



OFFICE OF THE PERMANENT SECRETARY

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Ref: MSD&FS No. 5/3/25 Temp.

February 17, 2022

Ms. Keiba Jacob
Secretary
Public Administration and Appropriations Committee
Office of the Parliament
Parliamentary Complex
Cabildo Building
St. Vincent Street
Port of Spain

Dear Ms. Jacob,

The Second Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an examination of the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial year 2020

Your letter reference Parl.:5/1/2 dated November 24, 2021 on the subject caption refers.

Please find attached a copy of the response to your request. The delay is regretted.

Sincerely,

.....
Jacqueline Johnson
Permanent Secretary
Ministry of Social Development and Family Services

**PERMANENT SECRETARY
MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
AND FAMILY SERVICES**

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES' PARLIAMENTARY RESPONSE

The document summarizes the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' response to the Second Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an examination of the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad & Tobago for the Financial Year 2020

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INTRODUCTION

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) was established by the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in accordance with Section 119 (4) and is mandated to consider and report to the House of Representatives on:

- *appropriation accounts of money expended out of sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure of Trinidad and Tobago;*
- *such other accounts as may be referred to the Committee by the House of Representatives or as are authorized or required to be considered by the Committee under any other enactment; and*
- *the report of the Auditor General on any such accounts.*

The PAC's Second Report of the Twelfth Parliament details its examination of the Auditor General's Report on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year 2020. The Report highlights the issues, observations and recommendations made by the Committee in its review of the 2020 Auditor General's Report.

The PAC requested that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) provide an update to the list of observations and recommendations provided by the Committee.

As requested, the MSDFS submits the following responses to the PAC's aforementioned recommendations on the *Second Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an examination of the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad & Tobago for the Financial Year 2020*.

Pervasive Issue 1: Information Systems – Processing of COVID-19 Expenditure

OBSERVATION:

The database difficulties which were largely brought about by a lack of interoperability among government digital platforms. This issue was raised in the Committee's Thirty-Third (33rd) Report, Eleventh Parliament. In the Thirty-Third (33rd) Report, the Auditor General recommended the development of policies and guidelines for systems interface by the Ministry of Public Administration, which was also a stated priority in the National ICT Plan. The National Information and Communication Technology Company Limited (iGovTT), which now falls under the purview of the Ministry of Digital Transformation (MDT), managed an Enterprise Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Microsoft Corporation. This Enterprise Agreement promoted the use of shared platforms which was due to expire in June 2020, some three (3) months after the onset of the pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago.

RECOMMENDATION:

The MSDFS should provide a status report to Parliament on the following by January 31, 2022:

- a) **The improvement of checks to ensure that only pandemic relief payment is received per household;**
- b) **The initiatives taken to recover sums confirmed to have been overpaid; and**
- c) **The lessons learned from these processes which would strengthen internal controls going forward.**

MSDFS RESPONSE:

In keeping with the above recommendations, the MSDFS has made strides to improve its overall processes for the disbursement of pandemic relief payments. To this end, the Ministry has implemented various measures to improve its targeting mechanisms and overall operations, these include:

- i. Implementation of an online application and validating system fitted with online monitoring and control capabilities.
- ii. Enhanced inter-ministerial collaboration between the MSDFS, the Ministry of Finance (MOF) and the National Insurance Board (NIB), which was critical in ensuring that the requisite crosschecking of databases was facilitated.

Furthermore, the Ministry also implemented specific measures to aid in the recovery of monies to clients who were overpaid. In such instances, a designated officer contacted the relevant bank managers to notify them of the overpayments and request that the payments be reversed.

During its Phase II COVID-19 relief support initiative, the MSDFS, having learnt lessons from its Phase I implementation process, established a rigorous process flow in an attempt to

strengthen its overall internal controls to reduce fraud. Details of this process are outlined in Appendix II. Overall, the Ministry has realised that adequate planning, process mapping and the establishment of realistic timelines are key components to ensure greater efficiency in the disbursement of emergency relief payments. The need to quickly identify persons who are or who may become vulnerable in the event of a disaster or crisis is also critical. In this regard, the Ministry has embarked on a project to create a National Register of Vulnerable Persons (NRVP) to support its service delivery to clients. The NRVP is expected to assist the Ministry in its overall efforts to address poverty and vulnerability by tracking these individuals across Trinidad and Tobago. The database will provide the information required to identify the vulnerable in order to be able to address their specific needs in and out of crisis. The National Registry will enhance both the efficiency and the equity of the social protection system.

