A high level meeting was held on Thursday 12 June 2014 at the Hall of Justice to discuss the initiation of a project which aims to transform the Juvenile Justice System in Trinidad and Tobago. Present at the meeting were The Honourable The Chief Justice, Mr Justice Ivor Archie, United Nations (UN) Resident Coordinator and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Resident Representative Mr Richard Blewit, and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Government to Government Advisor Mr Mansfield Blackwood.

The project is aimed at improving critical aspects of the juvenile justice system through system reforms and capacity building. The Juvenile Courts service clients under the age of 18 years. The three key project objectives are, firstly, establish two juvenile courts in Trinidad and perform a needs assessment and conduct youth courts in Tobago. The second objective is to strengthen the capabilities of the juvenile court system to enable effective and efficient adjudication of cases in accordance with new laws (eg the Children’s Authority Act 2012) and the principles of restorative justice. This strengthening will include training, case management, new rules and procedures, and court annexed programmes in collaboration with government agencies as well as the Children’s Authority and civil society organisations. Lastly, the project will execute a public education programme to educate citizens and in particular young persons on the transformation of the juvenile justice system.

At the meeting, the Chief Justice stated that the establishment of the Juvenile Courts is consistent with the Judiciary’s strategic focus to institute specialised courts, tailored to meet the needs of its varied customers as well as problem solving courts which treat with root causes. An example of the latter is the Drug Treatment Court. The institution as part of its mandate understands as well the critical importance of family and children in our society and has demonstrated in its Family Court, a new approach to family centred justice. In like manner, we turn our attention to the juvenile justice system. It can hardly be denied that the current structure of the criminal justice system provides limited opportunities for dispensing justice effectively to juveniles. This project provides an opportunity for minors in the criminal justice to be dealt with in a manner appropriate to their age and to be
rehabilitated without being adversely affected by many of the accompanying hazards of the existing system.

UNDP Resident Representative highlighted the importance of the project which will give greater consideration to the needs and best interests of the child in accordance with the UN Conventions on the Rights of a Child. He added, studies have shown some of the root causes that bring children into conflict with the law include poverty, broken homes and lack of parental guidance, lack of education and employment opportunities and peer pressure. The Juvenile Court Project will seek to address those root causes of conflict with the law by creating the linkages and supporting mechanisms to enable juveniles to receive and access treatment as well as participate in diversion programmes. Blewit further stated, in many countries such as New Zealand, England and Canada juvenile justice system have helped to reduce reoffending rates and by extension the crime rate among juveniles by focusing on rehabilitation using a restorative justice approach.

Over the next three years the United States Agency for International Development (USAID will contribute funding in excess of US$4.5M towards the Trinidad and Tobago Juvenile Court Project. Mansfield Blackwood, USAID Government to Government Advisor shared; "USAID is happy to support this initiative to reform the juvenile justice system in partnership with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the United Nations Development Programme. It is critical to support, protect and put in place measures that afford our young people a second or even third chance to turn their lives around and become positive members of society."

The Judiciary, which has the constitutional responsibility for adjudicating and sentencing in criminal matters including juvenile offences, will lead on project implementation, providing in kind support including facilities, training, and court administration skills and staffing. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) will be responsible for project oversight, fiscal and risk management, and quality control and assurance, and overall accountability to the donor.

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