

Clear skies for the local tourism industry

Charles Fernandez, Minister of Tourism and Investment, outlines the country's successful efforts to bolster its tourism infrastructure to cater to the modern visitor



How successful has Antigua and Barbuda's tourism sector been since global travel returned?

Our outlook in January was the sky is the limit. We were very confident due to a tremendous increase in travel in the previous summer. July and August in 2021 were the best months we have ever had, and the winter season was also quite good moving into January. We are still looking good and set a record in April 2022 with visitors coming from the United Kingdom and the United States. However, visitors coming from Canada are still down by 40 percent compared with our traditional numbers. The Caribbean region and Canada were a very close third and fourth in terms of the amount of arrivals.

We work with the airlines and hotel associations; we interact on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. For example, if the price of fuel goes up, we get together to see what we can do to mitigate any possible threats. At the end of the day, it is all about working together and seeing how we can come up with good strategies. The war in Ukraine has affected the world in terms of the price of fuel. This has had a profound effect on ticket prices and the cost of living. People now have less disposable income with which to travel. In turn, properties and carriers face higher utility costs, which translates into higher ticket and room prices. The industry is in a difficult position. However, we remain optimistic.

What major infrastructure projects is the nation undergoing to expand its tourism offerings?

Our sister island Barbuda has recently seen a tremendous amount of investment in high-end tourism infrastructure. A new airport means people will be able to fly directly to the island. Although the airport in Antigua is bigger, the one in Barbuda is set up to handle jets. Prior to this, one would have to take a ferry from Antigua. Our airport in Antigua has been named number one for several years standing.

In terms of ports, projects are underway to increase cargo. The cruise port underwent dredging. We are moving towards developing the landside of the cruise port. There will be at least 50,000 square feet of buildings to rent to vendors and shop owners. The project could include a casino, restaurants, cafes and similar amenities. It is expected to be completed by the first quarter of 2024. In terms of hotels, timelines were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as some technical staff could not come in because of travel restrictions. Irrespective of that, there are two or three projects we hope to start before the end of the year.

What has the country done to develop its cruise ship segment and what kind of projections does the country have in terms of expected cruise ship passengers in the coming years?

We have partnered with Global Ports Holding, which is the largest port operator in the world. Under the deal, they will operate our cruise port for thirty years. They bring a tremendous amount of expertise and credibility to the management of our port. They have been a huge help in marketing the segment, most of which we could not have done on our own.

We anticipate a rise in the number of cruise passengers by a million within two years from the present rate of around 800,000. We do not want to overload the winter season. Rather, we are looking for ways to allow for our summer season to become more competitive. Traditionally our summer season has been virtually empty in terms of boats.

“At the end of the day, our tourism product must be sustainable. Our beaches and reefs must not be affected by our tourism operations; they are our most important asset.”

Charles Fernandez, Minister of Tourism and Investment

The environment is a huge factor for us. Whatever we do, we must tick this important box. At the end of the day, our tourism product must be sustainable. Our beaches and reefs must not be affected by our tourism operations; they are our most important asset.

How have restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the recent rise in tourism, and what level of restrictions does the government currently have in place?

The Caribbean is still a mixed bag as to how you need to be tested and what protocols are in place related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have seen losses related to that. Although Antigua has done very well with the pandemic, we are still seeing a large number of cases in the U.S., the U.K. and other parts of the world. As a result, there is still uncertainty as to what protocols will now be introduced. There is concern that if one books their ticket now to travel, the protocols around quarantine upon returning home may pose difficulties.

Currently, if you are fully vaccinated, you can come to Antigua with-



Antigua and Barbuda's colorful capital, St. John's

out a test. If one is not vaccinated, they need to take a test to prove they are COVID-19 free. Once you are on the island, the protocols that were put in place are now left up to departments and businesses to determine. At this point, there are no government restrictions in place. Government premises and terminals require a mask, but it is up to the taxi driver and property authorities to decide.

We are closely monitoring what is happening and feel confident because of our high vaccination rates. Of course, a new variant may arise, and we will respond as is necessary. We are confident that we are ahead of the curve.