Pervasive Issue 3: Non-Compliance with Financial Directives

OBSERVATION:

In the Thirty-Fourth (34th) Report of the Committee, Eleventh Parliament on an examination of the Report of the Auditor General for the Financial Year 2019, the Committee similarly noted the widespread problem of non-compliance with financial directives. It was recommended in the 34th Report that the Treasury Division work with the Public Service Academy to ensure that the Accounting Units of MDAs were provided with training to enhance compliance with the financial directives. In its response, the MoF explained that the provision of such training was already an established practice. The most recent training sessions conducted by the Treasury Division took place in 2019. They were interrupted in 2020 by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The MoF also indicated that it would engage with the Public Service Academy towards the development of online government accounting training for MDAs.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Treasury Division should provide Parliament with the following by January 31, 2022:

- a) **A progress report and completion timeline regarding its development of online training in government accounting for MDAs in collaboration with the Public Service Academy; and**
- b) **A list of priority MDAs where training is most needed.**

MSDFS RESPONSE:

The Ministry is currently engaging the Treasury Division for appropriate training for the Finance and Accounts staff. The training needs have already been identified.

Pervasive Issue 4: Contracts

OBSERVATION:

No contract agreements were made available to the Auditor General with respect to six (6) service providers to whom payments totalling \$4,524,420.89 had been made as at June 30, 2020.

MSDFS RESPONSE:

The MSDFS acknowledges the fact that it has not supplied the Auditor General with the aforementioned contractual agreements. The Ministry wishes to utilise this opportunity to clarify that the last contractual agreements for security and janitorial services for the six (6) service providers in question ended in 2014. Following this period, the Ministry engaged the service providers on a month-to-month basis and as such no contract agreements would have been available to provide to the Auditor General. The MSDFS is, however, in the process of tendering for these services pending the relevant budget approvals.

Pervasive Issue 9: COVID-19 Relief Spending — Internal Controls and Monitoring

Stronger internal controls and monitoring were needed to ensure that relief facilities were not abused or manipulated. The MOF financed the Temporary Food Card Grant initiative that was administered by the MSDFS to provide food cards worth five hundred and ten dollars (\$510.) to Individuals with children registered for the National School Feeding Programme. The MOF's internal controls for this initiative took the form of a Declaration and Signature sheet to be completed by beneficiaries before they could receive the Temporary Food Card.

It was noted that, at the end of the financial year, one (1) of every six (6) Declaration and Signature sheets (3,431 of 20,497) had in fact not been duly filled out as required. Further, there was no evidence available to the Auditor General that COVID-19 expenditure was monitored so as to ensure that funds were used for their stated purposes. This monitoring should be carried out by the Strategic Management and Executive Office (SMEO).

RECOMMENDATION:

The MoF should submit to Parliament a status update on the following by January 31, 2022:

- a. **Whether the 3,431 outstanding Declaration and Signature sheets were in fact never completed by recipients of the Temporary Food Cards; and**
- b. **The steps taken to strengthen internal controls for the Temporary Food Card initiative.**

MSDFS RESPONSE:

The 20,497 temporary food cards were distributed via members of Parliament who were instructed to have the Declaration/Signature Sheet completed prior to the issue of the cards to identify the beneficiaries of the Cards and for data collection purposes. The Members of Parliament were to return the completed Declaration/Signature Sheet to the Ministry for all cards distributed. Based on our records, the Ministry is unable to confirm that 3,431 Declaration/Signature Sheets were returned by the Members of Parliament.

The Ministry is continually seeking to strengthen internal controls and will consider alternative mechanisms to ensure that services delivered through the Members of Parliament are adequately accounted for.

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES

Ministry of Social Development and
Family Services -
Response to the Interim Report of
the Public Administration and
Appropriation Committee on the
examination of the Response of the
Public Authorities to the COVID-19
Pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago

RESPONSE TO THE INTERIM REPORT OF THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND APPROPRIATION COMMITTEE ON THE EXAMINATION OF THE RESPONSE OF THE PUBLIC AUTHORITIES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

INTRODUCTION

The Public Administration and Appropriations Committee (PAAC) was established by Standing Order 102 and 92 of the House of Representatives and the Senate respectively. The Committee is mandated to consider and report to the Parliament on:

