



Senator the Honourable Donna Cox
Minister of Social Development and Family Services

Opening Remarks

at the

Caribbean Sociological Association's E-Conference

The Sociology of Crisis and the Crisis of Sociology

Wednesday June 15, 2022

9:00 a.m.

It is a pleasure to address you at this, 2nd Annual Virtual Conference of the Caribbean Sociological Association under the theme: “*The Sociology of Crisis and the Crisis of Sociology*. During the COVID-19 pandemic we all had to choose between extinction and survival, between adaptation and stasis. I wish to congratulate the Caribbean Sociological Association for choosing survival and adaptation.

Today’s *e-Conference* is a good example of adaptation, and presents an opportunity for continued dialogue among leading and emerging scholars and researchers from across the Caribbean diaspora, as well as the UK, USA, Canada, India and Zimbabwe, on a wide range of critical social issues. Among these issues are abuse of children, women, men, sex trafficking, suicide, the treatment of immigrants, the transgender community, as well as the impact of COVID-19 on education and health.

We acknowledge with pride, that the e-Conference also features the new biography on our own Trinidadian born, soca singer, actor, record producer and songwriter, Machel Montano as told by his mother Lady Elizabeth Montano. It also highlights two films dealing with domestic violence against men and against women by Nigerian/Trinidadian film maker, Oyetayo Ojoade who lectures in film at COSTAAT and the contributions of Dr. Talia Esnard, Head of the Behavioural Sciences Department and other academicians of the University of the West Indies.

This year's theme places focus on the current state of sociology as it pertains to the work of scholars, writers, musicians and film makers from within the region.

This region has a long and very chequered history of its sociologists holding up the proverbial mirrors and demanding that we look intently at our state of affairs.

Indeed, from as far back as Frantz Fanon's "**Black skins, White masks,**" and "**The Wretched of the Earth**" to the modern Gordon K. Lewis and many others, our sociologists have challenged us to examine more critically the ways in which we see ourselves, and the manner in which we are prepared to determine our own destiny.

At the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, we are tasked with the responsibility for addressing the social challenges of poverty, social inequality, and social exclusion. Emphasis is placed on the vulnerable and marginalised groups in society such as women, children, persons with disabilities, older persons, the poor/indigent, widows, the socially displaced, and persons living with HIV/AIDS.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many socio-economic challenges that made these vulnerable populations even more susceptible to existing socio-economic issues.

It exacerbated family violence which many across the world referred to as the shadow pandemic.

Against this backdrop, and determined to chart a comprehensive way forward in light of the pandemic, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago established the Roadmap to Recovery Committee. Amongst the recommendations of the committee, was the implementation of a social protection mechanism to ensure that no one is left behind.

Titled *‘Protecting the Vulnerable and the Displaced and Using the Social Safety Net to build a stronger Trinidad and Tobago’*, this recommendation was situated within the context of the **Government’s National Development Strategy, known as Vision 2030**, which itself is heavily aligned to the UN’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The first of the UN’s five (5) pillars is *“Putting People First – Nurturing Our Greatest Asset.”*

In response, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services recognised the need to adopt a multifaceted and responsive approach to the delivery of social programmes and services, and one of our key emphases was on ensuring the stability of the family. At the Ministry, we have determined that one of our core areas of priority must be the provision of support to the family.

I believe this is even more critical at this time, as we continue to contend with a multiplicity of socioeconomic challenges. Many have labelled this as a breakdown in the moral fabric of society.

The Ministry's National Family Services Division in response to the challenges emanating from families, provides a comprehensive range of outreach services and programmes to assist individuals, groups, widows, single parents and couples through counselling, advice, advocacy and referrals.

Additionally, the Ministry is working intently on finalizing one of its key strategic policies which is intended to address the current changing social environment in which the institution of the family is being threatened, namely, the National Family Policy of Trinidad and Tobago and the accompanying National Parenting Policy.

The reinforcement of familial values is indeed essential for continued behavioural transformation in our nation. These values which include respect, honesty and compassion, serve as foundational principles of family life and contribute towards developing a progressive and resilient mind-set.

In this regard, the Ministry has commenced a Values, Attitudes and Behaviours (VABs) campaign internally, which will encourage staff members to strengthen core values which have been lost in many instances, and are arguably no longer predominant. We hope to expand this campaign to the wider citizenry in the near future.

In addition, the Ministry, through its social protection system, offers a suite of grants and social programmes to support vulnerable groups and persons, both financially and psycho-socially.

This suite of grants is provided to persons to support and help them through their challenging financial situations, while providing opportunities for individual and family/household empowerment and transformation.

One of the Ministry's key deliverables in fulfilling its mandate of establishing and strengthening the social protection system, is the implementation of the National Social Mitigation Plan, which was set out to cushion negative impacts on the economy. Out of this National Social Mitigation Plan has come the establishment of the Social Services and Empowerment Unit. The Social Services Empowerment Unit is a transformative initiative of the Ministry, based on the concept of an integrated One Stop Shop that allows for the seamless delivery of social services.

The Unit will serve as a liaison to other Ministries, Departments and Agencies to implement a more integrated and holistic programme of aid for the vulnerable and their families.

Through the Social Services Empowerment Unit, the Ministry proposes to implement the recommendations of the Roadmap to Recovery Committee by partnering with Non-Government Organisations, Community Based Organisations, Faith Based Organisations, as well as the private sector, to support the transition of the vulnerable populations' dependency on the state to becoming more independent and having a better quality of life. The Ministry, also continuously collaborates with both governmental and non-governmental organisations in the pursuit of initiatives that directly address issues that affect the family.

The Ministry also in the process of establishing a 24-hour crisis hotline after careful analysis of the types of intervention provided by the Ministry's National Family Services to persons who have been suicidal over the past two years. Data received from the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, Crime and Problem Analysis Unit also strengthens the need for this critical service. The data provided by the police indicates that there were **545** suicides during the period January 01, 2016 to May 02, 2022 and **248** attempted suicides during the same period. The loss of one life by suicide is cause for concern.

As a result, the Ministry is putting systems in place to reach these individuals who feel that all hope is loss and the only solution is to take their lives.

As policy makers, academicians, researchers, writers and so on, we all have a responsibility to find solutions to the challenges faced by families. We all have a part to play in strengthening this very important institution through which all of us have been shaped. According to Aaron Patzer, an internet entrepreneur and founder of *Mint.com* – “*It is not about ideas, it is about making ideas happen.*” May I say, it is not about research, it is about making research happen, as you contribute to social change and development.

As I close, I again congratulate the Caribbean Sociological Association, for helping to remind our societies of the need to reinvigorate the discussion around the crises that is currently being experienced in the Caribbean and the need to produce data that informs developmental change.

I assure you of my continued support, and that of the Ministry’s, and I look forward for more opportunities to engage in discussions and share information on ways to help, empower and transform the lives of the vulnerable among us.

Maxwell Maltz, an American author once said, "*Close scrutiny will show that most 'crisis situations' are opportunities to either advance, or stay where you are.*" Let us therefore advance for the betterment of the people of our countries.

Do have a productive session!

Thank you.