



THE MANUFACTURING SECTOR HAS BEEN TRIED, TESTED & SAFE

- TT\$ Millions in Export Orders to be Lost

The country has been on lock down since 30th March in order to curtail the spread of the dreaded Covid-19 virus, whose damaging effects to health we are seeing globally. The Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association (TTMA), applauds the government's swift response to closing our borders to deal with the threat and commends the Ministry of Health on the efforts taken to effectively control the spread locally. It must be noted that during this period of lock down, the food and beverage, agro processing, cleaning products, hygiene, pharmaceutical, food packaging and PPE manufacturers of the manufacturing sector have continued to operate as essential services.

About 1000 companies comprise the manufacturing sector. Of those, 530 are currently registered members of the TTMA and 273 are classified as essential businesses. This means that an average of 50% of manufacturers have been safely operating over the past eight weeks and have successfully managed to control the spread of the Covid-19 virus over a sustained period. The TTMA believes that this valid sample group confirms that the robust guidelines and protocols that the sector has put in place across the nation, is working – and working well.

It is estimated that some 52,000 persons work in the sector and with the reduced headcount permitted to work, some 15,000 or 30% of essential staff have now been tested by the system during the mandatory lockdown period. An important proof-point in this regard, is the steady and sustained decline of Covid-19 cases while such a large percentage of member companies are already up and running. Research shows that Trinidad and Tobago has declined from 116 cases to 1, ranking second, behind only Vietnam in its readiness to roll back lockdown measures – this, according a study by Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government at the end of April.

To date there has been no known case of Covid-19 spread in a factory setting. The TTMA is therefore advocating that the remaining members be allowed to open and operate – especially given that they are bound by the same guidelines and protocols under which the essential businesses have been operating. The TTMA believes that the litmus test undertaken by operating manufacturers supports the call for a reconsideration of the scheduled date and an immediate reopening of the sector. TTMA President, Franka Costelloe says there is no solid rationale for sustaining the closure or for denying her remaining members the opportunity to go back to work and to put their people back into employment.

There is an urgency of securing jobs, stabilizing the economy and keeping families protected. Manufacturing workers are eager to get back to business. Costelloe believes that the delay is also weakening T&T's hold on trade and earning much needed foreign exchange for our country.

The essential manufacturers who have been working over the 8 week lock down period have in so doing, provided a blue print of safety protocols which includes: hygiene control, provision of shuttles where possible to minimize the use of public transport, no external visitors to the factories, working from home with the necessary platforms made available to employees, implementing a shift system for employees coupled with social distancing, use of proper personal protective equipment – complemented by training of staff according to the new protocols. These standards are to be adopted by non-essential members to incorporate into their HSE compliance processes. They fully understand the weight of responsibility and the impact on business sustainability.

The TTMA believes that government should take into consideration that the manufacturing sector is well positioned to generate much needed foreign exchange at a time when the energy sector is under-performing due to prolonged suppressed oil prices. It seems the prudent thing to do at this time, is to leverage the capacity of the sector to bring about much needed economic stimulus.

The TTMA has repeatedly expressed grave concern wherever it has been given a voice, about the effects of the lockdown on the competitiveness of the sector and loss of market share. While 13 other neighbouring countries have been fully reopened their manufacturing sector (including Jamaica, Barbados, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic), the manufacturers deemed non-essential in T&T are awaiting re-opening to fulfill outstanding export orders.

Among the membership of the TTMA alone as of 14th April, nineteen (19) non-essential manufacturers have export orders totaling TTD \$103M. When the 2020 figures for the period 28th March -29th April is compared to that of 2019, it shows an alarming decline in exports of 66% (just over TTD \$283M). A continued loss in export revenue for T&T cannot be sustained, especially with the current TTD \$934M spent by the government on COVID relief as of 12th May.

The TTMA membership is making an appeal to reason and fair play to allow the other 50% of manufacturers to be allowed to reopen on Monday May 18th, 2020. President Franka Costelloe has written to the Recovery Committee, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Health to support this call for necessary and urgent relief of its members.