



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

## Ministry of Trade and Industry

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# *“A Taste of the Caribbean” Caribbean Food and*

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### FEATURE ADDRESS

SENATOR THE HONOURABLE PAULA GOPEE-SCOON  
MINISTER OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY

JUNE 28TH, 2023

Salutations:

- Senator the Honourable Mr. Avinash Singh, Minister of Agriculture
- Mr. Rajiv Diptee, Chairman of the Caribbean Supermarket Association and President, Supermarket Association of Trinidad and Tobago
- Mr. Patrick Antoine, Head of the Caribbean Private Sector Organization (CPSO) Secretariat
- Board of Directors of the Trinidad and Tobago Supermarket Association
- Specially Invited Guests
- Members of the Media
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning All,

It is my distinct pleasure to deliver the feature address today at this inaugural Caribbean Food and Beverage Trade Event, which brings together all major stakeholders in the food and beverage space to continue the conversation on food security both domestically and regionally.

Let me begin by commending this initiative of the Caribbean Supermarket Association (CSA) and the CARICOM Private Sector Organization (CPSO) which directly actions the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the CPSO, CSA and Trinidad and Tobago at the successful Agri-Investment Forum and Expo held in August of last year. This is a significant outcome.

This event supports the mandate laid by the region to achieve a twenty- five percent reduction in the region's food import bill by 2025. Our Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (GoRTT) has been steadfastly working towards ensuring food and nutrition security for the citizenry whilst working in tandem with member states to achieve this regional goal. In so doing, there is the impetus of boosting production of food domestically, targeting further investment in the food and beverage sector, and reducing the supply chain difficulties we have all endured particularly due to the unprecedented Covid-19 Pandemic.

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) defines food security as all people, at all times, having physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious foods that meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. This definition has since expanded to include dimensions of food availability, food access; utilization and stability to not only reflect the changes in society but also that of policy articulation and development.

Food security has also been identified as a national priority in our National Development Strategy of Trinidad and Tobago (2016-2030), in keeping with United Nations (UN) Sustainable Goal 2, to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture. A series of measures to bolster our food security with a focus on upscaling production of food for our domestic use and consolidating value chains for strategic industries inclusive of poultry, fish and cocoa is also highlighted in the Phase 2 Roadmap to Recovery Report.

Quite notably, Trinidad and Tobago's food and beverage manufacturing sector has been very successful and continues to see significant growth. Trinidad and Tobago has consistently produced a yearly average of TT\$2.53 Billion in food and beverage exports from 2018 - 2022. In the six month period October 2022 and March 2023, Trinidad and Tobago exported TT\$1.5 Billion in food and beverage products. Top exported food and beverage items include cereals, aerated beverages, aromatic bitters, non- alcoholic beverages, sweet and unsweetened biscuits, chocolates, and beer from malt with the main export markets being the CARICOM region, USA, Canada and the United Kingdom. This shows our ability to not only produce at a high quantity but also at a standard that satisfies international markets.

Our local manufacturers continue to innovate their product offerings with companies such as Novo Farms specializing in the production of items such as cassava fries, dasheen fries and grated coconut; Associated brands specializing in a line of Organic Chocolates and Nestle who recently launched its Almond Milk production, just to mention a few.

Notwithstanding these export figures, our food import bill continues to be of concern remaining in the range of TT\$6 billion. Evidently, the rate in production locally is still narrow and must be expanded. Further, looking at our locally manufactured goods, way too many imports are sourced externally and a clear strategic approach is needed to address this.

In this regard, we recognize the usefulness of regional value chains to achieve food security through greater collaboration and commercial agreements with regional partners. The MTI has therefore commenced a study on regional value chains for the manufacturing sector. This Study is being funded by the Inter-American Development Bank under a Technical Cooperation Agreement and is well underway, with expected completion by August 2023.

This study will produce clear regional value chain maps for the manufacturing sector, inclusive of food and beverages, chemicals and printing and packaging in Trinidad and Tobago. Additionally, the maps will assist in identifying new and alternate suppliers of inputs in CARICOM for the manufacturing sector and policy actions that target bottlenecks within the regional supply chains.

This Study will prove very useful to the region and to organizations such as the CPSO and other stakeholders present today, as it will identify new opportunities aimed at increasing the regional integration of production.

### **Investment in the Agriculture Sector**

In addressing food security, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has adopted a multi- faceted approach whereby focus is placed on boosting local production.

An example of investment in the agriculture sector with the application of adaptable technology that we have seen is the establishment of Trinidad and Tobago's first fresh berry farm in Tobago, a commercially scaled climate-smart hydroponic greenhouse farm.

The initial investment saw the construction of a 42,000 square foot greenhouse farm in Tobago, with the capacity to produce over 22 tons of fresh berries per month as well as fresh organic greens once in full operation.

Under the remit of the Ministry of Agriculture Land and Fisheries (MALF), we have also seen small-scale investments in sustainable agricultural production system by farmers. Some of these systems include the use of Integrated Farming Production Systems where farmers simultaneously engage in the production of both Livestock and Vegetables in the same geographic location; the utilization of Aquaponics to hydroponically grow plants; the practice of Crop Rotation and the use of renewable energy (solar power) for irrigation in cocoa production.

