

OPENING ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT DR C.B. JAGAN
AT THE CONFERENCE ON "POVERTY IN GUYANA: FINDING SOLUTIONS"
UNIVERSITY OF GUYANA, MARCH 18, 1993

Mr Chairman,

It is indeed a special honour for me to be offered the opportunity to open this important conference which is to deliberate on issues of poverty in Guyana and to find implementable solutions.

Personally, I would have preferred to be among you and to make my contribution from the floor. You perhaps know that the problem of poverty, its cause, effects and cure, not only in Guyana but in the world at large, has always been a key motivating factor in my political career. Today, I am heartened that so many of my fellow countrymen from all walks of life, understand the importance of finding solutions to poverty, and are prepared to utilise their time and knowledge to address the issues involved.

I wish sincerely to thank the Institute of Development Studies and the University of Guyana for organising this event and to state that my administration pledges its full support for this effort and will give all encouragement, and more, to continue informed public discussions and debate on such fundamental issues.

It is not by chance that such a debate is being initiated here by the University of Guyana. This is like a dream come through. When the idea of a local university first took hold of me, I knew that one day, if we persisted, this institution would play a pivotal role in our development and be, so to speak, the "brain of our nation." Today, I can say with pride that the University of Guyana has come of age and it has a glorious future ahead of it.

In recent decades a deep moral, social, political and economic crisis engulfed our nation. Our people have paid a high price

during these years. We hope that with the advent of a freely elected government, Guyana can embark on the road to recovery.

We are still in a crisis situation. Despite recent relatively high growth rates the economy continues to be weak, unemployment is high, the loss of skills due to a massive brain drain leaves us with a human resource void. At the same time, infrastructure is deteriorating, the social sector is in need of major financial and other inputs, and services and wages are far below the required minimum for a modern standard of living. Today all our efforts are hampered by the tremendous foreign debt accumulated over the years.

The task ahead of all Guyanese is indeed monumental. But as they say, hope springs eternal from the human breast. I am very

optimistic that we can recover from this situation. I am confident that we will not only bring prosperity to Guyana but given our natural resources and the drive and fortitude of our people, we can make Guyana a model of development.

Since I have been given the task of simply opening this conference I will refrain from dealing with the reasons, local and international, for our present predicament. These are, however, extremely relevant and should be analysed since they would have a bearing on whatever strategies we may want to implement to eradicate poverty in our society. My reasons for doing so is not to avoid looking at "imperialism's strategy" or the "imperialist vehicle that perpetuates poverty in Guyana", as Mr Freddie Kisooson, in today's Stabroek, insists we do.

Today I want to say a few words about some aspects of the historical majority who have been marginalised for whatever reason and which majority, cannot play their rightful role in the development process.

This conference will be looking at poverty in Guyana and attempt to find solutions. There are many measures of the extent of poverty in Guyana. Some even say that all Guyanese are poor. But whatever source we use, the inescapable fact is that poverty in Guyana is a serious problem and affect the majority of the people.

I want to impress upon you the need to keep in mind the people we are talking about. These are real people. We have to know them. We have to put ourselves in their place and see how they think. We must ask ourselves how they interpret these efforts in conferences halls to deal with their plight. We have to see if these people, who live daily in need, in slums, are hungry, poorly educated or illiterate, have broken families, are no stranger to crime, can understand themselves, can help themselves, and can involve themselves in whatever bright plans we advance in their cause.

In thinking about my unfortunate countrymen, I recall a few lines from "The Stranger of Raveloe" by George Eliot about those who live a life of want. The lines are, I quote, "To them pain and mishap present a far wider range of possibilities than gladness and enjoyment: their imagination is almost barren of the images that feed desire and hope, but is all overgrown by recollections that are a perpetual pasture to fear."

Mr Chairman, as you can see, our major tasks in eradicating poverty in Guyana is not simply to find solutions. We have to find and articulate solutions and positions that those people out there understand and accept, to the extent that they are prepared to lift themselves out of their misery. Should our attempts here today be seen as another effort at charity, simply to ease their pain for a few moments, then we would have failed.

It is my firm belief that an anti-poverty strategy cannot be successful outside of an integrated development strategy. An inherent feature of that strategy should be aimed at improving the

quality and efficiency of social programmes. This is in no way a suggestion that measures aimed at targeting any of the vulnerable groups cannot be effective. As a matter of fact all endeavours to alleviate poverty are welcomed, given the scope of this problem.

We have to bring those marginalised sections back into the mainstream of economic activities. To be successful, we would have to continue on the road of economic growth and human development. At the end of the day, all our strategies must result in the poorer strata being able to meet their basic needs. We have to find ways to find productive employment for our people, increase their purchasing power and improve primary health care, reduce malnutrition, pre-school education, train and re-train of adults and improve housing. Special efforts will have to be given to children, pregnant mothers, the elderly and Amerindians.

As you know the government has placed much emphasis over the past five months on the formation of community groups and have given much encouragement to non-governmental organisations. We will continue to do this and to seek more funds for SIMAP with help from the IDB and the EEC. SIMAP, of course, will have to be better organised and oriented to deal with vulnerable groups on a broader scale. But it will take more than SIMAP to achieve success.

There is definitely need for a national effort at mass mobilisation to confront this problem. I think that our present shortage of cash is offset by the presence of a strong political will and commitment by all to find imaginative and bold solutions to chart a successful anti-poverty programme.

We all recognise that there is need for a concerted anti-poverty programme. I think, however, that serious debates must take place on how to bring together all the players in the game. This will create the conditions for proper coordination and creation of appropriate planning and executing bodies. This will certainly help

to bring about more effective social management, a strengthened statistical database and institutions.

An important aspect of an anti-poverty strategy is democracy. As I said before the people we have in mind must be involved. While there is a growing role for the government to play in eradicating poverty, there must be a great degree of de-centralisation. The beneficiaries of the programmes must be given a chance to be involved in arriving at solutions and to work out methods of implementation. I think that experience will show that programmes for the poor are more likely to be successful when they offer scope for broad community participation especially with the injection of self-help and self-management at the micro-economic level.

Mr, Chairman, I want to use this opportunity to urge the private sector, foreign donors, charitable organisations, all NGOs and interested individuals to come forward and play a role in this national effort.

My government will be following closely these proceedings and will be especially interested in the results of this conference.

I wish the conference organisers and all participants every success in the deliberations to come.

It is with great pleasure that I now declare this Conference on "Poverty in Guyana: Finding Solutions" open.