- *The budgetary expenditure of Government agencies to ensure that expenditure is embarked upon in accordance with parliamentary approval;*
- *The budgetary expenditure of Government agencies as it occurs and keeps Parliament informed of how the budget allocation is being implemented; and*
- *The administration of Government agencies to determine hindrances to their efficiency and to make recommendations to the Government for improvement of public administration.*

The PAAC Report for the First Session, Twelfth Parliament contains the details of the examination into the following:

- i. The response of the Public Authorities to the COVID-19 pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago; and
- ii. The preparedness and response of public authorities to the COVID-19 pandemic in T&T with regard to the procurement and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines

Subsequent to a written submission and subsequent attendance at a Public Hearing on January 13, 2021 by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the PAAC conducted a review and analysis of same and proffered recommendations related to identified issues in an Interim Report on the Examination of the response of Public Authorities to the COVID-19 pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago, First Session, Twelfth Parliament.

As such, the MSDFS submits the following responses to the PAAC's aforementioned recommendations presented in Chapter three (3) of their Report.

ISSUE: Restructuring the Ministry's mandate in light of the COVID-19 pandemic

OBSERVATION:

The Committee noted the changes made to the Ministry's mandate in light of the COVID-19 pandemic to provide assistance to the country's most vulnerable.

RECOMMENDATION:

The MSDFS should provide a status update to Parliament by January 31, 2022 on:

- a) change in its management plan;
- b) training and development of existing human resources;
- c) its plan to focus on reducing the rate of the increase in persons entering the Social Safety Net to assist in preventing and lifting persons out of poverty and to encourage early recovery from the dependency on social programmes; and
- d) the methodology to be implemented for the measuring and reporting on these changes.

MDSFS RESPONSE:

- a) The MSDFS has shifted its focus towards transforming and empowering vulnerable individuals to take charge of their own lives thereby ensuring independent living and resilience. As such, the Ministry has expedited the implementation of the National Social Mitigation Plan 2017-2022, with major emphasis on key components such as the implementation of the **Social Support and Empowerment Unit (SSEU)**. The SSEU will revolutionise the service delivery model to one which is integrated, multifaceted and responsive. The Unit is designed to be a ‘One-Stop-Shop’ that reflects the philosophy of a ‘single-door approach’ and thus embraces the rebranded image: “No door is a wrong door, every door is the right door”. Integral to the establishment of the SSEU is the introduction of the developmental model referred to as the **Social Transformation and Empowerment Programme Uplifting People (STEP-UP)**. This model is essentially a programme of psychosocial support designed to operationalise the social protection framework with a defined case management plan from entry to exit to build resilience in clients.

The **Integrated Social Enterprise Management System (ISEMS)**, which is the IT platform to facilitate the SSEU, will create a centralized database on clients’ information that is readily available. ISEMS also allows for seamless interoperability and integration to enable data and information sharing across the organization, as well as with other social sector ministries and service providers. It is envisioned that these three (3) critical components SSEU, STEP-UP and ISEMS will transition the Ministry’s mode of operation, utilizing a client-centred and whole-of-Government approach to assessing and addressing the needs of clients. This new mechanism is expected to change the Ministry’s approach to social services by monitoring and supporting clients from dependency into a state of independence and self-sufficiency.

- b) The Project Manager and Change Management Team are currently engaged in the change management initiative, which focuses on three (3) strategies, namely:
 - a. Analysis, development and improvement of processes
 - b. Development of supporting structures - HR, Facilities

- c. Development and change in culture- Training, simulation, policies, information disbursement, orientation/on-boarding

The Change Management Plan commenced with thirty-two (32) sensitization programmes that were conducted throughout the Ministry where staff were exposed to the following areas:

- o Integrated Social Service Delivery
- o STEP-UP overview
- o ISEMS
- o SSEU and the intent of the new system; and
- o Community first responders

In June 2021 a sensitization activity was conducted at the pilot projects sites located in Tunapuna and Rio Claro respectively. Staff were sensitized on: the change management process; coping with change; the projects that are being undertaken by the Ministry; and the ICT changes to occur. During the month of August 2021, the Ministry also undertook training in collaboration with the University of the West Indies (UWI), St Augustine. The major focus was the impartation of knowledge to facilitate the new Case Management approach. Training continued in the Month of December 2021 by the resident subject matter experts in the following areas:

- o Transition to the SSEU
- o Client Information Management
- o Client care: Supervisory skill

Training is expected to continue in January 2022 with focus on:

