



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism

# **International Conference on Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Tourism**

Opening Remarks

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Minister of Trade, Investment and Tourism

Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2026

Good morning.

It is a privilege to join you at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, for this important conference. The theme, “From Soil to Society,” speaks directly to the interconnected priorities of food security, economic diversification, and tourism development in Trinidad and Tobago. Food is about people, resilience, identity. And in a country like Trinidad and Tobago, food is also about opportunity. A “foodie nation”. I was watching a YouTube video; the guy had fifty million subscribers and he said he discovered the number one street food in the world is Doubles.

Today, I want to make a simple but critical point: food security and sustainable tourism are not separate conversations, they are mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable economic growth.

Food security, is a national priority. It is about reducing our vulnerability, strengthening our productive capacity, and ensuring that our people have reliable access to safe, nutritious food. Our country currently spends approximately TT\$7.4 billion annually on food imports. We must reduce our dependence on imports at a time when global supply chains remain uncertain, prices remain volatile, and foreign exchange pressures continue to affect small island states like ours. Anytime there’s a war going on, people don’t think it affects us. It affects us. It’s a supply-chain bottleneck. Supporting local is going to become a priority.

That is why the Government through the Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism and in collaboration with key stakeholders, has prioritized import substitution, domestic production, and agro-processing development as central pillars of national policy. They are necessary components of a more resilient and more self-reliant economy.

Initiatives such as our “Buy Local, Build Trinbago” campaign: strategic interventions designed to increase local production, support farmers and agro-processors, improve national food availability, and reduce the country’s exposure to external disruptions. If you import a product, the people who make the product come from a foreign land. If you make it here, you’re hiring people. We make the best of everything locally. This is the greatest country in the world. We manufacture more products per capita than any country in the world. We just have to give the agricultural [sector] and manufacturers the capacity to produce.

At the same time, the tourism sector presents a powerful opportunity to strengthen food security. Globally, tourism is increasingly driven by authentic cultural and culinary

experiences. People want to see something different. Someone said, “When I come to Trinidad and Tobago, nobody treats me like a tourist; I feel like a local.” Visitors are no longer seeking only destinations, they are seeking identity, heritage, and cuisine. They want to understand a country through what it produces, what it values, and what it offers that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

Our cuisine is one of the strongest expressions of our national identity. It is diverse, recognisable, culturally rich, and deeply appealing. Trinbago cuisine is not incidental to our tourism product; it is part of its substance. By integrating local agriculture into the tourism value chain linking farmers directly to hotels, restaurants, and festivals, we can:

- Create stable, long-term markets for domestic producers
- Increase local content in tourism spending
- Retain more foreign exchange within the economy
- Enhance the authenticity of the visitor experience
- Saving forex is equally important as earning forex.

When a visitor eats in Trinidad and Tobago, there should be greater confidence that what is being served reflects local production, local enterprise, and local character. That is how we strengthen both food security and tourism value at the same time.

While Trinidad and Tobago is a recognized leader in Caribbean food manufacturing, we must address a key structural challenge, our continued reliance on imported raw materials.

To build resilience, we must move up the value chain by increasing domestic value-added production.

The Ministry is actively using trade and import data to identify high-value product categories where local production can replace imports. Dr Eric Williams launched a ‘Buy Local’ campaign in the sixties, but it flopped because quality standards were substandard at the time. We have everything we need to boost the economy. This includes targeted support for agro-processing, investment facilitation, and policy alignment to improve competitiveness.

The objective is clear: to improve competitiveness, expand domestic value creation, and better position Trinidad and Tobago to benefit from its own productive potential.

Regionally, our efforts are aligned with the CARICOM “25 by 2030” initiative, which aims to reduce the Caribbean’s food import bill by 25%. I think we could do 50%. Through this framework, Trinidad and Tobago is collaborating with regional partners to strengthen collective food security.

Only a few days ago, I joined my Cabinet colleagues in support of efforts by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries to establish special varieties of soya bean, corn and black-eyed peas in Caroni. This initiative is one practical example of the kind of action required if we are serious about advancing food security and sustainability in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Ministry is also developing a new National Trade Strategy in collaboration with the International Trade Centre out of Switzerland.

In particular, we are positioning gastronomy as a service export, where our cuisine, festivals, and cultural expressions, especially during Carnival, become drivers of economic activity.

This is where food security meets tourism innovation together in a very practical. Our agricultural output becomes not just sustenance, but an experience, a brand, and an export.

Food security may begin with the farmer, but it does not end there. It extends across the value chain: to the processor, the distributor, the retailer, the chef, the entrepreneur, and ultimately the visitor who experiences Trinidad and Tobago through its food, culture, and hospitality.

When we strengthen these linkages:

- We reduce our import dependence
- We create jobs and support rural livelihoods
- We enhance tourism competitiveness
- And we build a more resilient, diversified economy

In August of this year, we’re going to have an inaugural flight to Ghana and open the African market, positioning Trinidad and Tobago as the epicenter of travel. When we bring all these people here, imagine what it means for our cuisine. You can go across there and open the market in Ghana.

The task now is not simply to agree on the importance of these issues. The task now is to execute. We must align policy with production, production with markets, and markets with national priorities. We must support local enterprise more effectively. We must strengthen the links between agriculture and tourism more deliberately. And we must make full use of the assets that Trinidad and Tobago already possesses, including our people, our productive capacity, our entrepreneurial talent, and the very strong appeal of Trinbago cuisine.

If we do that, the benefits will be real. We will strengthen food security, create greater opportunity for local producers, and build a tourism sector that is more authentic, more competitive, and more sustainable. That is how Trinidad and Tobago can move closer to achieving both food security and tourism sustainability in a serious and lasting way.

I thank you very much for your gracious invitation and wish you a productive conference.