

Response of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) to the First Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on Examination into the Current Expenditure of Ministries and Departments under three (3) Sub-Heads: Current Transfers and Subsidies, Development Programme-Consolidated Fund and Infrastructure Development Fund

General Comments

The Report was very comprehensive and relevant, highlighting a number of areas which are responsible for hindrances to the efficiency of the Agencies which were under review and making recommendations for improvement in public administration. The MSDFS noted that many of the findings were common across Ministries and that some of the pervasive issues were internal audit, fraud, monitoring and evaluation, project management and Non-profit Institutions. All of these listed areas are critical to the efficiency of the public service and the Ministry supports the view that a sector approach to addressing the issues through a central agency such as the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications or Finance, will be prudent. The Committee adopted the said approach with some of the issues such as the Internal Audit function and the need for the development and implementation of a fraud policy.

It is further suggested that small teams comprising persons with the requisite skill sets in the related areas, should be established to prepare action plans to address the issues within a given timeframe, with robust systems and mechanisms for monitoring implementation and reporting back to the Committee. The Ministry is confident that the implementation of the recommendations will improve the functioning and effectiveness of the public service and improve transparency and accountability in keeping with national development objectives.

Specific Comments on Pervasive Issues

The Ministry is in full agreement with the recommendations related to the Internal Audit, fraud and monitoring and evaluation. In terms of monitoring and evaluation, in addition to the recommendations proposed, the MSDFS suggests that action be taken to develop courses/degrees at UWI and UTT to

adequately train citizens in this important field. The MSDFS was the first Ministry in the social sector to establish an M&E Unit and has suffered over the years with regard to staff turnover and the inability to recruit adequately trained personnel in this area. This has also been the experience of other Ministries. In addition, in order for the M&E function to be effective, there must be robust data collection systems across Ministries to enable measurement of results and avenues for continuous training of staff.

The area of project management is another one of strategic significance to the public service, which was highlighted in the report. It is a difficult area to recruit highly skilled staff, especially at the managerial level and some of the challenges relate to the unattractive remuneration packages in the public service for the higher level positions as compared to those offered in the private sector. Project management Units also require a mix of skilled persons to function effectively, which is sometimes difficult to achieve.

It may be useful for the Ministries of Planning and Development and Public Administration and Communications to collaboratively develop a basic organisation structure for project management units, similar to that which was done for Monitoring and Evaluation Units; this could then be adapted by each Ministry according to their needs. It is also important for Ministries to identify and maintain a register of persons with project management skills within their Divisions and harness these skills for the benefit of the Ministries through project implementation teams. This is particularly significant where members of staff benefitted from training at the expense of the Ministry but are not given the opportunity to utilise the skills to enable a return on the investment.

The MSDFS works in tandem with a number of non-governmental institutions to provide services to its clientele. The Ministry notes the recommendations of the Committee with regard to the management and monitoring of the funds provided to these agencies and informs the Committee that at present the Ministries of Community Development, Culture and the Arts and Sport and Youth Affairs maintain registers of non-governmental and community based organisations which are utilised by the MSDFS.

Additionally, in 2007 Cabinet approved 'A Guide to NGO/Government Relations,' which outlined the intended relationship between government and the NGO sector as it relates to service delivery and the guidelines for the provision of subventions to such organisations. This document is still used by the MSDFS to guide its operations with the sector and there are plans to revise the guidelines. Similar guidelines exist in other Ministries as it relates to the disbursement of funding to non-governmental organisations, such as the guidelines for grants to cultural organisations under the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts.

In this regard, in 2016, the Minister of Planning and Development appointed two Committees to review and rationalise the policies and operations related to the disbursement of grants to non-governmental organisations. The Committees have completed reports on the issues, which are to be finalised. The MSDFS also suggests that in instances where Ministries have had long-standing financial relationships with some entities with very limited or no documentation on the nature of the relationship and the responsibilities of each partner and in cases where the entities are regarded as statutory boards, that clear guidelines should be established to govern these relationships.

Comments on Specific Issues Related to the MSDFS

At page 58 of the Report the Committee noted among other things, that no information was provided on how the Permanent Secretary assessed the effectiveness of the internal audit function. However, it should be noted that this question was asked under each of the three sub-heads and it is only under the Development Programme sub-head that a response was not provided. A response was subsequently provided in December 2016 as requested on page 59 of the Report. The two other recommendations related to the Ministry involved the need to take action to widen the Internal Audit scope to include among other things, analysis of strengths, weaknesses and threats, the identification and assessment of risk and the identification of conflicts of interests and the implementation of a fraud policy. The MSDFS

will collaborate with the central agencies with responsibility for these matters, the Ministries of Finance, Public Administration and Communications and the Office of the Prime Minister, to implement the recommendations. In the interim, the Internal Audit Unit has included the additional functions in its Charter.