- o STEP UP and its related Pillars
- o National Social Mitigation Plan 2017-2022 (NSMP)
- o Client care
- o Communication for Effectiveness
- o Client Information management
- o Simulations

- c) In keeping with this recommendation, the Ministry continues to work earnestly towards the establishment of the previously mentioned STEP-UP programme. This programme comprises 8 pillars namely:

- o Personal Identification
- o Education
- o Safety and security
- o Income and Financial Security
- o Family dynamics
- o Housing
- o Health and well-being

- Employment

The programme is also designed to provide a combination of customized benefits to clients to transform their lives from vulnerable to self-sufficient. A client must undergo this transformation within the stipulated 30 months' period. The client will also be supported and monitored by a caseworker throughout the process. The utilization of this overall case management system will monitor clients from entry to exit (within the established time period) and is an essential feature aimed at reducing and managing the number of persons on the social safety net (SSN) and by extension see the graduation of clients off the programme from a state of dependency to self-sufficiency. The STEP-UP programme will also be inter-linked with other programmes, educational institutions and Government Ministries and agencies to ensure a holistic assessment of the client and the provision of maximum benefits to assist them in building resilience and attaining a state of self-sufficiency.

d) The following are the stages being utilised for the implementation of these changes:

- The Implementation of the SSE/STEP UP and ISEMS will be done on a phased basis.
- Conceptually the programmes have been defined but focus is being placed on starting the implementation process within the second quarter of the fiscal year 2021/2022.
- This process will commence with two (2) Pilot projects at Rio Claro and Tunapuna Regional Offices.
- During the pilot, the focus will be to implement the SSE/STEP- UP and a prototype version of ISEMS.
- The pilot project will be focused on data collection that will inform the Ministry on the efficacy of the installed processes, help identify the gaps and bottlenecks and aid in providing data for improvement decisions.
- Staff are and will be continuously trained and informed and will also be asked to provide much needed feedback
- It is targeted that the entire Ministry is transitioned/transformed within 3 years
- Through the use of the ISEMS and the activities of the Monitoring and Evaluation unit data will be gathered for further and continuous development
- The measurement of success will be centred on:
 - client experience and satisfaction;
 - reduction in fraud;
 - responsiveness and speed of processing;
 - reduction in overall cost; and
 - reduction of the vulnerable population.

Additionally, the Corporate Communications Education Unit (CCEU) of the MSDFS has developed holistic communications plans for the: (i) National Social Mitigation Plan and (ii)

Social Services Empowerment Unit with various strategies targeting different audiences. The CCEU updates staff through the intranet by disseminating public education messages on strategies being implemented and the next steps.

ISSUE: Social Protection Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic
Grants Administered

OBSERVATION:

The Committee recognises the various forms of grants offered to the citizens of T&T during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RECOMMENDATION:

The MSDFS should submit the following to Parliament by January 31, 2022:

- a. an evaluation (with supporting data and facts) of the success of the grants in meeting the needs of vulnerable groups such as women and girls, the elderly, persons with disabilities and persons residing in rural communities**
- b. an evaluation (with supporting data and facts) on how various forms of grants received by the citizens of T&T during the COVID-19 pandemic assisted in avoiding persons from entering the poverty line; and**
- c. a report assessing whether the objectives of the respective grants were met including the extent to, which the grants contributed to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 1, 2, 5 and 10.**

MSDFS RESPONSE:

Although the Ministry has expended a considerable amount of money and manpower into the dispersion of COVID-19 relief measures, it is currently unable to ascertain the extent to which these measures have truly assisted its vulnerable clients. In lieu of a proper analysis of its relief mechanisms, the Ministry can only hypothesise of the derived benefits of its grants. To this end, the Ministry's Nexus units are currently collaborating in an attempt to conduct a study on the effectiveness of the MSDFS' COVID-19 relief efforts in alleviating the negative impact of the pandemic on its poor and vulnerable clients.

ISSUE: Process for Disbursements

OBSERVATION:

The Committee noted the processes used for the disbursement of grants and the challenges faced challenges faced.

