# Social Protection Systems in Latin America and the Caribbean: **Trinidad and Tobago**

*by Claudia Robles and Luis Hernán Vargas, Social Development Division,
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean*

**Over the course of the 20th century**, Trinidad and Tobago gradually built up a social protection model with a strong contribution-based pillar (with growing access to health care services and education) in conjunction with a non-contributory pillar directed to vulnerable families. Trinidad and Tobago is an oil-producing country and has the third-highest per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the Caribbean, nearly double the sub-regional average. This favourable situation has given the nation the fiscal flexibility to invest in social protection. However, the country's economic growth is highly susceptible to global fluctuations in oil prices.

The social security system in Trinidad and Tobago dates back to 1938. The private social security system was set up in 1966, and, in later years, private contribution-based pension fund plans were reformed. In addition, in 1996, the country signed the CARICOM Agreement on Social Security, stipulating that all citizens have access to Caribbean pension systems, in acknowledgement of the migratory reality of the region. Currently, the old-age pension system consists of three pillars: public, mandatory private and voluntary. These pillars are complemented by social welfare programmes for vulnerable elders. There are also two types of pensions for persons with disabilities: one contributory and one non-contributory.

Non-contributory social security, of which one notable effort is the Targeted Conditional Cash Transfer Programme (TCCTP), is managed by the Ministry of the People and Social Development (MPSD) and is mainly regulated by the 1999 Public Assistance Act and the 2010 Senior Citizens' Pension Act. These laws regulate the benefits granted based on income level, and these benefits include cash transfers, social funds and other programmes, all of which are decentralised. One of the most important innovations in this area is the National Strategy of Trinidad and Tobago for the Reduction of Poverty, conducted through the Poverty Reduction Programme. This programme aims to improve the social information system, strengthen social institutions and promote decentralisation and the creation of a network of national security partners, including various non-governmental organisations. In addition, the MPSD manages a series of programmes and transfers for vulnerable groups: a pension for the elders and persons with disabilities, a public welfare fund and a general welfare fund that covers various types of support in case of risk events. In 2008, social security and welfare spending accounted for 1.8 per cent of GDP.

The health system combines centralised management with decentralised institutions. Regional Health Authorities are in charge of ensuring access to health care services, while the Health Ministry regulates the industry by setting protocols to ensure that quality services are provided. There is no public social security system, but the majority of benefits can be accessed for free at health clinics. There is also a private plan to finance health benefits at certain facilities. Likewise, the plan is to reform the social security system in the health care sector to guarantee basic services to all citizens and reduce out-of-pocket spending on health care.

In terms of employment policies, Trinidad and Tobago strongly supports cooperatives and small and medium-sized enterprises, aiming to improve employment opportunities and ensure the right to work among the economically active population. There are also assistance programmes for the unemployed that offer short-term work and training activities, as well as programmes for young workers to bolster both their technical and soft skills. Institutionally, the goal has been to install a decent labour plan, update labour security legislation and promote social dialogue.

Education is regulated by the 1966 Education Act, which ensures free and mandatory education for all children between 6 and 12 years of age. The education system is financed by the national government, but it coexists alongside private schools, which are required to offer a basic national curriculum. The education system consists of three levels: i) early childhood care and education; ii) primary and secondary education (under the responsibility of the Education Ministry); and iii) higher education (under the power of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education). In 2008, public spending on education was around 5 per cent of GDP, but this share has fallen, both for primary and secondary school. In terms of coverage, Trinidad and Tobago has practically universal enrolment at the primary-school level, but this figure falls to 89.9 per cent for secondary school. Between 2000 and 2009, there was an overall improvement in coverage, drop-out rates and repetition rates, with an additional decrease in the gender gap. The Education for All plan aims to ensure that the education system is universal, with high-quality standards, as well as gender equality in access to primary and secondary education.

In conclusion, Trinidad and Tobago is a successful example of a country that has increased contributory and non-contributory social protection coverage, improved access to education and set up a free public health care system. Consolidating its comprehensive social promotion and protection system will be a significant opportunity for the country to strengthen its coverage and improve the results of its social protection policies.

*Reference:*
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