While many are still wary of traveling, many persons are taking this period in stride and feel the need to get away because of added stresses during these difficult times. Antigua and Barbuda is the ideal place with our beautiful sunrises and sunsets, beaches and people to detox and preserve one's sanity. Furthermore, Antigua is seen as a high-end destination, meaning travelers will not be as affected by health risks as someone going low-cost destinations.

How has the pandemic period helped the tourism industry increase inspections of its operations and ultimately boost the country's profile?

We continuously inspect all our properties and train the workforce to ensure that standards are beyond compare, even at Airbnbs. People enjoy these properties to be immersed in the culture, enjoy a local experience and save on costs.

Airbnbs play a key role in bringing people to the islands, but what was being promoted was not always what was offered when guests arrived. In 2019 we passed an inspection and licensing act for Airbnb properties. We also sent a notice that hotels needed to be registered at the airport to receive visitors. Thorough inspections are carried out.

Ostensibly we started inspections because of the pandemic, but we have maintained them and the responses we are getting on our different platforms are extremely positive. As soon as we see something that may be an issue, we jump on it and see how we can address it and improve it. We have taken advantage of the pandemic period to inspect all kinds of hazards and norms.

Up until now, there has been no known transmission from any visitor staying at an Airbnb or a hotel to a local, and we intend to keep that record.



The islands are surrounded by pristine blue waters

Can you tell the readers about Antigua's green corridor and what they can expect to find when visiting?

The green corridor is the area of Antigua that gets the most rainfall, making it naturally very green. Compared to islands like Dominique it may not be a lot but compared to the northern or northwestern side of the island it is very lush. There are many fruit trees along the road where one can stop the car, pick a mango or an orange and eat them. Additionally, there are many vendors that operate along the route that sell very fresh fruit they have picked from the area.

They are amazing ambassadors for us, and travelers can have a lovely exchange with them. They are sure to tell you tales about that part of the island and recommend things to do. There are some very old churches and historic areas to visit along the route as well. The entire area has been designated as a protected area.

“We have all the ingredients to ensure that you get here, remain safe, enjoy your vacation and return home safe and sound.”

Charles Fernandez, Minister of Tourism and Investment

Why is Antigua and Barbuda an attractive destination for the current profile of globe trotters?

We are a beautiful country. Wherever you are, you are minutes from a beach. We have the best climate in the world; there are no heat waves in summer. Our crime rate is the lowest in the region, which is extremely important for guests. We have all the ingredients to ensure that you get here, remain safe, enjoy your vacation and return home safe and sound.

Additionally, we aim to reach first-world standards in terms of connectivity and pricing. The government has committed a lot of money towards this segment. Apart from our digital nomad program, we want to ensure our children are receiving the best possible digital learning and have embarked on a very robust and aggressive campaign to improve our connectivity.

We usually get awards for our marketing efforts. Our team is excellent, and we collaborate quite a bit. We launched a campaign in June for Romance Month wherein couples had fast-tracked entry. These initiatives help drive recognition of the destination. In addition, a number of our properties have received awards.

Regional leader offers a new home for a new life

Charmaine Quinland-Donovan, CEO, Citizenship by Investment Unit, talks about attractive advantages offered by Antigua and Barbuda's citizenship-by-investment program



Why is Antigua and Barbuda the top destination to relocate to in the Caribbean region?

Tourism has been the country's mainstay sector for decades. Because of this, our culture is warm and hospitable to all persons who visit our shores. Antigua and Barbuda is free of crime, which is analogous to living in paradise in this day and age. Among the regional programs, Antigua and Barbuda is the best country to facilitate relocation. A number of successful applicants and their families have already been relocated. Antigua and Barbuda is the premier choice for second citizenship around the world.

What advantages does Antigua and Barbuda's citizenship-by-investment program have compared to other options in the region?

In addition to the ease of travel for Antigua and Barbuda passport holders, our clients find value in our straightforward application process. No minimum net worth or previous business experience is required and decisions on applications are rendered within 60 to 90 days in most cases. Our program has no restriction on dual nationality; new citizens are not required to renounce citizenship from their country of origin. Furthermore, there are no taxes on worldwide income, inheritance, capital gains or investment returns.

"Among the regional programs, Antigua and Barbuda is the best country to facilitate relocation. A number of successful applicants and their families have already been relocated."