RECOMMENDATION:

The MSDFS should:

- a) **implement proper monitoring and oversight procedures to be utilized for the administering of the COVID -19 initiatives**
- b) **Create a digitalization strategy geared towards improving internal processing to avoid delays from large number of requests;**
- c) **identify the lessons learnt from these challenges with details of the concrete actions taken to ensure the challenges are not repeated, especially in the roll out of the grants**
- d) **Develop a business continuity plan in the event another national emergency occurs.**

MSDFS RESPONSE:

- a. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services notes and agrees with the recommendation as put forth by the PAAC. In keeping with this recommendation, the Ministry plans to establish a core team of key individuals who will be involved in all aspects of the COVID-19 process. Additionally, it is envisaged that a service charter will be developed to ensure that all team members are aware of their roles and functions. This service charter will also simultaneously facilitate the Ministry's Monitoring and Evaluation Division with the ability to conduct the required assessments needed to ensure that all deadlines are being met. Furthermore, the establishment of this team will facilitate improved communication between the necessary Divisions thereby reducing miscommunication and delays in the process. Concomitantly, the Ministry intends to analyse the entire process regarding the administration of COVID-19 relief with the overall goal of improving the process map to include realistic timelines and the assignment of team leads/divisions, thereby ensuring greater accountability.
- b. As highlighted previously, the MSDFS is currently in the process of developing its ISEMS. This system once fully operational will facilitate the electronic data gathering of clients' information and the processing of grants and services. Such a system will allow the Ministry to respond effectively and efficiently to national emergencies that result in an increased demand for its grants and services. This system also has embedded in it full auditing and real time data sharing capabilities, which further improves the Ministry's processing system. To assist in this transition, the MSDFS is in the process of gathering requirements to engage a vendor to digitize its administrative records which will then be migrated onto a SharePoint platform.

- c. In March 2020, the MSDFS implemented a series of social measures in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, the need to respond to the immediate rise in the demand for social assistance in light of a global pandemic has presented the Ministry with unprecedented challenges. Despite these challenges, the MSDFS continues to fulfil its mandate whilst identifying and learning key lessons from the ongoing situation. Some of the key lessons learnt include:
- The need for a crisis management structure/system to be developed. Such a structure should involve the continued investment in technologies and improvement of delivery of social services so as not to disrupt the ease of doing business even in crisis situations.
 - Collaboration for resource mobilisation is key and should involve all sectors.
 - Coordination of social support measures is critical for the efficient distribution of scarce resources.

Consequently, the Ministry has made strides in ensuring that lessons learnt from its challenges are not repeated; and having identified ISEMS as a key component in addressing these challenges, the MSDFS continues to expeditiously pursue its implementation. Additionally, the MSDFS where necessary will further embark on a number of Agreements with key stakeholders to facilitate innovation and enterprise development, as well as the maintenance of synergies during times of adversity.

Furthermore, the Ministry has identified the following specific areas in which additional assistance is desirable to improve its overall capabilities:

- Technical assistance for the implementation of the National Social Mitigation Plan (2017-2022) which outlines activities that will aid the vulnerable populations to recover.
 - Technical assistance in assessing the impact and developing a strategy for recovery of the sector.
 - Mechanism for sharing of Lessons Learnt.
- d. It has been established that the MSDFS currently stores all its business and client data on its data servers. Presently, there is a very limited backup and recovery solution that is at end of life and support that cannot meet the existing or future needs of the MSDFS. This exposes the data to a high degree of risk should there be any system or data failure. To mitigate this risk, the ICT Division is currently developing an ICT business continuity solution that will entail a secure and reliable backup and recovery solution to mitigate against data or system failure. The expected outcome is a secure and reliable backup and recovery solution that provides for minimal down time in the event of data loss or data corruption and business continuity in the event of a data or system failure.

ISSUE: Social Support Expenditure

OBSERVATION:

The Committee recognises the social support protection offered by the Ministry as well as the number of beneficiaries that were in receipt of support.

RECOMMENDATION:

The MSDFS should submit to Parliament by January 31, 2022:

- a) the total sum expended on the Social Protection Responses to COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the number of beneficiaries per category to date;
- b) a breakdown of any additional funds allocated and number of beneficiaries per category to complete the remaining applications that were awaiting payments; and
- c) The duration of time from receipt of an application to approval and disbursement of grant.

