



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago
Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism

Steelpan Manufacturers' Association of Trinidad and Tobago (SMATT)

Launch of International Steelpan Technology Conference

Keynote Address

Abigail Bynoe, Permanent Secretary
Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism

Wednesday, August 12th, 2026

Salutations

- Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine – Pro-Vice Chancellor and Campus Principal, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus
- Dr Mia Gormandy-Benjamin – Assistant Professor (Pan) and Discipline Leader, The University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT)
- Dr Damien Richardson – Director of Culture, Ministry of Culture and Community Development (Representing the Honourable Michelle Benjamin)
- Mr Terry Bernard – Vice President, Pan Trinbago (Representing the President of Pan Trinbago)
- Mr Michael Cooper – President, Steelpan Manufacturers' Association of Trinidad and Tobago (SMATT)
- Representatives of Government, Academia, and Industry
- Members of the Steelpan Manufacturing Industry
- Members of the media
- Invited guests
- Ladies and gentlemen

Good morning.

Yesterday, the world celebrated World Steelpan Day. Today, here at home, we take the next step: ensuring that the instrument Trinidad and Tobago gave to the world creates greater opportunity for the people who gave it life.

I congratulate the Steelpan Manufacturers' Association of Trinidad and Tobago, UTT, and UWI for bringing manufacturers, tuners, researchers, and innovators together. This Conference is important because it asks a practical question: how do we turn our pride in pan into stronger businesses, better jobs, and a more secure future for our people?

Our invention. Our opportunity.

The steelpan is more than music. It is the sound of Trinidad and Tobago's imagination. Our people transformed discarded material into an instrument now heard in schools, universities, orchestras, and communities across the world. That journey tells us something powerful about who we are: we can create value where others may see limits. But recognition alone is not enough. The people who make, tune, play, and teach pan must be able to earn, grow, and pass their knowledge to the next generation. A young person who is fascinated by pan should be able to see a future not only as a performer, but as an engineer, designer, tuner, researcher, entrepreneur, or exporter.

That is the human purpose behind Government's policy: to take what is uniquely ours and build opportunity around it, for families, communities, and businesses across Trinidad and Tobago.

Steelman is a slice of Trinbago. For the person who has never heard the steelpan, usually it's a little bit of background music in a movie where the character is taking off on a tropical vacation, and cue the steelpan music. It evokes automatically, not just the sound, but the sight of a beach, or breeze, a cocktail, relaxation. So, it's multi-sensory; it's not just the steelpan.

For the people who know Trinbago, or know the Caribbean, we get a different, more layered multi-sensory experience. We think about a nice chip on the road with friends. We feel that automatic warmth, almost like a sip of rum warming you up. We could taste the tamarind sauce and chadon beni in the doubles. That piece of music evokes all of that. And it's a joyful sound, the steelpan.

So, when I say steelpan is a slice of Trinbago, it is intrinsically tied into our culture, and that is the first step for us to recognise that when we're talking about steelpan, we are not simply talking about a musical instrument. And therefore, when we are manufacturing steelpan, innovating, and the technology involved in steelpan, it is also very much about the culture of Trinbago.

Today's launch recognises the steelpan, a treasured part of our cultural identity, as an important economic asset with the potential to contribute to manufacturing growth, innovation, export, tourism development, and investment opportunities for Trinidad and Tobago.

I am representing the Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism, and we are talking about where the demand for steelpan comes from. It comes firstly from somebody who has been exposed to it and who it has resonated with, and they have a joy for it, and they want to pursue it: they want to play it; they want to produce it; they want to share it; they want to develop accessories for it; the whole gamut.

We in Trinidad and Tobago have a responsibility to nurture that demand. While I can't speak to culture policy, I know that one of the strategies is to ensure that in our schools, we have pan from very early on, taking it through to primary school—so we want it from ECCE to primary to secondary to university to adults playing in the steelbands to the National Steel Symphony Orchestra. That demand is generated there, and it is shared whenever there is an international event that we are participating in, et cetera.

The Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism, through Global Trinidad and Tobago, we have Music TT. We have a role to play in nurturing that demand. We have a role to play in saying, "This is the portfolio of steelpan music available." We have a role to play in fashion: this is the steelpan-inspired fashion available, and to put that out there and have that readily accessible. We have a role to play in film: these are the films, the documentaries available that tell the story of steelpan. This is the music available for

screens, so anyone who's producing film internationally can access that catalogue.

Similarly, the same way as every school child is able to access pan, know pan, and grow the interest for pan, I daresay it needs to be carried through our business places—certainly government offices. Everyone should have a pan, every business place should have a pan, and every occasion that there's an event, we should have pan played. And that's how we start it and translate it into international demand.

From cultural excellence to commercial excellence

Our goal is clear: Trinidad and Tobago must remain the birthplace of the steelpan and become the global centre for its research, manufacturing, innovation, and trade.

This means helping local manufacturers produce more efficiently, maintain world-class quality, and reach more customers. World-class quality: Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards is under the Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism, here to support developing standards for pan and all of its related items: the sticks, the stands, the cases, the classes. It means protecting the knowledge and identity attached to our national instrument. And it means ensuring that, as global demand grows, more of the value, jobs, income, exports, and investments stay here at home.

We are seeing signs of that potential. Steelpan exports grew from approximately TT\$1.9 million in 2020 to TT\$3.1 million in 2025. During the first half of this year, 2026, exports reached approximately TT\$969,700—38 per cent higher than the same period in 2025. Those numbers matter because behind every instrument sold is local skill, local enterprise, and the possibility of another livelihood. I say the numbers matter because every drop in the bucket counts, but steelpan is way bigger than that.

If you Google the number of homes that are built annually, I think you'll get a figure of 53 to 60-something million. There are about 197 countries in the world. And if we say we just want .05—not even one per cent—we want .05—half of a per cent—of every new home built globally to have a steelpan; that's 2.5 million homes, and I'm just using the conservative 50 million. So .05 of 50 million new homes, constructed annually.

If that's our market that we're aiming for, that's 2.5 million homes to put a steelpan in; that's 2.5 million steelpans to produce, not the 8,000–10,000, where we are now. I want us to live in that figure; live in that dream, that steelpan: we need to produce about 2.5 million annually. Let's not even talk about growth right now. That's our figure: 2.5 at \$10,000 on average for a pan. 2.5 million by TTD\$10,000. What's that figure for production of steelpan? TTD\$25 billion: that should be the size of the global industry, and Trinidad having a big slice of that pan production.

That could be a big part of our non-energy sector economy, don't you think? I'll leave

those figures there so we know we have to understand our market, how the demand for pan is generated, and we have to understand what the potential is for the size of that market, and therefore what we should be working towards producing.

Practical support for local enterprise

Government has begun to support that growth through the Steelpan Manufacturing Grant Fund Facility. More than 10 businesses have benefited, with approximately TTD\$3.1 million disbursed for machinery, equipment, software, tools, raw materials, and training.

This support has helped businesses improve production, strengthen export capacity, and even reopen local chroming services. These are practical interventions: helping a manufacturer fulfil a large order; helping a tuner work with better tools; helping a small business compete for customers beyond our shores.

But funding by itself is not the finish line. We must connect support to measurable results, better products, stronger firms, more exports, and more jobs.

Under the Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism, we have the Special Economic Zones Authority. If we have to produce 2.5 million pans, and a good chunk of that in Trinidad and Tobago, we need to get our manufacturers organised and in a Special Economic Zone for you to be manufacturing steelpanns and get the tax exemptions associated with that.

Shaping the Future of Steelpan Manufacturing

The Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism fully supports this Conference and its deliberate focus on the technology, science, and manufacturing that underpin the steelpan industry. It provides an important platform to examine the steelpan manufacturing value chain and explore technologies such as precision engineering, digital design, artificial intelligence, advanced acoustics, and electronic and hybrid instruments, innovations that can improve productivity, quality, and competitiveness while preserving the artistry and unique identity of Trinidad and Tobago's national instrument.