Charmaine Quinland-Donovan, CEO, CIU

These benefits in and of themselves are wholly attractive, but even more attractive is the fact that the country's infrastructure is akin to that of more developed countries. For example, the first successful kidney transplant was completed here four years ago. We have a cancer treatment center that caters to neighboring Caribbean countries for chemotherapy and radiation treatment.

Antigua and Barbuda is also home to a number of medical universities. One can complete medical studies in Antigua and fulfill residency requirements for the United States of America at the American Uni-

versity of Antigua. Other tertiary education institutes also exist in the country.

Persons who want a change in their pace of life and to enjoy the freedom and security that comes with living on a beautiful island can seamlessly fit into the fabric of our society while enjoying good educational options for their children. The country's literacy rate is at 99 percent. Those desiring to establish a business in Antigua and Barbuda can take advantage of its educated and skilled workforce.

Can you tell us about the new University of West Indies campus option for those looking to join the country's citizenship-by-investment program?

The University of the West Indies option provides the best large value proposition for families with a minimum size of six individuals. This option is particularly attractive for individuals from jurisdictions culturally known for having larger families, such as markets in the Middle East and Africa. We therefore continue to promote the program targeting persons who want to invest in our island paradise and who see Antigua and Barbuda as their plan B. As a result, we expect to see growth in applications of at least 50 percent in the next 24 months.

As an alumnus of the University of the West Indies, I feel immense pride with the establishment of the Antigua and Barbuda campus. I can attest to the university's superior brand; the university sat in the top 2.5 percent of universities globally in its 2021 impact rankings and number one in the Caribbean. We are happy to provide a reliable source of funding for the university through this new option. The contributions made by the fund assist with the university's recurrent expenditures and its expansion. I am really pleased with both the direction the university is taking and the rising interest in our program's related offer.

What current sectors present the most opportunities for investment from the U.S. and other foreign markets in Antigua and Barbuda?

Development projects under the program have largely been geared towards real estate and expanding the nation's available room stock. We continue to support additional upcoming projects and the government has outlined several new projects in the pipeline in this segment.

Another area where investment is encouraged is in our agro-processing sector. In the context of looming global food shortages, cultivating and manufacturing food for local consumption and export is sensible.



The country welcomes about 800,000 cruise passengers a year

Antigua and Barbuda has vast fertile land and untapped resources that are attractive to investors.

Other opportunities can be found in our information technology infrastructure, ocean farming and green projects such as solar and wind energy. There are also opportunities in the creation of new industries to facilitate economic diversification. One only needs to visit and explore our beautiful twin-island state to realize the immense possibilities that exist here.

What kind of specific challenges did the COVID-19 pandemic bring to the island nation?

We overcame many hurdles related to the pandemic, with the primary challenge being country-wide lockdowns. Antigua and Barbuda has experienced curfews following countrywide damage resulting from natural disasters in the past, but these curfews were usually for very brief periods and these instances were more understandable. Country-wide lockdowns mandating persons stay indoors for extended periods was a novelty for the vast majority of us. It was a difficult time, and particularly so for the unit.

What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on Antigua and Barbuda's Citizenship by Investment Unit?

The Citizenship by Investment Unit was the only office in active operation in the region. Our diligent staff reported to work daily to ensure that applications were processed efficiently as we understood how important the process was to our clients during an uncertain time. While much of our processes are automated, there are some parts of the process that require physical interaction with documents.

In light of declining revenues from the tourism sector, successfully navigating the unprecedented challenges brought on by the pandemic and keeping the unit operational and efficient was a significant achievement for us and the country. When the country began to relax the lockdown protocols and welcome visitors, the safety risks to staff increased. As vaccines did not become available to the country until February 2021, we mapped out and implemented hybrid operations consisting of in-office and remote work. We worked two alternating teams in the office weekly with required redundancies on each team. We were fortunate to have our team vaccinated in the first round of vaccination administration, which made it easier to transition back to the office.



The sheltered English Harbour in the south of Antigua

How did raised funds from the citizenship-by-investment program help those negatively affected by the pandemic?

The Citizenship by Investment Unit enabled the country to set up its infectious disease center. Additionally, revenue from the program assisted the government with retrofitting a building to operate as a spillover facility for the infectious disease center and the nation's main hospital. Thankfully, the retrofitted facility did not have to be used due to the government's successful management of the pandemic, with numbers of those requiring hospitalization at any one time not being too significant.

