

Our Resilient Future: A People-Centred Programme for Relief, Recovery, Reconstruction and Sustainable Development

By

Unity Labour Party

[Excerpt from the 2025 Budget Address by Hon. Camillo Gonsalves, Minister of Finance and Economic Planning]

Madame Speaker,

We begin each year with a Budget Address that sets out our goals and details the next steps in our plan to accelerate transformative change in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Within that plan is a collection of commitments that are markers on the path that we travel together towards greater development, prosperity and progress. While disasters like Hurricane Beryl can obviously cause delays and diversions on our journey, this Government is consistently proud of its record of accomplishment and our record of promises fulfilled. 2024 was no exception. Despite the cataclysmic mid-year intervention of Hurricane Beryl:

We pledged to complete a \$35 million upgrade to our sporting facilities and host World Cup Cricket T20 games, and we fulfilled that pledge, spectacularly.

We told you that we would host the largest gathering of world leaders, governments and international organisations in the history of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and we did it; conducting a massively successful summit of the Community of States of Latin America and the Caribbean.

We promised that Saint Vincent and the Grenadines would add 400 top quality rooms to our hospitality room stock, with the opening of Sandals Resort and Holiday Inn Express. That happened, and, combined with additional rooms added by local hoteliers, we blew past the 400-room target.

We assured you that a major new airline would begin visits to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and that existing carriers would come here from new cities. As such, 2024 welcomed Jet Blue Airways for the first time, and American Airlines added routes from New York and Charlotte, North Carolina.

We committed to beginning construction of the Arnos Vale Acute Care Hospital, and we have indeed begun the most significant and transformative expansion in our healthcare infrastructure in generations.

We promised to distribute \$27 million worth of supplies and production supports to farmers and fishers nationwide, and we have done so, comprehensively.

We promised to dramatically increase minimum wages across the board in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and we did so, enacting the largest such wage increase in history.

We pledged that public servants would receive a 2 percent salary increase, on top of the 2.5 percent that they received the previous year. That pledge was fulfilled, as will be our pledge for further increases this year.

We also guaranteed that all nurses, nursing assistants, and nursing aides would be paid a five percent monthly supplementary income. This has been done, and extended beyond the initial six-month period that was first promised.

We committed to help ease the pressure of inflation on vulnerable Vincentians, and we have unveiled a raft of innovative interventions that have worked to cushion cost of living challenges.

We said that we would create a Prime Minister's National Advisory Council on Youth, and we have done so, launching a vibrant and active youth-led organisation with a breathtakingly wide scope of activities and ambitions.

We assured you that we would enact important reforms to our National Insurance Services to ensure the health and longevity of our social security arrangements. After lengthy consultations with stakeholders, we did just that.

We promised to reduce interest rates on student loans to 4.5 percent, and we did it, much to the apparent surprise of some.

We promised to complete far-reaching rehabilitation projects at the Bequia Community High and St. Clair Dacon Secondary Schools, and we have done that. Students of those schools will begin this school year in radically-improved buildings.

We pledged to begin construction of the Administrative Building at the Sir Vincent Beache Stadium, the Multipurpose Centre at Diamond, the Enhams Wellness Centre, the Buccament Isolation Unit, the temporary High Court at the former Bank of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines building, the Jackson Bay Beach Facilities, and the Park Hill Cultural, Education and Wellness Centre. Actual construction on all of these projects is underway.

We outlined, in granular detail, a plan to undertake road reconstruction works on 50 separate stretches of road across Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Forty-six of those 50 road contracts are either completed or substantially underway.

In the face of critics who claimed that our capital budget was overly ambitious, or worse, fictitious, we expressed confidence in our *“projections, our plans, and our partners’ ability to rise to the occasion.”* In so doing, 2024 marked an historic feat of over \$460 million in capital expenditure – roughly \$80 million more than 2023’s record-breaking implementation total.

And we pledged to create greater economic growth and further reduce unemployment in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Despite Hurricane Beryl, our nation enjoyed its fourth consecutive year of robust economic growth and increased employment.

Along the way, 2024 was a record year for the award of the number of national and exhibition scholarships, bursaries and special scholarships. It was a record year for the number of Tuition Scholarships distributed. It was a record year for the number of young SET, YES and ON-SITE interns gaining valuable experience in the public and private sectors.