Technology, however, must serve our people. It must strengthen, not displace, the artistry and hard-earned knowledge of our master tuners and manufacturers. Their expertise is part of our national inheritance. Our task is to combine that expertise with research and modern tools, so it can be preserved, taught, and taken further.

We also need stronger standards, certification, branding, intellectual property protection, and digital access to markets. Under the Ministry, we have Global TT; we

are here to help you access international markets and export into international markets. The pursuit of the Geographical Indication protection is important because the world should know that authentic steelpan is rooted in Trinidad and Tobago, and our people should benefit from that distinction. We all know about different musical instruments and [with] the piano, there's a range—you could buy low end; you could buy high end. When people buy a steelpan, they should want to buy a steelpan with a GI, because it came from the birthplace; it represents the quality, the culture, the home of steelpan, and it should be at a premium price.

Innovation must also extend beyond the factory floor. It must translate into stronger businesses, increased productivity, and greater exports. The development of specialised tools, improved manufacturing processes, and products such as the G-Pan demonstrates the potential to combine engineering, research, and creativity while preserving the unique identity of our national instrument. Again, when we hear the steelpan, it evokes a multi-sensory experience, and we must preserve that. The pursuit of Geographical Indication protection for steelpan further strengthens its authenticity and international reputation.

This Conference therefore represents more than an exchange of ideas; it is an investment in building a technology-enabled, globally competitive, and sustainable steelpan industry capable of generating employment, attracting investment, earning foreign exchange, and ensuring that Trinidad and Tobago captures greater value from an invention that is uniquely our own.

One industry, many pathways

Steelpan connects manufacturing, culture, education, tourism, and trade. This is why the Ministry is exploring a Steelpan Museum, a tourism asset: not simply a place to display instruments, but an immersive experience where visitors can encounter the story, science, craft, and sound of pan. Done well, it can support tour guides, performers, artisans, manufacturers, and surrounding businesses while deepening national pride. And we are in a digital world, so while we can do a physical museum, we can have digital museum products so people can tune in and experience the steelpan products, the history, performances, the manufacturing and technology side, the academic side—all of those can be digital products as part of the museum.

No ministry can build this industry alone. Manufacturers must tell us what prevents them from scaling. Universities and researchers must help solve real production challenges. Financial institutions must better understand creative and manufacturing enterprises. Industry organisations must help set standards and open doors to new markets—and we need new markets because it's intrinsically the pan, our culture, our soca, our Carnival, it's always about us and the diaspora. Very few new markets. The

growth is there, but we need to make sure that we're sharing it at every opportunity and creating new markets.

And our young people must be placed at the centre. Let us create apprenticeships, technical training, and entrepreneurial pathways that allow them to inherit not only the tradition of pan but the opportunity it represents. Every single student in the Trinidad and Tobago educational system should be exposed to pan; every single national, when we travel, we should be exposing others to pan; and people need to see the steelpan as a career path, just as many elements of our culture, whether it's doubles, roti, bake and shark.

Looking Ahead

As participants of the inaugural International Steelpan Manufacturing Technology Conference, we must view this event as a catalyst to establish Trinidad and Tobago as the global home for steelpan excellence. The world must not only recognise Trinidad and Tobago as the birthplace of the steelpan but also as the epicentre for steelpan research, manufacturing, innovation, and investment. Let us identify the barriers that manufacturers face, the technologies that can raise quality and output, the skills the industry will need, and the markets we need to enter. Let us leave with clear responsibilities and timelines.

Closing

The Ministry of Trade, Investment and Tourism stands ready to work with SMATT, our universities, Pan Trinbago, manufacturers, tuners, and the wider private sector. Our shared objective is simple: the instrument we gave to the world must create greater value and better lives here at home. Just as we talk about the energy sector in this country and the contribution of the energy sector, and then we talk about the non-energy sector, the steelpan industry creates a space in that non-energy sector that is of immense value and really reflects what the steelpan is worth.

The steelpan began as an act of imagination. Its next chapter must be one of ownership, enterprise, and opportunity, written by the people of Trinidad and Tobago, for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I wish you every success as you build towards the International Steelpan Technology Conference in 2027. I thank you.