"One only needs to visit and explore our beautiful twin-island state to realize the immense possibilities that exist here."

Charmaine Quinland-Donovan, CEO, CIU

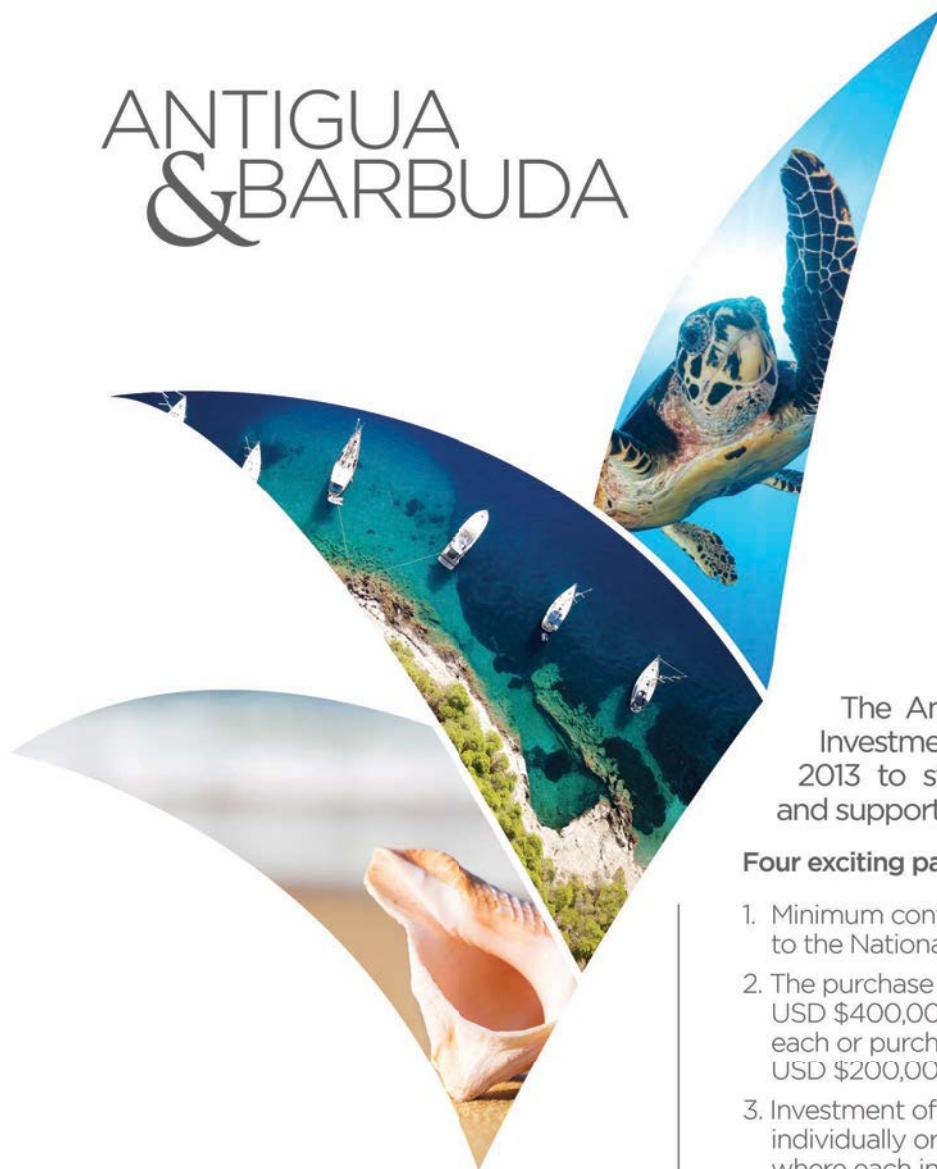
Revenues from the program also assisted the government in securing the necessary personal protective equipment for medical teams and tools required for testing the virus and facilitating initial payments for vaccines.

Apart from direct support to the government, the Citizenship by Investment Unit contributed directly to persons adversely affected by the pandemic and worked with local non-governmental organizations to provide food vouchers. Overall, we feel that revenues from the program helped alleviate difficult circumstances for many and made a real impact on our society.

