Small Country, Big Goals, ICT's role

Cleveland Thomas, National Chief Information Officer, Ministry of Public Administration, Trinidad and Tobago talks to InterComms about ICT's role in the country's development goals

Cleveland Thomas, National Chief Information Officer for the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

In July 2005, Cleveland Thomas was appointed the National Chief Information Officer for the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. This post is attached to the Ministry of Public Administration, the agency responsible for implementing fastforward, the country's National Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Strategy.

As NCIO, Cleveland is chartered with the responsibility for the use of Information and Communication Technology as an enabling tool to assist with Trinidad and Tobago's Vision 2020 Plan. He is known particularly in international circles as Trinidad and Tobago's representative at the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), Understudy Group 3 and also as the former Chairman of the Tariff and Accounting for Latin America and the Caribbean (TAL) Group. He sits on the ITU Council (Directors) and was recently appointed Chairman of a Committee to revise one of the United Nations treaty instruments – International Telecommunications Regulations (ITRs). He has made presentations on their behalf in Russia, The Gambia and Botswana among others.

Q: Can you give me an overview of the issues for telecoms in Trinidad and Tobago?

A: We are a small island state about 1.4m people, very cosmopolitan and unique in the Caribbean since we are the only one who depends so much on petroleum. We have benefited tremendously from recent high prices. We are the only country among many developing countries that has set an agenda to achieve developed country status by a particular date, in our case, that is 2020. ICT is being used as a key tool in our National Development strategy for achieving "Developed Country Status" Vision 2020 and its five (5) developmental pillars:

- Governing Effectively;
- Enabling Competitive Business;
- Infrastructure and Environment;
- Developing Innovative People; and
- Nurturing a Caring Society.

When we talk about telecoms, it is as a part of ICT. Trinidad and Tobago were like many other countries and had a single local operator: Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT) in which The Government continues to hold a 51 percent shareholding. We signed up to telecoms liberalisation in 2001 but because of a number of issues, it took until 2004. To achieve this we established the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago which is no different from UK's Ofcom or the US FCC.

We decided that we would not take a similar approach to our counterparts in the region by first liberalising the mobile market and then going on to other sectors. In tour we liberalised all services at once, allowing us to catch up with others. Three mobile operators were given licences. Unfortunately there were challenges with interconnection and it went to court but those matters have now been substantially resolved. The government will shortly go back out and invite a new operator very shortly. In domestic fixed lines, we have issued six concessions. In the case of international services there are a further seven operators. There are six, free to air television and broadcasting channels and eleven subscription TV licenses. There are thirty licenses for free to air radio broadcasting. We have the lowest rates for a number of services in the region, including internet and broadband services. Mobile is the most competitive sector and our penetration levels are in excess of 140 percent. Fixed lines have remained the same at about 30 percent. An amended Telecommunications Act for 2009 will shortly be placed before Parliament. The Act takes note of recent developments in the sector giving people more assurance and clarity.

Q: What role can Telecoms play in transforming a country from Developing to Developed country?

A: The issue of the Digital Divide remains a concern. We do have rural and urban communities who have not had access to technology that still have traditional ways of purchasing services and communicating with each other. They want to improve their lives, economically socially or through education. Telecoms can play a role in giving these people a wider opportunity to talk to the rest of the world. Through the click of a button, ICT brings access to them through such opportunities as tele-education and e-Health. Rather than sitting in a healthcare centre, our citizens can ►

get that information by the touch of a button. Some of those programmes are in place right now. Some people have been video conferencing with their grandchildren overseas and having a response immediately.

We are a small island state and we are simply not self sufficient in every respect. Through telecoms, we can link to other parts of the world for economic development. Though the telecom sector, moving from developing to developed status, we recognise that we cannot remain isolated if we are to become a knowledge based society. ICT is a platform that allows us to go further than universal education by reaching the unreachable and giving them a new channel of opportunity. Government has been entrusted to do many things.

There is now more access to that information. There is now a greater requirement for accountability for Government, to respond to the important subjects that touch our citizens. With the many broadcasting licenses that have been issued, people are now made more aware of both failures and successes. There is now a requirement to respond more swiftly to public opinion. That is an important way that people can link themselves to the development of the country. At a macro-level, the big picture is about growth and development, but how does it really touch the individual and provide opportunities to them? There is a great opportunity to communicate with all and sundry with the provision of services in rural areas. These are all very, very important as an enabler for business. Government is also providing services. We have a brand in Trinidad and Tobago called ttconnect which uses multiple channels for service delivery and meeting people's needs. This multi-channel approach provides individuals, business and other stakeholder with an opportunity to have their needs met in convenient and efficient ways.

Q: Can you give me an example of meeting individual needs?

A: Whatever your individual needs are from birth to death, we have the opportunity at each point in time to meet that individual's needs. For someone just about to give birth, we could have a programme in place to identify where the child's birth certificate can be issued, potential schools and later help them get their driving permit and passport. Traditionally for these services, we queue, we make an appointment but we don't have feedback. ICT gives you a confirmation for a request. I know my status and can move forward. It really touches the people at their basic needs.

Q: Could you outline the sorts of success you have had in developing the country?

A: Trinidad & Tobago's annual growth over the past four years has been in excess of eight percent. We continue to demonstrate growth of three to four percent, even with the financial crisis. We are not in recession at present. Investors continue to express confidence and deep interest. We continue to see great interest in the area of natural resources. The petroleum industry generates the highest single contribution to our GDP. In terms of mining - exploration, and refineries, we have number of investors there. Because we have placed such a great emphasis on it, there is recognition that we have to diversify and we have to look at the role that ICT can play in that. We have established an ICT Park, the eTeck Park and we are now to seeking to make Trinidad and Tobago the financial centre for the region. We are well placed to be the link between the English speaking Caribbean and our Spanish speaking South American colleagues and we have many in the banking industry who are in discussions with us. From a macro-international perspective, our government recognises that we do not have all of the resources we need to do this and we have engaged international agencies to help us with our development and growth. There is a tremendous amount of construction going up in every sector: arts, commerce and the basic provision of homes to name just a few. That is happening with the support of external industries providing support. Government and the private sector are doing a great deal of work in our nation building with international open tender invitation. We do not have as much tourism in Trinidad, because our emphasis has been on the energy and commercial sector. Tobago is where we have placed emphasis on tourism. We have developed a tourism and a small business portal for Tobago and we are building a Tourism Park there too.

Q: How are you engaging with other countries?

A: Trinidad and Tobago is hosting two major conferences this year, the Summit of the Americas with 34 international leaders in the hemisphere, including President Obama. In November we are going to have 54 international leaders for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. We don't know of any country in the world who would have taken such two international meeting in the same year. We have engaged Canada and Singapore through our government to learn from their experience with ICT. We have worked through an MoU with the UK, and there are others we are working with. This is a way to help and the private sector looking at financial management.

Q: How is the global financial turmoil affecting?

A: It has affected us. We are not immune. There is a reduction in our growth and that means we that we have to look at our planning. Our energy is the same and our optimism.

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