MSDFS RESPONSE:

- a. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) COVID-19 relief response included the development of a package of short-term grants designed to bring immediate relief to persons impacted by the public health protocols and regulations, which were enforced in March 2020 and April 2021. The categories of persons eligible to access the short-term COVID-19 pandemic relief were as follows:
 - o Vulnerable individuals/families currently on the Ministry's database and in receipt of some form of government assistance (specifically Public Assistance, Disability Assistance Grant and Food support).
 - o Individuals/families who were retrenched, terminated or experienced reduced income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A summary breakdown of the number of beneficiaries and expenditure for COVID-19 Phase I is presented in the following **Table**:

Table 1: COVID-19 Measures Implemented by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services & Related Expenditure Fiscal 2020/2021 as at September 2021

Phase II Support Measures

COVID-19 Intervention	Description	Households Paid to Date	Expenditure
Food Card	Additional support to existing beneficiaries of food support	25,101	\$17,144,100.00
	Food and Income Support-Retrenched/terminated/income reduced for an initial period not exceeding 3 months.	55,924	\$245,359,830.00
	The provision of Food Support to households that receive meals from the School Feeding Programme but who are not current beneficiaries of food support.	20,497	\$31,360,410.00
Income Support	Support to current beneficiaries of the Public Assistance and Disability Assistance Grant	42,451	\$22,520,250.00
Senior Citizens Pension (outstanding)	Food support to persons who applied for Senior Citizens Pension but their applications were pending.	2,818	\$ 12,681,000.00
Disability Assistance Grant (outstanding)	Food Support to persons who applied for Disability Assistance Grant but their matters were pending.	488	\$1,464,000.00
Hampers¹	Emergency hampers were provided to families in urgent need during the stay at home period. This project was executed in collaboration with the 14 Municipal Corporations.	1,400	\$500,000.00
Food Vouchers²	Food Vouchers/Market Boxes provided to families, in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture during the stay at home period and continuing. This included a basket of fresh produce, inclusive of two chickens, and a grocery voucher. This initiative aims to provide support to 30,000 families.	24,999	\$6,249,750.00
Rental Assistance	Rental Assistance to a family where a member was retrenched/terminated/reduced	4,322	\$22,544,255.00
TOTAL		178,000	\$359,823,595.00
TOBAGO SUMMARY (Values are included in the above breakdown)			
Salary Relief Grants	Food and Income Support-Retrenched/terminated/income reduced for an initial period not exceeding 3 months.	1,947	\$8,108,760.00

¹ Executed in collaboration with the 14 Municipalities

² Executed in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture. The MSDFS a \$250 voucher for grocery items and MALF provided a food basket containing fresh fruits, vegetables, ground provision, seasoning and two chickens.

During this Phase, individuals who were adversely affected by the additional lockdown measures were invited to apply for the Income Support Grant (ISG). Consequently, individuals who lost their earnings on May 1, 2021 were eligible for payment in the sum of fifteen hundred dollars (TT\$1500.00) for a maximum of 2 months, while those who lost their incomes on May 8, 2021 were eligible for a payment of one thousand dollars (TT\$1000.00) to cover the month of May, 2021 and a further payment of fifteen hundred dollars (TT\$1500.00) to cover the month of June, 2021. Altogether, 1,196 approved applicants received payment at a cost of **\$3,019,500.00**.

- b. As at January 2022, there are no outstanding applications awaiting payments from the MSDFS.
- c. This process is currently under review by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

ISSUE: M&E Framework

The Committee learnt that in May 2020, the Ministry recruited a Director for the Monitoring and Evaluation Division and was developing a M&E Framework. At the time of the public hearing, the Ministry was utilising a Draft M&E Framework to measure overall performance. Also, the Ministry's M&E Division was working in collaboration with the Heads of Division to strengthen and complete the draft framework by refining indicators and ensuring targets were realistic and achievable.

The Committee requested a completion date for the implementation of the M&E Framework. The Ministry stated that they were collating additional data to input into the M&E Online Platform throughout the various Units/Divisions. This information comprises of outcome indicators and targets, baseline data and alignment of programmes and projects to the National Development Goals from the National Development Strategy (Vision 2030) and by extension the SDGs. The Ministry also stated that the Framework was results based and will comprise results from the output level to the outcome level. This framework will be developed by the end of June 2021, with full implementation of the online solution and training for all staff by the first week in July 2021.

RECOMMENDATION:

The MSDFS should submit a status update to Parliament by January 31, 2022 on:

- a) the Integrated Social Enterprise Management System;**
- b) the completion of the M&E Online Platform and the M&E Framework; and**
- c) a plan setting out how it will achieve its new target over the next three years.**

MSDFS RESPONSE:

a. The status of ISEMS as at January 14, 2022:

iGovTT, on behalf of the Ministry, successfully procured and entered into a contractual arrangement with Fujitsu/Synergy on the 11th of September 2020 for the implementation of this system. The mobilization fee was paid on the 30th of September 2020. A project steering committee was subsequently formed to provide governance for the project. The team includes executives from iGovTT, Fujitsu/Synergy and MSDFS. A project Change Management team was also formed, comprising members from Fujitsu/Synergy, iGovTT and MSDFS.