What concluding remarks would you like to give to the readers of Newsweek to invite them to the Caribbean's premier destination?

I am happy to be partnering with Newsweek once again to place the spotlight on the beautiful twin island nation of Antigua and Barbuda and the amazing offerings under our attractive citizenship-by-investment program.

Consider this a clarion call to all potential investors to apply, invest and visit us today. I invite all readers to come and enjoy our beautiful paradise with unspoiled beaches. We really do live a happy life in Antigua and Barbuda with perennial sunshine among very peaceable people.



The Antigua and Barbuda Citizenship by Investment Programme was established in 2013 to stimulate foreign direct investment and support the real-estate market.

Four exciting pathways to citizenship:

1. Minimum contribution of USD \$100,000 to the National Development Fund (NDF).
2. The purchase of a property valued at minimum USD \$400,000, a joint investment of USD \$200,000 each or purchase of a property valued at USD \$200,000 in an approved real estate project.
3. Investment of USD \$1.5 million in a business individually or USD \$5 million by 2 or more investors, where each invests no less than USD \$400,000.
4. Investment of USD \$150,000 to the University of the West Indies Fund.

Why Antigua and Barbuda Citizenship by Investment?

Visa-free access to more than 150 countries, including United Kingdom and Schengen Area.

Competitive global option for economic citizenship, range of price points and investments.

No restrictions on dual nationality.

Citizenship for life, once residency requirement is met.

Straightforward application process, no minimum net worth requirement or previous business experience.

Average application processing time is 60 days.

No tax on worldwide income, inheritance, capital gains or investment returns.

Paradise becomes your home.

Antigua and Barbuda has so much to offer to potential investors through its Citizenship by Investment Programme.

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ANTIGUA & BARBUDA

Nation looks to the seas for transformation

Athill Dean Jonas , Minister of the Blue Economy for Antigua and Barbuda, summarizes the country's ambitious goal to become a regional hub for maritime innovation



What goals has Antigua and Barbuda set for the nation's sustainable development?

Our strategy is to ensure the new blue economy contributes to our national development without contributing to climate change. We want to grow the maritime sector to make up 40 percent of our gross domestic product within three to five years. Tourism takes up around 75 percent of our current gross domestic product and will continue to be a significant part of our industrial framework as we move forward.

Antigua and Barbuda is committed to ensuring clean oceans. I attended the COP26 event last year and was a part of many meetings for Antigua and Barbuda where we discussed our plans for the blue economy. We signed an agreement at the summit to designate 30 percent of our ocean space to be kept pristine. There will be no fishing, mining or underwater operations in these zones. There is a third island called Redonda that is part of Antigua and Barbuda, and we chose it for this purpose. We are committed to keeping both its fauna and flora pristine as part of our international commitments and part of our drive to secure the ocean life under the sea here in Antigua and Barbuda.

We are training our staff within the ministry under the Marine Spatial Planning strategy. Under this initiative, we will designate various areas of the ocean for different activities, such as farming, tourism, mining and power generation. The plan will enable us to look ahead and decide what we want with our ocean space while keeping in mind environmental constraints. There is a huge incentive to protect our marine life and ecosystem in the country as 75 to 80 percent of our existing gross domestic product comes from tourism. Our main products are our sand, sun and sea and they need to be protected.

What kind of new opportunities will the country be exploring at the planned Centre of Excellence for Oceanography and The Blue Economy (COBE)?

We plan to launch the COBE at the University of the West Indies. The University of the West Indies is the premiere education institution in the Caribbean with campuses in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados. There were previously only three campuses, but now the University along with the government of Antigua set up a fourth campus here on the island.

Many years ago, when Antigua went into tourism—which now exists as one of our main industries—we set up a hotel training school to train local Antiguan to work in the hotel sector. If you are going to drive a cab

or be a maid in a hotel, you require training at all levels. Our economy depends on it. Therefore, we set a school up to perform training for all persons in the tourism sector, and this new center is very similar. Many Antiguan now are trained to work in hospitality or the tourism sector, but many people want to go into other fields and study medicine or law. However, we do not yet have the skillsets needed to transition into a blue economy.

The center will be the premiere institution for research into the blue economy in terms of science and business activities. Our largest focus areas will be in the three following areas: energy, aquaculture or mariculture for food security and mining of aggregates. We will train scientists and engineers through courses on various subjects including pharmaceuticals and algae and creating ocean-based energy systems.

