



An Open Letter from the SATT President :

It has certainly been a rapid period of adjustment for all of us. Catchphrases such as 'social distancing' and 'flatten the curve' have fast slipped into the trini vernacular and become almost as rampant as the spread of COVID-19 itself. It has been a remarkable period of almost daily challenges juxtaposed by reactions to similarly daily press conferences, the dissemination of new procedural policies to the protective services as well as the education of staff and customers alike.

We have seen back to back rounds of induced panic buying in supermarkets as a causal effect of hysteria driven by the fear of food shortages. Almost instantly, hand sanitizer and Lysol products became an abstract memory as these were the first to be completely wiped off the shelves. As the situation became more dire, harsher restrictions regarding partial lockdown took effect. The mad rush on fast food outlets was almost as mind boggling as the mad run on Pricemart when they announced rationing a few weeks ago.

The thing about crisis is that it always lends a pregnant pause for reflection at the height of desperation. Desperation breeds innovation. When we think about Food Security at the forefront of this crisis, we dwell on what may have been with the sugar factories and the rice fields that once were a source of immense national pride in this country. Instead, we are left to labor a heavy breath on an extremely bloated and cumbersome heavily dependent \$5 Billion USD Import Bill that requires an EximBank facility set up by the government to ensure food security for the nation at this time.

In addressing food security, let's break it down to the short term, the medium term and the long term. In the short term, that being the immediate period of the next three months, there will be acute shortages of products that have been hoarded or in a global short supply such as cleaning and sanitation items. We have already seen local companies step up to the plate to attempt to fill this void. There is certainly enough cover in the warehouses of both stores and suppliers to fill essential items as well as many local manufacturers to assess and address these requirements.

In the medium term, that being the period of the next three to six months, there are containers in transit on order, orders to be filled and logistical gaps to plug. These revolve around a daily changing dynamic that involves a disrupted supply chain with circumstances evolving daily globally. That is to say that delays may be expected while alternatives are sought. All stakeholders and actors are operating at the highest levels to ensure the smooth delivery of goods to our ports during this period.

In looking further ahead to the long term at our Food Security, it beggars belief that there needs to be a change of thinking holistically at the greater landscape of the agricultural sector and the agroprocessing sector which involves the manufacturing of inputs and materials crucial to the operations of our local manufacturers. There needs to be a change in the perspective of how we view the agricultural sector and its actors and components; we as people may not take the time to recognize or appreciate the things we expect in life on a daily basis.

At this time of writing at the end of the Lenten period, we await the resurrection of a return to normalcy and abundance. That abundance cannot be sustained with the FX import bill being where it is taking into consideration our current FX earnings and global economic outlook. All the luxuries we possess will not matter unless we can provide food to the nation's families. The acute pressures of continuing to depend on the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund means sustaining the import bill in its present incarnation will require a deep adjustment as to what is to be prioritized further down the road.

At the time of writing, farmers are dumping produce as they claim no market for it. This is a tragic indictment on our agricultural policies, the lack of protections in place and a failure of mechanisms to protect a vulnerable pocket of society. There needs to be a legislative framework that supports farm to table in a realistic and incentivized manner that makes agriculture and agribusiness operations profitable, lucrative and attractive. We need to ensure that there can be more local import substitution of produce in stores. Supermarkets cannot be held accountable for this as there currently exists for farmers no comparative advantage to the cost of production as opposed to importing the same produce. The state must give further consideration to supporting and incentivizing farmers as well as be forward thinking to the idea of processing, stockpiling and storing for the future.

In no way at all am I suggesting a lack of incentives and a great deal of effort by the current administration. There simply needs to be a detailed strategic plan going forward as this becomes one of the most critical cogs to the nation's food belt. This is an issue that transcends politics as it speaks directly to our food security which is paramount to the entire nation. There is no time like now to plan for further down the road to execute these plans rapidly to revive sectors from seeing farmers out in the land to a vibrant agro processing sector for food processors and input producers.

We've clapped for our Frontliners as we've continued to feed them (The SATT Food Drive for Frontliners is into its third week of operation and going), we've spoken about the need for essential workers. After all this has passed, the healthcare workers to whom we will owe a great debt at the end of this crisis, they will then pass on the Florence Nightingale baton to our farmers as we will become deeply reliant on them to transform our food security toward a period of recovery and sustainability. There is absolutely no shame in the work they do; many of our forefathers were of the land and very successful as well. These people represent a solution in the wilderness of a wounded nation and we will owe them a great debt of gratitude for their labors. The onus is on us to ensure that they, and by and large the sector, receives the attention, care and dedication it deserves.