The ISEMS comprises four (4) incremental phases. Increments 1 and 2 refer to the application form and the processing of all the Ministry's grants. These two increments have been completed. Increment 3, refers to the payment module system, for which the design document for the system was developed and signed off by the Permanent Secretary. The contracted vendor, Fujitsu/Synergy, has commenced development of the prototype. The vendor is also preparing to design Increment 4 (reports and web portal) where it is envisaged that all data sets shared with external entities will be formulated into this particular feature.

The project is estimated at 60% completed.

- b. The MSDFS is pleased to inform that the M&E Online Platform is currently in its final stages of completion. To date, the data migration process and the development of the requisite targets and indicators have all been completed. A Refresher training course for staff was designed and the development of dashboard reports was completed for implementation in January 2022.
- c. Additionally, the work plans of all units/divisions will be developed each year in accordance with overall objectives and targets as specified in the MSDFS' five-year strategic plan. Monthly Reports will also be submitted to identify any shortcomings and inform the MSDFS Executive.

ISSUE: Challenges to the response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Committee inquired whether any challenges were faced in undertaking its COVID-19 pandemic response. The Ministry stated that its major challenges were the existing human resource limitation and the payment system, which was not configured to treat with such large numbers of payments at any one time. For example, the Ministry informed the Committee that over sixty thousand (60,000) applications were processed in less than six (6) months while maintaining its obligation to one hundred and seventy thousand (170,000) core beneficiaries as part of its usual social support mandate. There was also the clogging of the system with persons who were not eligible for the grants. In some instances, multiple applications for one (1) person or for persons in one (1) household were received. As a solution to this challenge, the Ministry adopted an all of Government approach whereby staff from various Ministries/State Agencies assisted with the implementation of the measures. These included assistance with printing of application forms, downloading and printing completed

applications, data entry and review and verification of information. The Ministry also stated that at the start of the process, challenges were faced with regard to technology e.g the online application method used to fill out forms which created issues for both the Ministry and applicants.

Additionally, the Ministry outsourced some of its services to the private sector partners, namely, BPTT, SWMCOL, Massy, Scotiabank, United Way, ILan Outsource Limited and Supermarkets Association of Trinidad and Tobago on a volunteer basis. As a result of these challenges communication and sensitisation were heightened to enable persons to better understand who would be eligible for the grants

RECOMMENDATION:

The MSDFS should provide details to Parliament by January 31, 2022 on:

- a) improvements made to the processes and current systems in place;
- b) revision of its staffing needs going forward to determine the adequate number of staff needed to efficiently carry out its mandate;
- c) the areas which require strengthening, and routine monitoring and evaluation; and;
- d) any new development and implementation strategies that would avoid these challenges from re-occurring in the future.

MSDFS RESPONSE:

- a. Being the key social sector ministry, the MSDFS is continuously improving on its service delivery processes and systems. As at January 31, 2022, the following system improvement has been made:
 - The process is more responsive by focusing on flattening the hierarchical structure to facilitate:
 - The removal of the intake officer and the Advisor II and the insertion of the caseworker. This means that clients can now come into the local boards and receive service from someone who is knowledgeable of all the processes and benefits. This will aid faster response times and enhance client care and client confidence.
 - The addition of a psychologist to the proposed structure to handle serious psycho-social issues at each regional office. This is expected to add to the responsiveness to those particular cases.
 - The introduction of an ICT officer to ensure the maintenance of both Hardware and software.

