

**Feature address by Mr. Mario Siman, Chairman and CEO of the UNICOMER Group at the TTCIC Business Luncheon 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017**

It is quite an honor to be invited to address you today, and I wish to thank Mr. Gabriel Faria and the T&T Chamber of Industry and Commerce for extending the invitation.

Before I begin, I would like to share with you a short video on the UNICOMER Group and our presence in Trinidad and Tobago.

I was asked to share my views on leading an organization in challenging times. The topic is very relevant at this time in light of the current economic climate in T&T.

My family has had a long history of retail operations in El Salvador and Central America, and for us, working in challenging environments has been very much the norm.

Through experience we have learnt that even the most difficult times can provide opportunities that can sustain or even grow a business.

During the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s, the importation of goods was prohibited, cutting off supplies to our retail stores. We started investing in local manufacturers, helping them improve the quality of their products while at the same time, providing affordable goods to our customers.

Many producers benefited from this initiative and we saw their businesses grow alongside ours.

When the importation ban was lifted, foreign exchange was limited and we were unable to buy products from overseas. We turned to barter agreements, enabling us to gain access to new products from nearby countries. Over time this allowed us to strengthen our trade arrangements and develop new and strong relationships with many overseas companies.

When a business is faced with operating in difficult times, the key to survival lies in its vision of and confidence in the future. Just as we all go through many cycles in life, the situation in T&T is also a cyclical one.

In my view, the low petroleum prices and the resultant impact on the economy has set the stage for many businesses to re-examine themselves. Here are a few areas that can be considered.

Take a closer look at the organization's operational efficiencies. Are there opportunities to streamline operations? Can investment in technological solutions bring greater cost savings?

Also, the current environment may provide opportunities to acquire space to expand your footprint or even skilled employees to strengthen your talent bench.

UNICOMER is very focused on achieving efficiencies in our operations. We have conducted in depth reviews of our cost centers and found ways to reduce our operating expenses without negatively impacting on the delivery of our services to our customers.

Also important is the effectiveness of your team members in today's environment. Are they equipped to deal with the demands of a very discerning customer and a very competitive market place? What are the skill sets necessary now to ensure they can take the organization forward?

At UNICOMER we have established the UNICOMER University with three academies – the Retail Academy, the Leadership Academy and the Functional Academy, offering more than seven hundred courses to our more than fifteen thousand employees across the Group, for their personal and professional development.

And finally, it is critical to evaluate how relevant the company's offering is to the end user today. Have the customer's needs changed? How can the existing products or services be shaped to better serve their current needs?

Our provision of affordable and flexible consumer credit and its related payment protection, including redundancy coverage, are key benefits to our customers at this time. Additionally, we have expanded our credit facility to include partner companies such as hardware and automotive repair shops.

We also offer cash loans to our customers providing them with much needed liquidity at this time.

Our ecommerce site, shopcourts.com, geared to the new generation of online shoppers, provides easy access to our complete range of products anytime, from anywhere and on any device.

Despite the current outlook, the UNICOMER Group sees tremendous opportunity in T&T. We believe that all the work we are doing now will strengthen our position in the market place as a preferred retailer when the economy rebounds.

We continue to expand our retail chains, Courts and Courts Optical.

Additionally, we opened the Ashley Furniture HomeStore last November, and, with our acquisition of the brand and franchising rights for RadioShack for this region, we have opened three RadioShack stores in Trinidad.

But our investment here is not limited to the expansion of our retail chains. Our Freeport campus, which is under construction, will house a state of the art 240,000 square feet distribution and warehousing center, and the head office for Unicomer Trinidad Limited and our Caribbean regional offices.

We continue to look for new opportunities to help shape and develop the local retail landscape.

One of our affiliate companies, Second Plaza, partnered with local investors to acquire and redevelop the Valpark Shopping Plaza. The new plaza when completed will provide both tenants and shoppers with a safe, spacious and ultra-modern shopping environment.

We have also been able to cultivate mutually-beneficial relationships with local furniture manufacturers. Several of them supply their products to our stores across the Caribbean.

We are always open to strengthening our supply chain and look forward to partnering with more Caribbean-based manufacturers to serve our over-one-thousand-store network.

I believe that a very important aspect of doing business in any country, and I would say specifically at a time when the country maybe going through some difficulty, is a commitment to corporate social responsibility.

Our CSR initiatives are all geared at providing either social, economic or environmental value in the communities in which we operate. In T&T, we have had a number of programs that have contributed in some small way to the betterment of the people that we serve.

Our Gift of Illumination Project, in collaboration with the Red Cross Society of T&T, provided lanterns and spectacles to children with no access to electricity.

Additionally, our Courts and the Cocoa Community Project, done in partnership with the Machel Montano Foundation for Greatness and the Alliance for Rural Communities of T&T, provides technical and commercial training in the production of chocolate bars from cocoa.

And while I am very proud of the work we have done in these areas, perhaps the one initiative that is closest to my heart is our UNICOMER Volunteer Week.

For one week every year, the employees of all our companies in the twenty-four territories, go out into the communities to make a difference.

This year's UNICOMER Volunteer week was March sixth to the twelfth, and our local employees assisted in the refurbishment of a home for the elderly in Trinidad and a primary school in Tobago.

Trinidad and Tobago is an important market for the UNICOMER Group. Our success here is not only as a result of the dedication and hard work of our team members, but also due to the tremendous loyalty of our many customers.

As the market leader in our area of business, we commit to bringing more innovation and world class best practices to the retail environment - even in these challenging times.

And it is in times like these, I always remember what my father used to tell me. He would say 'never give up on your country when it needs you the most'.

Right now, T&T needs all of us to do what we can to keep the commercial system running.

But, we can't do this alone. The business community needs the support of the Government of the country. There are three aspects of doing business here that need to be addressed.

One is the tremendous red tape that a business has to overcome to get things done.

A second area of concern is the unavailability of adequate foreign currency. Like many other companies, we are constrained by the shortage of US dollars to meet our needs.

And a third constraint that impacts some of us more than others, is the limited availability of properties to expand our businesses at a reasonable pace and cost.

I urge the Government address these issues urgently since they limit a country and an organization's ability to move ahead and develop new opportunities – at a time when such initiatives are very much needed.

Nevertheless, the UNICOMER group aims to continue contributing to the development of this country, fostering growth in the communities in which we operate, and actively participating on a national level, in stimulating the economy through business partnerships and solid investments. I am confident that very soon the stormy clouds will recede to reveal a bright future once again for T&T.

Thank you.