



Statement

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Minister of Social Development and Family Services

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Socially just transition towards sustainable development: the role of digital technologies on social development and well-being of all.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is indeed a privilege to bring greetings to this Assembly on behalf of the Government and people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. The Ministry is charged with the provision of a robust social safety net, the protection of the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable and building the resilience of the population. That we continue to gather, albeit under these difficult and different circumstances is evidence enough of this Commission's commitment to its purpose initially enunciated in 1995.

Today, some 25 years later, and with less than 10 years to the realization of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, this vision is no less as important and its achievement all the more paramount. COVID 19 has exposed more vividly than ever before, the cruelty and inequity, both latent and visible, existing in our global society. Fortunately, it has also exposed in the resilience, generosity and creativity of so many people, the means to rescue our societies and economies.

One area in which this has become very evident is in the development of digital solutions to challenges previously thought to be insurmountable. Particularly in the area of social service delivery, where the human interface is more welcoming, digitalisation has thankfully lost its lustre as something to be avoided.

The COVID-19 scenario has catapulted the significance of digital life and the digital extension of traditional and innovative service delivery. This growing trend of

digital transformation has undoubtedly served to make businesses and services more dependable with the advantage of being more rapid, and data-driven. It also presents the possibilities of data-driven analysis for flawless planning. When dealing with multiple populations of varying densities, this added benefit cannot be understated.

The end result is that more persons can be reached quicker, that an increasingly more diverse suite of services can be made more readily available to wider populations, and that our boast of leaving no one behind, can actually be realised.

The other side of the double-edged sword of an unfettered digitalisation though, is the actual widening of the digital divide and the creation of a new class of poor – the digital poor – those who, by virtue of their economic and geographic circumstances find themselves outside the mainstream of the digital solutions, and therefore sink even further into poverty.

That is a situation against which we must jealously guard, and I posit then that the next 10 years must be spent in the search, discovery and implementation of an inspiring and actionable blueprint that not only builds a better world for all of humanity, but one that puts the poor and vulnerable at the heart of this new thinking.

I share the optimism and belief of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago that that blueprint of unforeseen possibilities can emerge from all gathered here acting together despite our differences.

Prior to COVID-19, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago had already embarked on a similar project through its Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, as a result of the drastic decline in global energy prices in 2015. The development of a national policy, which is known as the National Social Mitigation Plan (NSMP), has as its aim the cushioning of the impact of future economic downturns on the most vulnerable.

Trinidad and Tobago wholeheartedly agrees with the Secretary General's Report which recognises the recovery from the on-going pandemic as an *opportunity to reset socio-economic policies in order to restart economic growth*.

We believe that such growth must be defined and delivered within the context of an innovative and enterprising workforce and citizenry, who are sufficiently enabled and empowered by grants, programmes, policies and services which speak directly to the holistic development of the individual and family. That succinctly identifies the mandate of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Trinidad and Tobago for which I am currently responsible.

Trinidad and Tobago has an ambitious and aggressive National Development Strategy, known as Vision 2030 which is heavily aligned to the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals agenda, in which the first of the five (5) pillars is "Putting People First – Nurturing Our Greatest Asset." Such an approach is meant

to ensure *a socially just transition to sustainable development is adopted in support of the 2030 Agenda*.

The Ministry has incorporated a more strategic use of information communication technologies (ICT) to achieve:

- The eradication of poverty;
- The promotion of full and productive employment, as well as,
- The fostering of social inclusion.

Achievement of these goals is supported by a robust National Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy, which recognises the growing reliance on digital technologies for good governance. The increasing inclusion of ICT in the State's policy initiatives has served as a gateway for a *whole of government* approach to sustainable development for all, facilitating effective monitoring, evaluation and accountability of activities by policy initiators and the wider citizenry.

I am happy to indicate that our National ICT Policy has allowed the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to embark on a number of key initiatives in support of the most vulnerable and marginalized communities. These include:

- On-going collaboration with the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, as it relates to the Universal Service Initiative and accessibility

to information and independent living by the community of persons with disabilities;

- Provision of specially outfitted mobile devices for the visually and hearing impaired;
- Provision of free WiFi services on public transportation, transportation hubs, libraries and public spaces;
- Provision of kiosks in strategically located places for persons to access information on all government services;
- Establishment of an Integrated Social Enterprise Management System (ISEMS)/Social Services Client Management System (SSCMS) to enable a seamless administration of social services across multiple agents in the social sector. This will allow for more effective case management to help, empower and transform the lives of social welfare clients.

We recognise that there is still much work to be done and the Government has prepared a Roadmap to Recovery, which encapsulates many of the recommendations of the Secretary General's Report on the Meeting theme.

There can be no doubt that this crisis has called forth the sense that we all need each other. Irrespective of our geographical size, the strength of our economy, or the size of our population, we have been humbled by a microbe we cannot see. Now more than ever there is need for an end to the globalisation of indifference and the

hyperinflation of the individual. Together, we can reorganise the way we live, to choose what matters most to most people. We must work together to achieve it. We can learn what takes us forward and what sets us back.

We can choose to engage in a socially just transition to sustainable development where people, aided and abetted by the increasing use of digital technology can be afforded the luxury of a more enhanced quality of life.

In closing, I wish to acknowledge that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is cognizant of the critical role that digital technologies must play in the social development and well-being of all persons, and as such, continues to make the necessary adjustments to diminish the negative impacts which digital transformation may have on our vulnerable populations.

Through these measures and others, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services reaffirms its commitment to ensuring that no person is left behind.

I thank you all for the courtesy of your attention.

God bless you!

Senator the Honourable Donna Cox
Minister of Social Development and Family Services, Trinidad and Tobago
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