- b. Currently the staffing needs of the MSDFS are under review by the PMCD. The Ministry envisages that once the pilot projects for the SSEU are completed, it will be in a better position to determine the staffing complement of the Local Boards.
- c. The MSDFS has identified the following possible areas for strengthening:
- The need to become data driven and knowledge based. Data will be collected from all aspects of operations.
 - Continuously identifying knowledge gaps and providing the necessary training.
 - Training methods must include different methods of imparting knowledge in addition to classroom arrangement. These include:
 - ✓ Vestibule
 - ✓ Coaching
 - ✓ Apprenticeship
 - ✓ Onboarding tests
 - ✓ Online training
 - That data must then be analysed to ascertain meaning and provide insight on the vulnerable and the economy (both regional and national)
 - Stronger associations must be made with research and development institutions to develop studies, spark innovation and continued development.
 - Development of data collection methods on the performance of the processes and information on the development and transition of vulnerable clients.
 - Revision of Legislation and policies to facilitate new and advanced methods of conducting business
 - Culture change using hard and soft methods:
 - Hard e.g. written Code of ethics, standards of behaviour, onboarding tests used for screening, continuous training and policies
 - Soft e.g. Interactive sessions, social events (sports day etc).
- d. The Ministry is committed to the development and implementation of the following strategies:
- The introduction of an industrial engineer(s) to the M&E unit who will constantly review systems, identify gaps and provide justifications and recommendations for improvement of systems.
 - A review of the performance Management system must be put in place to ensure that Human Resources can continuously be developed and made accountable for their performance.
 - A continuous review of the performance of the ICT systems.
 - Forensic analysis to be conducted on a consistent basis.

ISSUE: Fraudulent activities regarding the Provision of Social Protection Support

In the written submission provided, the Ministry indicated that there were instances of fraudulent activities occurring with regard to the provision of social protection support. The

Ministry informed the Committee that thirty-seven (37) fraudulent applications were detected from persons applying for Rental Assistance as at November 30, 2020.

To remedy this, an existing Unit was given the mandate to follow-up on all applications to eliminate invalid applications and ensure compliance. The Ministry explained that once fraud was detected/suspected such matters were submitted to the Fraud Squad of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service for further investigation and necessary follow-up action. The Committee also questioned the possibility of staff engaging in fraudulent activities. The Ministry indicated that up until the public hearing no such incidents occurred.

RECOMMENDATION:

The MSDFS should identify the lessons learnt from this issue and submit to Parliament by January 31, 2022, details of the concrete actions taken to ensure incidents of fraud are not repeated, especially in the roll out of any social protection services.

MSDFS RESPONSE:

In the instances of fraud, the Police Service is/will actively pursue the investigation of any and all fraudulent reports. In the event that investigations reveal an attempt to defraud, the necessary action will be taken. The Ministries (MSDFS and MOF) are working on making relevant adjustments to the systems and procedures to avoid any such re-occurrences.

Some of the initiatives that were instituted for the Ministry's Phase II COVID-19 Income Support Grant relief measures included:

- Placing the application process online- this involves the use of automated business logic as follows:
 - i. Front-End measures to ensure that the prequalifying page includes a question about the client's National Insurance Board (NIB) status and advise the client about his/her suitability or recommend him/her to the Ministry of Finance Website.
 - ii. Back-end checks to determine if the client has already applied for the COVID-19 Phase 2 support grant or is a recipient of the Ministry's existing grants.
 - iii. Manual Process –payment files are sent to the Ministry of Finance for validation before payment is made.
- Making the validation process more robust- this involves an automated workflow process as follows:
 - i. Roles are assigned to Validators, Team Leads and Quality Control (QC) personnel. The application tracks and records the validation process which not

only facilitates auditing/accountability but allows for the appraisal of the performance of Validators by the Team Lead and the QC reviews. If the QC reviews resulted in unacceptable error rates, the validation state is iterated.

- ii. Timely data sharing with NIB and the MOF to ensure that double-dipping is eliminated altogether:
 - iii. The business rules defined by the MOF have made the process a simple one since the rules were based on the NIB's client database. Therefore, the initial process identified was one-way traffic, where the MSDFS would send the payment file to the MOF to match against the NIB's database. However, the ideal approach may be to have a central shared repository, where both entities can upload and search each other.
- The Ministry believes that once established, its ISEMS platform will also assist in mitigating fraud, as a unique identifier ID will be utilized for each client/family/household. This will be complemented by the Ministry of Digital Transformation' Electronic Identification (EID) once enforced. This unique identifier solution will allow for all client's information to be validated on a national level. It is envisaged that with the use of this unique ID, through the ISEMS, duplication will be avoided as the system will be able to identify and alert a condition that is already met or a social support service already received by a household.

- Improvement in Data Collection

Efficient data collection methods will assist the Ministry in tracking fraudulent activities. The Monitoring & Evaluation Division, Development Support Unit (DSU), Social Investigations Division (SID), ICT Division and the project Manager of the NSMP are collaborating to implement systems that can continuously provide data for analysis.

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES

