



**REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
MINISTRY OF LABOUR**

**STATEMENT BY
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MINISTER OF LABOUR**

**TWENTY-FIRST INTER-AMERICAN CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS
OF LABOUR (IACML) OF THE ORGANISATION OF AMERICAN
STATES (OAS)**

Third Plenary Session:

*The importance of the world of work to COVID-19 recovery and to the
development of more resilient, sustainable, just, and inclusive societies*

September 22 to 24, 2021

Minister of Labour, Employment and Social Security of Argentina and Chair of the XXI IACML;

Fellow Ministers with responsibility for labour from across the Americas;

Officials from the Organisation of the Americas Secretariat;

Hemispheric Labour Ministry Officials;

It is my distinct pleasure to participate in this dialogue today. Given that I assumed the position of Labour Minister in August 2020, this is my maiden participation at the IACML and I look forward to the discussions and conclusions of the plenary sessions. Allow me firstly to thank the Government of Argentina and the Organisation of American States for the coordination of this virtual event.

Indeed, the past year has brought with it tragic consequences for the health and lives of millions of people around the world. As a result policy responses were required that combined measures which simultaneously protected public health and the economy. Governments across the globe have implemented a series of socio-economic measures to protect economic activity, jobs and income. While measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus are essential to protect lives, those measures have amongst other things, led to production disruptions, with enormous impacts for workers and employers.

It is common knowledge that the Americas have been most severely impacted by the pandemic, with over 80 million cases registered in the region as at August 2021. In Trinidad and Tobago there have been over 40,000 cases with approximately 1,300 deaths.

Having commenced duties as Minister of Labour in the midst of the crisis last year, I have been fortunate enough to be supported by a team committed to serving the country's workers and employers as we weave our way through the pandemic. Also, Under the leadership of Prime Minister, Dr. the Honourable Keith Rowley, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has remained committed to prioritising the health and safety of its citizens throughout the crisis.

In addition to the overall impact on the global labour market, specific sectors have been particularly hard hit. For instance international tourism activity has fallen drastically and this has had devastating consequences for economies reliant on this industry. Tourism-related activities contribute significantly to the Gross Domestic Product and employment in many countries in the Americas, particularly in the Caribbean sub-region, and the resultant strain on these economies is undeniable. However, while we re-build, there is an opportunity to develop other sectors in order to promote economic diversification, thereby promoting economic resilience against future shocks.

Several other sectors have also been significantly impacted such as persons who own and/or are employed in small and medium-sized enterprises, those employed in the informal sector, indigenous people, disabled persons, as well as women. All too often these groups do not have adequate access to social protection and are therefore disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Therefore, in order to ensure that our recovery is resilient, sustainable, just and inclusive strengthened social protection mechanisms are vital.

The pandemic has resulted in job and income loss and therefore returning people to jobs is critical to income restoration and pre-pandemic living standards. In this regard the following questions must then be answered: what do we as policymakers do to address the crisis and build forward better? What do we do to turn adversity into opportunity and ensure that our recovery leads to resilient, sustainable, just, and inclusive societies?

Interventions will differ depending on the stage of the recovery process, but the key question for decision-makers will be how to use our resources to enhance income security; create and retain decent work; strengthen the social and ecological fabric of our economies and transition towards a “better normal” – one that is human-centred, inclusive and accessible, gender-responsive, and sustainable.

Having identified the major impacts of the pandemic, as well as some of the responses I would like to share with my Ministerial colleagues some of the mechanisms implemented in Trinidad and Tobago. Firstly, the Government put in place a number of short-term measures at the onset of the pandemic to protect the livelihoods of citizens. These included: the development of National Policy Guidelines on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19. Additionally, the Occupational Safety and Health Agency also developed Guidelines for Employers and Businesses which provided information on treating with the virus in work spaces.

National measures to promote business continuity and ensure social protection included: decreased lending rates; liquidity support programme through credit unions; salary relief grants provided via the National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago; grants - including the public assistance grant, the temporary food support grant and the rental

assistance grant – which were administered through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services..

Given that the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic are likely to have lasting effects, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago maintained that in addition to the aforementioned short-term measures, there was also a need for medium and long-term measures. Thus, a 23-member committee, under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister was established in April 2020, with the mandate to develop a post-COVID-19 road map for Trinidad and Tobago, through which no one would be left behind.

We are currently in Phase 2 of our Road to Recovery, which has commenced with the publication of a Report on ‘Transforming to a New Economy and a New Society’. The key pillars for this process are:

1. Diversifying and Transforming the Economy in Tobago and in Trinidad;
2. Making Food Security a Reality; and
3. Leaving No One Behind while creating greater equity.

As Trinidad and Tobago continues to work to uphold even further the principles of decent work and those enshrined in the Declaration of Buenos Aires, to be adopted at this Conference, it would be remiss of me not to share the major strategies and achievements of the Ministry of Labour in the context of the aforementioned objectives which would place our country firmly on the path towards a resilient, sustainable, just and inclusive recovery:

- The Government of Trinidad and Tobago embarked on a labour legislative reform process, which involved tripartite consultations. Key pieces of legislation which would be amended include the Industrial Relations Act, Chapter 88:01; the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act, Chapter 88:13; and the Occupational Safety and Health Act, Chapter 88:08, to name a few.
- The Government has developed a comprehensive National Workplace Policy on Sexual Harassment and a National Workplace Policy on HIV and Aids. It is also in the process of developing national policies on labour migration and the elimination of child labour, in addition to policy prescriptions for employment standards.
- The Government continues to strengthen The On the Job Training Programme targeted at young nationals, offering them an opportunity to intern at a public or private sector organisation in order to increase their employability.
- Boosting the Ministry's digitalisation capabilities and platforms to ensure that services and programmes are accessible to all;

In closing, we as leaders must do what we can to ensure safe and decent workplaces for all. As both developed and developing countries, we are continuously challenged by external and internal forces that effect our economic and social well-being, and it is in our collective interest that we work together to promote decent work. We can be reassured that despite our differences in size, culture and language, we share a common platform for development. As Member States of the OAS, we are fortunate to have the opportunity to collaborate in this manner and to continue to

respond collectively, not only to the crisis, but to the shared goal of improving the quality of life of the workers in the Americas.

I certainly look forward to our discussions on this critical issue.

I thank you.