There are also youth programmes such as the Shade House Project and Youth Agriculture Homestead Programme offered by the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service aimed at developing and harnessing the skills of young persons with an affinity for agriculture and equipping them with the tools necessary for success.

Additionally, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, through its agency, investTT has also undertaken investment in physical infrastructure in the form of the Moruga Agro-processing and Light Industrial Park.

The Park is completed and let me use this opportunity to say that the Moruga Agro-processing and Light Industrial Facility is the ideal location for Caribbean investors to set up their production facilities.

The Park consists of eleven (11) developed land lots—five (5) lots for purpose-built factory shells available for leasing, while six (6) are developed sites for leasing. In addition to the Park having all the essential infrastructural facilities necessary for conducting business such as an established road network and all necessary utilities (telecommunications, electrical and water supply, drainage, sewerage and a waste treatment facility), the five factory shells are also outfitted with offices and washrooms, and cold storage spaces where needed.

Already investment in production facilities for food and vegetable processing, processing and packaging of meals and root crops, cocoa processing and pepper and ginger processing are underway.

### **Capacity Building Programme for SME's**

Trinidad and Tobago also recognizes the challenges faced by small and medium enterprises (SMEs). There is the need for SMEs to improve their quality standards, capacity and production.

Facilities such as the International Certification Fund (ICF) will assist exporters in achieving international certification in food/beverage and other product compliance to meet the quality and safety standards of international markets, increase import substitution, and boost the production of non-energy exports. Further, it will allow firms to successfully position and attach themselves into regional value chains.

There are also programmes specifically targeting Tobago-based firms such as the Capacity Building Programme, which seeks to address the unique challenges faced by Tobago-based firms in the Food and Beverage Sector. It supports firms in seeking to penetrate export markets by addressing logistical challenges;

access to financing/ funding; market entry and on-the-ground marketing in target countries; and product development, modification and testing.

Through the implementation of these programmes, improving the packaging, quality and marketability of our local products sets us on a path of not only increased exports, but contributes to the goal of food security as it encourages the buying of local products and increases the ability of these entrepreneurs to take advantage of existing opportunities.

### **Trade Missions for Firms in the Agro-Processing Sector**

One of the ways in which we continue to strengthen the relationship in the region and build our networks is through the hosting of trade missions. In an effort to develop sustainable agricultural and agro-processing trade markets, the EBI facilitated a number of Trade Missions that created export opportunities for several manufacturers and agro-processors including the:

- Guyana Virtual Trade Mission 2021; and the
- Jamaica Virtual Trade Mission 2021;

### **Food Prices**

Much of the push towards food security in this region is pursued to reduce the impact of global events on both price and availability of food. The increase in food prices as a result of disruptions in major shipping and logistic lines, the Russia-Ukraine ongoing conflict and protectionist strategies by countries in response to such have been eclipsed by the recent movements of global food prices as recorded by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). The Food Price Index (FFPI) shows a decrease, as it fell to 124.3 points in May 2023, its lowest in two years.

Our reliance on food imports leaves us heavily susceptible to global price fluctuations which essentially characterises us as price takers who must accept prices as they are. This is unsustainable when salaries do not reflect the same change but instead remain fixed. While the Government continues to do what it can to reduce the effect of these price fluctuations through the Suspension of the Common External Tariff and the removal of Value Added Tax on basic food items, subsidies such as these can only help to a point. If we are to improve food prices, the objective ought to be to produce ourselves. This would result in lower prices assuming of course that we aren't fully dependent on the inputs which is being addressed through our regional value chain study.

There will always be limitations to what we can produce on account of our small geographic mass, our climatic conditions and the kinds of investment that is needed in particular areas. However we must look to the possibilities.

### **Re-Investment in Plant Equipment and Operations**

Let me also use this opportunity to commend our existing manufacturers that are currently engaged in adapting their manufacturing portfolio by expanding their product lines through the re-investment in plant equipment and facilities. I must also make special mention of our importers and retailers who are diversifying their portfolios and investing in manufacturing. This is what we want to see

### **Conclusion**

Globally the food and beverage sector is becoming more health centric driven by a change in consumer food preferences and eating behaviours post pandemic. According to Ernest & Young US, this shift requires re-imagination of our manufacturing systems from a commodity-driven supply chain focused on scale to a personalized and value added food and agriculture ecosystem. To remain competitive in this dynamic sector our food and beverage producers and Argo-processors must embrace innovation, technology and sustainability as core guiding principles when making business decisions.

Additionally, to our specialty stores and brands, our restaurants, our distributors, our importers and our exporters present here today, it is important that you, the key stakeholders enter into the regional conversation, invest in adaptable cutting edge and innovative technologies, and pool your resources to be able to move the agenda forward.

It is in this light that I wish to assure you that the GoRTT is here to support you. The Ministry of Trade and Industry will continue to implement initiatives aimed at supporting the food and beverage sector and to those who play an important role in its eco-system to realize a more sustainable, health-conscious and vibrant food and beverage sector.

I thank you.