Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation

Senator the Honourable Allyson West

Keynote Address

Trinidad and Tobago IGF 2021

January 28, 2021

DIGITALISATION, THE NEW NORMAL

*Insert Salutations

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is both a privilege and a pleasure for me to join you today, at this, your annual forum. I wish to first thank the organisers of this event the Trinidad and Tobago Multi-Stakeholder Advisory Group (TTMAG) for extending an invitation to me to deliver the Keynote Address this year.

I must admit that I was intrigued by the theme you selected for this forum, "***Digitalisation, the new normal***", as it is such a fitting theme for the times that we now live in. I am certain that you will agree with me when I say that 2020 was definitely an unprecedented year. Not only did we grapple with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative economic impact on our economy, but we also witnessed an increase in the use of digital technology as we have never seen before. What we saw during those weeks and months in 2020 was the beginning of a paradigm shift, the onset of the new normal. We witnessed and continue to witness changes in the way people purchase goods and services, communicate, work and live. Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet became our new class rooms, work spaces, meet-up places and even our 'liming spots'. Digital and online technology has provided the means whereby our local artistes and event

promoters, who have been hit hard by the Pandemic, are finding ways to host online concerts and even fetes as a means of simultaneously generating income and easing the Carnival Tabanca that so many of our citizens are now experiencing. We have even witnessed election campaigns being conducted online. Who would have thought? The paradigm has indeed changed.

The digital revolution, which began a few short years ago, has been intensified by the Pandemic's gruesome demand for us to adhere to new needs, that is, our health and safety protocols of mask wearing, hand washing and most significantly, physical distancing. Thankfully, our use of technology has allowed us to also evolve and manage the time that we are currently in. Ladies and gentlemen, the 'new normal' is very much digital and it is here to stay. Think about it, many are now doing what they had long dreamt of ...."Working from Home". At the same time, it is now almost a year that many of our children have not been in a physical classroom; and while we expect that they will eventually return to school, as we know it, I am certain, that online learning will continue as a feature of our education system. Online examinations are definitely around the corner.

Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has had some negative effects on individuals, households and our economy, the latter, being due primarily to a decrease in our earning power as a result from depressed global energy prices, the growth in digital commerce grew exponentially and surpassed what was

initially projected in 2020. I am truly amazed to see this type of growth in micro, small, medium and larger scale enterprises. We can now boast of online applications and solutions such as Droptt, WiPay and EmployTT. I am particularly proud of the EmployTT App, which was developed by tertiary level students who participated in the first Hack-a-thon hosted by iGovTT in 2019. Just imagine the impact on our economy, if we seek to harness the technological capabilities of our young people and future entrepreneurs.

Let me reassure everyone that Government has placed the development of a Digital Trinidad and Tobago at the forefront of its Development Agenda. A fully digital Trinidad and Tobago is central to the growth and diversification of our economy. As the Minister with responsibility for Digital Transformation I am only too aware of what this entails.

However, a Digital Trinidad and Tobago will only be achieved when Information and Communications Technology (ICT) usage becomes a major feature of the fabric of our economy, society and governance mechanisms. In short, ICT must become as Trinbagonian as Carnival, Roti and Crab and Dumplings. ICT must play a fundamental role as both an enabler of national development, as well as a sector for economic diversification. Therefore, ICT will not only enhance service delivery, improve the ease of doing business and improve citizens' satisfaction, but also it will also provide our people

with the means to participate and contribute to the development of our country.

Now, there are those among us who will say that this is not attainable given our current economic climate and culture. However, let me assure everyone that this Government is committed to delivering on its promise of a Digital Trinidad and Tobago.

In keeping with its Digital Transformation Agenda, Government has signed an MOU with the Government of Estonia for assistance with the development of its e-identify and interoperability platforms. These two initiatives are essential to the widespread delivery of Government services online and improvement in the interaction between Government Agencies. Active discussions between key stakeholders have begun and more information on the progress of these critical initiatives will be released in due course ~~soon~~.

The development of a proper legislative and policy environment is also high on the Government's agenda. To this end, the Ministry is currently reviewing the Electronic Transaction Act, the Data Protection Act, the Data Classifications and Cloud Computing Policy. These are but, a few of the many pieces of Legislation and Policies that will have to be amended or even created to facilitate a truly Digital Trinidad and Tobago.

Additionally, Government has already removed taxes on computer devices making owning a device more affordable. The Telecommunications

Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT) has provided ten thousand (10,000) devices to the Ministry of Education, funded from the Universal Service Fund. We have started a project with the Ministry of Social Development and TATT, where Persons With Disabilities (PWD's) will be provided with subsidised smart phones. This project is expected to impact our citizens who are hearing and visually impaired.

We are aggressively pursuing the development of Community-based Access TT Centres in urban and rural ICT-underserved communities, across both islands. These Centres are equipped with state of the art computer systems that are free to use and conveniently accessible to members of these communities. Access TT Centres are furnished with an internet café, training facilities and a Wi-Fi patio where persons are encouraged to bring their devices and connect to the internet. These centres are staffed by members of the community, so we are also creating employment opportunities in the process of implementation. At present, the Ministry has six (6) active Access TT Centres in the following areas: Marac, Penal, Cumana, Guayaguayare, Todds Road and Carenage. In the coming months, we will be opening Centres at Beetham, La Horquetta, Santa Cruz and Roxborough. Others will follow.

Government's free countrywide Wi-Fi project, TT WiFi aims to increase access to and utilization of the internet and interest in ICT-related fields. To date, this service is available at twenty-six (26) locations nationwide,

inclusive of fifteen (15) libraries in both Trinidad and Tobago. It is also available in four (4) PTSC Bus Terminals, that is, in Port of Spain, San Fernando, Chaguanas and Sangre Grande; as well as on the Ferry service in Scarborough and Port of Spain along with the Water Taxi Service.

In addition to those services outlined above, Government has moved to make some of its services fully online. Services such as E-Tax, U-Turn system, requests for birth and death certificates are all services that can be easily accessed online. The MPADT has been given the responsibility for directing the necessary changes needed to accomplish our Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through the use of ICTs and we are working diligently on doing so. Since digitalisation dictates that we leverage our digital information in a beneficial manner, it certainly inspires more efficiencies where the Public Sector can better serve citizens, residents, visitors and even businesses. We recognise that today's technology is not only a strategic enabler for improving public sector efficiency, but also a key element in the effectiveness of policies that engender a more open, transparent, innovative, participatory and trustworthy Government. Furthermore, in conjunction with public sector transformation, while our plan seeks to enable a necessary shift from citizen-centric approaches (government anticipating the needs of citizens and businesses) to citizen-driven approaches (citizens and businesses formulating and determining their needs in partnership with government),

the proliferation of technological options introduce new risks and greater stakeholder expectations that Government must be prepared to address.

We do however need your help. **Everyone has a role to play in our digital journey -** We need all parties on board if we are to modernise the Public Service and make Trinidad and Tobago a Digital Nation.

Digital Transformation is not one Ministry's job. Rather, we all need to work collaboratively to affect meaningful change.

As I close, I must thank the organisers of this Forum for inviting

me and I look forwarding to working with you as we seek to develop a Digital Trinidad and Tobago.

I hope that your Forum is a successful one.

Thank you.