

■ Tobago West MP:

Cost of living in sister island much higher than Trinidad

TOBAGO WEST Member of Parliament Joel Sampson says the cost of living in the sister island is significantly higher than in Trinidad, as he lamented the persistent poverty there, and decades of unequal investment.

Speaking in the House of Representatives during the debate on the mid-year budget review, Sampson pointed to stark disparities in development programme spending between the two islands for fiscal years 2024 and 2025 as he accused the former People's National Movement (PNM) government of weaponising the budgetary allocation to the Tobago House of Assembly (THA) in an attempt to prevent Chief Secretary Farley Augustine from delivering to the people. Sampson noted that while Trinidad's per capita development expenditure was approximately \$4,441 in 2024, Tobago received just \$3,939 per person.

The gap widened in 2025, with \$4,046 allocated per person in Trinidad and only \$3,106 in Tobago—a shortfall of over \$1,000 per Tobagonian, he said.

'This is a deficit in investment of at least \$1,000 to \$1,300 per person in Tobago,' Sampson said in his maiden address to the Parliament yesterday.

'And when considered over the years of this persistent pauperisation of the Tobago economy, it is no wonder why persistent poverty is the single greatest threat to the development of the island,' he said.

Citing the 2015 Survey of Living Conditions, Sampson reminded the House that 24% of Tobago's population was living in poverty at that time-up from 19% in 2005.

He estimated that the number has now risen to 30%, or roughly one in every three households, due in part to the economic fallout from Covid-19 and the sluggish recovery of the inter-island airbridge, which continues to hinder business operations.

Sampson argued that the existing funding model disregards Tobago's structural disadvantages and contradicts the guiding principles enshrined in the Tobago House of Assembly Act, particularly section 43 of Act No. 40 of 1996.

That section outlines considerations that should guide the Cabinet when allocating funds to the THA, including Tobago's physical separation, isolation from growth centres, limited access to national facilities, and restricted employment opportunities.

'These factors justify a special consideration in allocating resources because even though money spent in Trinidad generates significant multipliers, these benefits do not transfer to Tobago,' he said.

He further explained that Tobago suffers from a higher cost of living—averaging 30% more than Trinidad—with inflated land prices and construction costs. Additionally, income levels on the island are substantially lower, with the average Tobagonian earning \$7,084 monthly, compared to \$9,201 in Trinidad, based on the last Household Budgetary Survey.

'Tobagonians are squeezing out a living in this country with an income that is 30% lower on average than a citizen in Trinidad while at the same time facing a cost of living 30% higher... Combined, the Tobagonian is constructing his existence in this space with a 60% real deficit in financial capacity,' he said.

Sampson accused the former government of starving Tobago of resources.

'The call for greater resources to the Tobago House of Assembly is well justified, but sadly, was never articulated by the PNM and its Tobago representatives of the past,' he said.

'It is my hope that this contribution sheds some light on the situation of Tobago, and the politics of the PNM in Tobago remain permanently in the past.'

He said active negotiations between the Tobago MPs and the present Government led to \$134 million becoming available to the people of Tobago from the supplemental appropriation.