However, Hurricane Beryl's untimely intervention did upend some programmes, while forcing the Government to make fresh and urgent commitments to the people of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Over the past six months:

Our promise to repair hurricane-damaged schools and start the academic term on time resulted in an unprecedented mini-boom in construction that saw Bishops College Kingstown receive \$2 million in repairs, and the construction of a \$3 million temporary school for Hurricane-displaced students from Union Island. With very few exceptions, schools opened on time for thousands of primary and secondary school students, just two short months after the hurricane.

Our commitment to house and care for Hurricane-displaced persons extended to over 1,500 persons in shelters, 600 people in apartments and guesthouses and 500 persons in private accommodations receiving assistance.

Our pledge to help homeowners impacted by Beryl has resulted in roughly 2,500 households receiving help with repairs, reconstruction or building materials to date. This is a phenomenal response in the circumstances.

We promised to ease inter-island connectivity challenges by providing free ferry services from Saint Vincent to the Southern Grenadines, and we have done so, with 24,000 passengers benefitting thus far, at a cost of \$3.7 million.

We promised to remove hundreds of thousands of pounds of debris from the most heavily impacted areas and to restore electricity expeditiously. We have done this, with BRAGSA's heroic work and VINLEC's restoration currently ahead of schedule.

We vowed to rescue Mayreau’s storied Salt Whistle Bay from Beryl-fuelled wave action, and we did so, in record time.

We assured Hurricane-impacted households, farmers, fishers and tourism workers that we would provide them with income support until some sense of normalcy was restored. To date, 12,012 persons have received income support, at double the level of our Volcano-related income support of just three years ago.

Measured by promises fulfilled, by capital expenditure, or by the sheer number of projects underway, 2024 was an extraordinary portrait of a government hard at work to accelerate our developmental transformation. Viewed through the prism of our hard midyear pivot and reprioritization to address the urgent needs of the 19,000 persons directly impacted by Hurricane Beryl, the Government’s exceptional efforts have been both tireless and compassionate. Perfection is neither a goal nor a realistic yardstick in any endeavour, particularly in the case of a small island government grappling with competing developmental priorities and the impacts of a natural disaster. But this Government has worked hard, worked smart, and worked well in the people’s interest.

Madame Speaker,

The past informs the present, and our record of 2024 accomplishments amidst trying circumstances should assure Vincentians that our ambitions for 2025 are achievable. We present to this Honourable House today a Budget that sets the bar of expectation higher than ever before. In 2025, we will:

1. Increase civil servants’ salaries by 2.5 percent
2. Complete the \$668 million Modern Kingstown Cargo Port
3. Construct not fewer than 1,000 homes for Beryl and Soufriere affected persons
4. Disburse over \$30 million in social assistance and income support to farmers, fishers, small businesses and vulnerable Vincentians impacted by Hurricane Beryl
5. Complete the Barrouallie Blackfish Processing Centre

6. Significantly advance construction of the Arrowroot Factory
7. Build more than 70 separate stretches of road with a 2025 budgetary allocation of over \$125 million
8. Advance construction of the Arnos Vale Acute Care Hospital
9. Start Semi-professional Netball and Football leagues
10. Launch the FAST fund to support Olympic athletes' quest for the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics
11. Launch a National Orchestra
12. Launch GYVE, a youth volunteerism initiative to support community-based engagement
13. Launch a dedicated programme to provide free transportation services for persons with disabilities
14. Commence construction of a vendors' market in Georgetown, and expand the vendors shops at Glen
15. Pilot a mathematics support programme to provide additional instructional time in math for primary and secondary school students
16. Begin construction of Marriott Resort at Mt. Wynne
17. Begin construction on the Sandy Bay, Brighton and Thomas Saunders Secondary Schools, the Kingstown Anglican School, and Grimble Hall at the Girls' High School
18. Begin cultural, education, wellness and production hubs in Belle Vue, Park Hill, Troumaca and Petit Bordel
19. Provide over 2,600 laptops to community college and secondary school students
20. Install lights and a warmup track at the Sir Vincent Beache Stadium
21. Begin construction of a modern parliament building in Beachmont
22. Begin or complete construction of 11 clinics nationwide
23. Conduct targeted and sustained police operations against criminals, and improve community policing in high-risk areas
24. Welcome a record number of visitors to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
25. Deliver another year of robust economic growth and greater employment opportunities

And we will do it all without raising taxes or fees. Each of these initiatives, and more, will be detailed during the course of this Budget 2025 Speech, and through the subsequent presentations by other members of this Honourable House.

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