s leaders.

The engagement of young people as advocates in the COVID-19 response is an important part of the COVID-19 Advocacy and Communication Strategy of the Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC). This has been reflected in HCC’s youth-focused webinar series, “The Future Talks”. The most recent webinar, The Future Talks: COVID-19 and NCDs in the Caribbean – The Legacy, saw young professionals from across the region share their experiences and perspectives on the COVID-19 response and how we, as Caribbean people, can “build back better”.

**COVID-19 IMPACT**

Tara Armour, a trainee clinical psychologist at The University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona Campus, highlighted the impact that COVID-19 has had on mental health in the region, particularly among youth. She stressed that youth mental health must be a priority in all health systems, with the youth being included in related discussions. Dr Keddy Moïse, a young Haitian physician working with FHADIMAC (Fondation Haïtienne de Diabète et de Maladies Cardio-Vasculaires), spoke about community-based strategies being deployed to help persons living with NCDs manage their

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conditions during the pandemic, some of which he spearheaded. Eden Augustus, a trained chef and PhD student at UWI, Cave Hill Campus, assisted in a study that examined the behaviour of the general public during the height of COVID-19. She spoke to the power of research and its importance in identifying and managing persons affected by COVID-19 and highlighted the need for multisectoral research collaboration across the region. Kimberley Benjamin, a final-year law student at the Hugh Wooding Law School, stressed the importance of prioritising strong regulatory environments in order to accelerate the prevention and management of NCDs. The panellists, with their varied and rich experiences and expertise, have been actively involved in COVID responses in their various spheres, demonstrating the value and power of youth as actors and advocates.

So, why should our voices be part of creating the policies that will shape the communities and countries that we will inherit? Young people are critical stakeholders with valuable insights and unique needs that are important considerations when designing policies, especially those that affect them. A great way to get us interested and engaged is to involve us from the get-go. Rather than simply creating a policy that tells us what to do, we should be instrumental in policy formation, execution, and evaluation. This will not only foster a sense of ownership, but strengthen our trust in public institutions. Involving us as co-creators and expert resources sends a powerful message of trust and confidence and leads to programmes and policies that truly reflect our needs.

If our region’s leaders are thinking strategically about “building back better”, they should be visualising a sustainable society for generations to come – one that purposefully involves and engages key subpopulations, including young people.

Some regional civil-society organisations have commendably demonstrated how this can be done by engaging youth in addressing critical issues like childhood obesity and the prevention and management of NCDs. For example, The Heart Foundation of Jamaica (HFJ), through the Go Red for Women initiative, shed light on heart disease among women when they collaborated with young physician and Miss Jamaica World 2015 Dr Sanneta Myrie. Their joint messaging amplified the need for preventative approaches to tackle NCDs. The HFJ is also growing their youth influencer programme and has done work with the National Secondary Schools Council.

**MEANINGFULLY ENGAGED**

The Barbados Childhood Obesity Coalition has a youth subcommittee that is actively involved in guiding the obesity-prevention agenda. A youth subcommittee member was invited to contribute to the National School Nutrition Policy consultations hosted by the local Ministries of Health and Wellness and Education and Technological and Vocational Training. Today, the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados will also be launching “Act Now! Protect our Children’s Health”, a youth-informed and executed mass media campaign. The Antigua and Barbuda Diabetes Association dedicates part of its programming to children and young people living with NCDs, essentially supporting youth and giving them tools to confidently advocate for themselves and other vulnerable persons.

There are numerous ways that young people can be meaningfully engaged and supported.

Politically, there are avenues for youth to directly influence policy through youth parliaments, membership on national NCD commissions, and seeking out roles as youth champions and ambassadors both nationally and regionally. Young people have a right to participate in the democratic process.

Youth allies can also support you by intentionally contributing to and funding local youth-focused organisations and initiatives, providing mentorship, and creating spaces for inter-generational collaboration. Ultimately, the opportunities offered to youth should be multisectoral in nature and involve as many stakeholders as possible (see HCC “Opportunities for Engaging Youth” graphic for other suggestions).

The urgency to build back and engage youth now is intensified by the fast-approaching deadline for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which states that children and young adults are ‘critical agents of change’. The active engagement of youth in fulfilling these goals is critical to achieving sustainable

and inclusive societies. With these global deadlines looming, paired with our region’s challenges such as COVID-19 and climate change, the need for innovative ideas, concerted multisectoral action, and the meaningful engagement and participation of youth is critical for effective and sustainable change. Conversations about managing the realities of the pandemic today and rebuilding for the future are conversations that affect young people of today. These young people – we – must be part of this dialogue.

The HCC congratulates all of the regional youth and youth organisations on their contributions to their societies during this unprecedented time. We have observed your dedication, commitment, innovations, and knowledge-sharing. We look forward to seeing invitations from policy-makers to engage you as critical actors moving forward. Youth continue to shatter preconceived notions and work collaboratively in different spheres to truly shape this “build back better” blueprint. Remember, nothing can be done for you without you.

■ *Pierre Cooke Jr, Youth Voices Technical Adviser; Kerrie Barker, project assistant; and Danielle Walwyn, advocacy officer at Healthy Caribbean Coalition, are youth advocates and amplifying the voices of youth. Email feedback to [hcc@healthycaribbean.org](mailto:hcc@healthycaribbean.org).*

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGING YOUTH

For NCD Prevention & Control

**POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

**LOCAL**

- Actively support **youth councils and youth parliaments**
- Include a youth voice in **policy development and consultations, particularly those that are youth focused** e.g. National Youth Policies, National School Nutrition Policies
- Integrate youth policies within **others policies**
- Representation on national NCD Commissions
- Promote the **accessibility of elected officials** to youth

**REGIONAL**

- Actively support **regional high-level youth organisations** like CARICOM Youth Ambassadors, Regional Youth Parliament, Caribbean Youth Forums
- Representation on regional NCD Commissions and COVID response commissions and planning committee
- Including **youth representatives in national delegations** to the UN General Assembly and other UN meetings

**EDUCATION**

- Support for **local universities and youth-focused initiatives**
- Facilitate and **provide funding for youth training programmes**
- Provide **comprehensive education and training opportunities** to vulnerable youth groups, such as out-of-school children and adolescents, migrants and refugees, disabled people, people from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups and those with a limited education
- Provide opportunities for youth to engage in **research**
- Provide **media training** opportunities

**HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

- Supportive policies for healthy living** e.g. school nutrition policies, bans on marketing of unhealthy commodities to minors, mandatory physical education in schools
- Health education and support** NCDs, sexual health, mental health
- Providing **youth health friendly health services**
- Capacity building opportunities for health care professionals** to provide quality services for children and young people
- Mentoring and training youth leaders and engage youth in decision-making and strategic planning** on issues of climate change and the environment and its impact on health.

**OPPORTUNITIES & CIVIC PARTICIPATION**

- Facilitating **internships, mentorship and employment** (specifically investing in professional growth and leadership) opportunities
- Provision of meaningful opportunities in **civil society organisations**
- Support youth organisations **financially, technically, educationally** or otherwise

Some information adapted from UN Guide to Implementation of the World Programme for Action for Youth, Youth in Civil Society and the Caribbean Congress on Adolescent and Youth Health Preliminary Road Map

**VICTORIA MUTUAL**

A P P O I N T M E N T

**Mr Dalton Richardson**  
Group Chief Technology Officer

Mr Courtney Campbell, Group President & CEO of Victoria Mutual is pleased to announce the appointment of **Mr Dalton Richardson** to the post of **Group Chief Technology Officer**.

**Mr Richardson** has more than 26 years’ professional experience, 16 of which have been in leadership roles overseeing areas such as strategic planning, improving operational efficiency via innovation, team building, enterprise project management and piloting technology and business growth in the financial and insurance services industries.

Mr Richardson holds a Commonwealth Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) from the University College of the Caribbean. In addition, he is certified in Systematic Problem-Solving Process (SPS Methodology), Analytical Thinking and Problem Solving, COBIT Maturity Assessment and Implementation, ITIL v3 Fundamentals, Certified Scrum Master (CSM), Change Management and Advanced Strategic Management.

**VM is pleased to have Mr Richardson on board our Executive Leadership Team and looks forward to his contribution in service to our Valued Members and Clients.**

Mr Dalton Richardson is a professional with a strong background in technology and business. He is currently the Group Chief Technology Officer at Victoria Mutual. He has over 26 years of professional experience, with 16 years in leadership roles. He has overseen strategic planning, operational efficiency, team building, and business growth in the financial and insurance services industries. Mr Richardson holds a Commonwealth Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) from the University College of the Caribbean. He is also certified in Systematic Problem-Solving Process (SPS Methodology), Analytical Thinking, and Problem Solving. He is a member of the Institute of Management and Business Administration (IMBA) and the Caribbean Association of Management Executives (CAME). He is also a frequent speaker at industry conferences and seminars. He is passionate about technology and its role in driving business success. He is also a mentor and coach for young professionals. He is currently a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Management Executives (CAME). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Business Executives (CABE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Financial Executives (CAFE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Marketing Executives (CAME). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Operations Executives (CAOE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Procurement Executives (CAPE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Human Resources Executives (CHRE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Information Technology Executives (CAITE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Logistics Executives (CALOE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Sales Executives (CASE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Training Executives (CATOE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Quality Management Executives (CAQME). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Project Management Executives (CAPME). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Risk Management Executives (CARME). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Compliance Executives (CACOE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Ethics Executives (CAEE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Sustainability Executives (CASEE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Social Responsibility Executives (CASRE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Corporate Governance Executives (CACGE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Business Ethics Executives (CABEE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Business Law Executives (CABLE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Business Tax Executives (CABTE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Business Finance Executives (CABFE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Business Insurance Executives (CABIE). He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Caribbean Association of Business Real Estate Executives (CABRE). 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