Additionally, we will offer the first ever blue-focused Master's of Business Administration. The blue economy is of course not just the word blue, but also the word economy, and business is a large part of what we are doing. In the end, the center is important not just for the nation but for the region.

We want to grow the maritime sector to make up 40 percent of our gross domestic product within three to five years.

Athill Dean Jonas , Minister of the Blue Economy

We are actively trying to attract stakeholders from across the globe, which has met with some success. For example, many of the islands have a major problem with sargassum seaweed. When sargassum comes to shore, it stinks and kills a lot of living creatures. Youth from the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom have partnered with the COBE to build undersea drones with artificial intelligence to deal with the problem across the region. By early 2023, we will see these drones in our waters.

What kind of opportunities exist for foreign investors in Antigua and Barbuda's energy transition?

Antigua and Barbuda has the largest ocean space in the Caribbean even though the islands are small. We rely on the ocean for water production in Antigua. We do not get a lot of rainfall, which is a sort of a



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Antigua and Barbuda's blue economy offers many opportunities

double-edged sword. Tourists love it because they do not get a lot of rain on their vacation. However, it means we need to take water from the ocean using reverse osmosis or desalination plants, which requires a lot of energy.

Currently most of the Caribbean islands including Antigua and Barbuda get their energy supply from heavy fuel or diesel. These are not clean sources of energy by any means, and they contribute significantly to global warming. Therefore, we must diversify our energy sources towards more sustainable, renewable sources of energy.

“Antigua and Barbuda has the largest ocean space in the Caribbean even though the islands are small.”

Athill Dean Jonas, Minister of the Blue Economy

While the region gets a lot of sunshine and has the capacity to grow a wind power sector, we do not think solar and wind sources can provide the base load required for national energy security. Instead, this will come mostly from tidal and wave power, with some islands also looking towards geothermal energy.

The local government is willing to sign purchase agreements with companies who can provide indigenous solutions for energy security, and a few companies have shown interest. Antigua is a good place to perform testing and research before rolling out these solutions to the region as we are training the population to assist in these efforts at the COBE.

How significant is the nation's fishing sector and what kind of potential does it have to grow?

We have ready markets in North America for marine food and have special trading arrangements with the United States, Europe, China and Japan. We currently export spiny lobster from Antigua to Hong Kong. There are also huge markets in North America and Europe for this commodity. We limit our fisherfolk from catching these lobsters; they can only pick the lobsters three to four months per year. We do not want to overfish the species.



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The country is committed to protecting its marine ecosystems

We also have other species such as grouper, snapper and crabs. Ocean farmers in the United States such as salmon farmers and others around the world have the expertise to farm marine animals in Antigua on a large scale and the government is interested in coinvesting. It represents a significant opportunity.

The country also holds a mountain of mineral resources in its waters. What is the country's main mineral resource and how can it be used?

Another key area lies in exploiting mineral resources. Antigua holds the largest abundance of sand in the entire Caribbean in our territory. This sand can be used to manufacture silicone-based integrated circuits and construction products and as nourishment for beaches. Sand has a variety of uses. We are open to exploiting this in a responsible way. We are talking to companies from the United States and are looking to sign contracts.

What role will the blue economy play in creating socioeconomic benefits for citizens?

The Ministry of Social Transformation and Human Resources is responsible for gender and youth affairs. We are also responsible for people who are differently abled such as those that are blind or require the use of wheelchairs. I am also the Minister of Children Affairs. In my roles I am responsible for looking after those that are vulnerable, which plays into our plans for a robust blue economy. There is a lot of synergies between this new segment and these groups of persons. Our aim is to merge the idea of a blue economy with social transformation.

Currently fishing is done by men; we do not see many women in this area. Women instead provide secondary services such as cleaning the fish. The blue economy is significant as it enables women to become involved in aquaculture. We can designate areas for ocean farms where women could be involved. Additionally, we have begun setting up aquaculture systems so persons in wheelchairs can be included in the work. These have already begun their pilot operations.

Our young will also be supported by training at the COBE. We want the youth of Antigua and Barbuda to look seriously at the blue economy and what we are doing to attract investment from across the globe.