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Public Sector Reform Begins With the Timely Publication of Annual Reports

The main reason that Barbados slipped from Number 46 in the global competitiveness rankings to Number 72 in the most recent Global Competitiveness Report is the poor performance of our public sector. Delays in registration and approval processes have robbed the country of over \$2 billion of public and private investment in recent years. In order to turn the economy around, the public sector must be given a makeover, to improve competitiveness and restore Barbados' attractiveness to investors.

The Annual Report is the place where all public sector entities report to the people of Barbados on their performance. Barbadians will have their first concrete evidence of public sector reform when the first Government department or statutory corporation reports on its performance for the last fiscal year.

Over thirty years ago my college Muriel Saunders and I completed a report on Government spending on health, education and other public services. That report may be found on the Central Bank of Barbados' website. In it we were able to show the results of public expenditure in terms of the incidence of disease, hospital beds available, educational achievement at various levels, crime statistics, and a variety of public and social services. We could track progress year by year, using the annual reports of the Departments of Health, Education, Agriculture, etc. Our study cannot be updated to the current time, because not one of the reports that were routinely produced forty years ago is now available.

The information provided in annual reports is a basis for measuring the performance of Government and public institutions. Public accountability begins with the timely publication of these reports. The public has a right to expect annual reports from every Government Department and agency, every statutory corporation, the UWI and every other entity that receives Government financing. These reports must be published within three months of the end of each institution's financial year, so that accountability is current and relevant. They must account for the use of the public funding received, compare their performance to the intended programme for the year, and explain their successes and failures. They must say what they plan for the current year, with the resources made available from Government's current budget. Their plans should include addressing unfinished business from the previous year, and provide an outline of medium term goals.

It is said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The challenge of public sector reform in Barbados is a daunting one. The timely publication of annual reports is the single first step that Barbadians have a right to expect towards the needed change.