Policy Debate Address

For

Dr. the Honourable Natalio D. Wheatley
Minister for Education, Culture, Youth Affairs, Fisheries and Agriculture

On the Occasion of
The 40\textsuperscript{th} General Conference
11 to 27 November, 2019
At UNESCO Headquarters
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President of the General Conference
Chairman of the Executive Board
Director General Audrey Azoulay
Excellencies
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen

I greet you and bring kind greetings from the Government and the people of the British Virgin Islands.
Mr. President, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your election to the 40th Session of the General Conference. I wish you continued success as you assume your role with honour and dignity.

It is an honour to be here today to reaffirm the British Virgin Islands’ commitment to building the ‘defences of peace’ in the minds of men, women, and children, in keeping with UNESCO’s ideals of attaining the highest standards in education, science, culture, communication and information.

My dear colleagues, allow me to share with you some of the developments in education in the British Virgin Islands. As you are all aware two years ago, our islands were severely damaged when, within 14 days, we were visited by two devastating hurricanes – Irma and Maria. These hurricanes shook the very fabric and physical infrastructure of our education system, and the challenge to rebuild and repair was monumental. Students were displaced, the school day shrunk to half, and the effect was felt throughout the territory.

Mr. President, I am pleased to report that we are well on the way to remedying that situation, and the government and people of the British Virgin Islands are deeply grateful for the assistance which has been provided by UNESCO. We are rebuilding schools, one at a time.
Mr. President, like many, we have achieved universal Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Education and, in so doing, we have given attention to Early Childhood Education, Special Education and Technical Vocational Education. We have successfully embarked on teacher training programmes and we aim to have teachers qualified with Bachelors’ degrees in Education. For our teaching staff we continue to facilitate professional development, and for our students, our quest is to implement programmes to ensure that their reading skills reach an exceptional level. In these pursuits, we will welcome UNESCO’s expertise, and specialists to assist with further teacher training which is paramount for optimal achievement. Equipping our teachers with the tools and expertise will ensure that our students continue to excel. Given our quest for excellence, we are now including in the curriculum French, as another foreign language, with the expectation that our students will be better prepared to participate and benefit from the expanding tourism industry.

Mr. President, our Government is dedicated to building a Territory where all its citizens are provided with opportunities to reach their full potential. Access to a quality education is a high priority area and the impetus by which we will promote equality and opportunity for our people, so that they can actively participate and
contribute to the sustainable development of our Territory. I would also like to thank UNESCO’s efforts in guiding the Education 2030 Agenda and the sustainable development goals. In particular Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). Just last week UNESCO in collaboration with the Asia Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding under the auspices of UNESCO was gracious to fund a Global Citizenship Education Workshop in the British Virgin Islands where stakeholders were fueled with innovative concepts that will help in continuing to propel the initiative of ensuring “that all learners are provided with the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development.”

Mr. President, since the UNESCO Institute for Statistics produces the most comprehensive and trusted global education database, and capacity development is a crosscutting priority, we will continue to seek UNESCO’s support in data collection, analysis and distribution of results. We recognize this as the first step toward understanding and addressing the challenges which we all face.

Finally, as a Small Island Developing State, the British Virgin Islands continues to share some of the same challenges to sustainable developmental as our counterparts do. Our unique and particular vulnerabilities include climate change. The damage done to the British Virgin Islands in recent times as a result
of unprecedented climate impacts does not just erode the Caribbean way of life, it also derails Caribbean development. The result of the devastating category 5 hurricanes experienced in 2017 has proven that Caribbean Small Island Developing States are among those states which are most vulnerable to climate change. Therefore, a change in attitudes and approaches to this issue and its effects on Small Island States must be demonstrated. We thank UNESCO for your continued support and for the initiatives that were presented in the SAMOA Pathway even as we remind you that our challenges are increasing. So, we welcome any assistance UNESCO can offer for revitalizing global partnerships for sustainable development. We welcome and support Sustainable Development Goal 17.

Mr. President, in concluding I wish to reiterate that the territory of the British Virgin Islands continues to appreciate the benefits of membership and association with UNESCO. We therefore pledge the Territory’s commitment to and advocacy for UNESCO and its ideals.

I thank you!