



Major Groups and other Stakeholders Questions and Answers as part of the Voluntary National Review of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council

New York, 15 July 2020

Question 1

We ask you: In order to better assist and reach needy grassroots families should all governments in their annual budget set aside a pandemic relief funds as part of their social assistance programme?

Answer

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) continues to be a major disruptor to the social and economic fabric of nations. While unanticipated, the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago has endeavoured to ensure that the country's social protection programmes are sufficiently strengthened and sustainable, in order to provide continuous support for vulnerable citizens.

Indeed, even prior to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government had been working assiduously to refine and bolster the nation's social assistance system, including through various programmes and initiatives. These include the Public Assistance Grant, Disability Assistance Grant, and the Food Support Programme, which are among the pillars of the nation's social support system for disadvantaged persons. Faced with the sudden emergence of the pandemic, the Government was able to augment these existing initiatives in order to meet the needs of the populace. Noteworthy were the Government's initiatives in relation to increasing the value of the Food Support, Public Assistance Grant and the Disability Grant. By 30 July, 2020, additional funding had already been provided to 17,834 existing Public Assistance beneficiaries at a cost of \$11.4 million; to 24,627 existing persons with varying disabilities at a cost of approximately \$11 million dollars; and to 25,101 existing beneficiaries of the Food Support Programme at a cost of \$17.1 million dollars. It is foreseen that such programmes will continue to support and build resilience among needy families well into the future.

Additionally, the Government is also cognizant that the measures which are required to stop the rapid spread of the coronavirus have created an additional group of persons who would not necessarily have been included in existing social programmes prior to the pandemic. In ensuring that no one is left behind as a consequence of job losses or reduced personal and household income, unique social protection initiatives have been developed to protect the welfare of these families vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19. Initiatives such as the

Temporary Income, Food Support, and Rental Income Assistance are critical state interventions, which provided some relief to the effects of a crisis which deepens already existing disparities. As at 05 October, 2020, 33,813 individuals who lost their jobs or had their income reduced have received 81,179 grants amounting to \$129.8 million in salary relief or income support grants. Additionally, 3,770 families have also benefited from rental assistance. These initiatives have contributed to alleviating the hardships experienced by vulnerable groups.

Despite the reach of the abovementioned social assistance programmes, there is no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed structural inequalities in society. The Government has therefore recognised that the specific policies developed at this time will set the course of action, shaping the speed and strength of recovery, not only in the economy, but in society as well. As an early response, the Honourable Prime Minister appointed a multidisciplinary committee to develop a recovery plan for Trinidad and Tobago. As such, the Roadmap for Trinidad and Tobago Post COVID-19 Pandemic - Part 1 was developed, taking into account lessons learnt, and setting the framework for the creation of policies geared towards reducing inequality and promoting inclusive growth. This Roadmap is not only aimed at addressing and mitigating the hardships of COVID-19, but also aims to lay the foundation for restructuring and transformation towards a stronger and more resilient country wherein, equity, inclusiveness and self-sufficiency are all the cornerstones of society. It is anticipated that, through this approach, the Government will be even more effective in assisting and reaching vulnerable groups in the society.