

A new era of regional cooperation: The birth of the Association of Caribbean States



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At the end of the 1980's, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Heads of Government felt a growing exigency to forge closer relations with their neighbours in the Caribbean Basin. This desire to widen the integration process sought to embrace all those washed by the Caribbean Sea, including other Caribbean States, Central America and the littorals of South America. Against this backdrop, CARICOM agreed to establish The West Indian Commission (WIC), in July 1989 in Grenada, under the chairmanship of Sir Shridath Ramphal, to entrust an analysis of how to successfully create a mechanism for cooperation with their neighbours. A few years later in 1992, this independent body proposed in the report 'A Time for Action' the creation of an Association of Caribbean States (ACS). This Association would potentially become the largest integration movement in the Caribbean, expanding through unprecedented geographical scope.

The proposal came on the heels of the need for CARICOM to pursue further cooperation and strengthen its bargaining power in the global economy by creating an enlarged economic space. Member Countries envisioned the potential of this new enterprise which would comprise 200 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean.

There was general unanimity at the First Special Meeting of the Conference of CARICOM in October 1992, where Heads of Government agreed to consult with other states on the recommendation of the WIC. Follow up discussions occurred when the CARICOM Bureau met with government representatives from Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela to discuss the proposal. These countries wholeheartedly welcomed the idea. Further diplomatic discourse continued at the CARICOM/Central American Meeting in San Pedro Sula, Honduras.

The timing of the proposal gained momentum following failed negotiations to implement of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the European Union policies on trade. The fast changing international economic climate, coupled with the liberalisation measures adopted by Latin American and Caribbean countries, accelerated the indispensable appetite for integration and cooperation at the regional level, and for the development of closer economic geographical linkages, particularly in the area of trade and investment to boost economic competitiveness.

During the CARICOM-Central American Ministerial Summit in Kingston, Jamaica, May 1993, the Ministers of the respective countries welcomed the proposal to create the ACS. Thereafter, significant advancements and forthright commitments were made during the Summit of Heads of State and Government of CARICOM, Suriname and the Group of Three (G3), (Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela), in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, October 1993, where a timeline was set for the establishment of the ACS.

The negotiation of the Convention Establishing the ACS began in a workshop held in Kingston, Jamaica, in March 1994. Two meetings, one in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and a final one in Mexico City were convened. The main purpose was to agree on the nature, scope and objectives of the Association as well as the way in which countries, Overseas Caribbean Territories and non-governmental organizations would participate.

By July 1994, the growth of regional integration was steadily underway. At the Fifteenth Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community, 4-7 July 1994, Bridgetown, Barbados, Heads of Government expressed their eagerness to sign the Convention Establishing the ACS during that same month.

Against this backdrop of creating a new era of regional integration characterized by the strengthening of cooperation, the Convention establishing the Association of Caribbean States was signed on July 24th, 1994 in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia. As enshrined in this Convention, the Association is an organisation for consultation, cooperation and concerted action, whose purpose is to identify and promote the implementation of policies and programmes. The convention entered into force on August 4th, 1995.

At the signing of the Convention, this organisation of the Wider Caribbean, comprised of 25 Members and 3 Associate Members was created as a vehicle for functional cooperation among the countries which shared a common patrimony, the Caribbean Sea. The areas of cooperation primarily included trade, transport and tourism. Other priority actions such as natural and environmental disasters, the Caribbean Sea and social, cultural, scientific and technological development issues were included in the Work Programme of the ACS at the First Ministerial Council Meeting held in Guatemala, December 1996.

No other mechanism for cooperation in the Wider Caribbean espoused such an expansive call. From the beginning, four regional groups were distinguished: CARICOM, the Group of Three, Central America and the Non-Grouped (Cuba, Panama and Dominican Republic). The Overseas Territories were included as Associate Members. The creation of the ACS represented a strategic opportunity to develop new forms of regional cooperation.

In the months following the signing of the Convention, details of the finer workings of the Association were to be negotiated. Among the main issues: a Secretary General had to be appointed, a Host Country for the Headquarters had to be selected and a budget determined.

The First Summit of the ACS was convened on August 17th and 18th, 1995 in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. At this Meeting, Trinidad and Tobago was selected as the Headquarters of the Association, after the Dominican Republic and Venezuela previously withdrew their nominations. Dr. Simon Molina Duarte, of Venezuelan nationality, was at the helm of this organisation as the first Secretary General of the ACS, and the Council elected Mexico, as Chair of the Ministerial Council for a period of one year, under the chairmanship of Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, José Ángel Gurría.

In Guatemala on November 30th and December 1st 1995, the Ministerial Council held its first regular meeting and adopted 12 agreements. Among those was the Work Programme of the ACS, the terms of participation of Associates Members, Observers and Social Actors, rules of procedure of the Ministerial Council and the Regulations of Secretariat.

This unique, supranational and expansive organisation in the Greater Caribbean, charged with the optimism, vitality and support of their leaders, has demonstrated the will to frontally address the new challenges facing the hemisphere in a changing global village. Leaders of the day took a bold step and embarked on a journey to collectively create new opportunities for their territories. Today, after twenty years of existence, the ACS has survived many challenges and has emerged revitalized, continuing to promote functional cooperation among its Member States.