

# Creative Solutions for Small Countries

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: How is the Global downturn affecting Trinidad and Tobago?**

**A:** Major developed countries and many smaller countries are all equally affected by the recession. If you look throughout the Caribbean region, the recession has affected tourism and remittances from abroad to family members. A number of our neighbours in the Caribbean have also approached the International Development Bank and International Monetary Fund for financial help. The situation is bearing on small economies and even in developing economies.

Trinidad and Tobago has its own challenges. We have not had the levels of growth that we have had in previous years. The reduction in oil and gas prices has affected us. Our economy depended on tourism far less than our colleagues in the region, but in terms of the natural resources we are still feeling it as much as they are.

**Q: What does that mean for your development strategy?**

**A:** We are treating it as an opportunity to be creative. We are keeping a focus on the future and we continue to remind people of our goal, which is still to become a developed country by 2020. We say not working harder but working smarter. We are trying new ways of doing what we have done before. For example, why don't we bring new measures to handle some of the problem in the economy? We lose a lot from traffic

congestion and commuting. To ensure that inefficiencies or lost productivity from that can be gained back, one potential solution is working from home and teleworking. Another way might be to take the work closer to the propel so there is less time spent travelling. This is now decentralisation of many of the activities that previously occurred in the capital city. There is very much a focus now on establishing activities in remote locations.

One of the other things we have done and are doing is continuously is to find new channels for delivering services to the people. In our country, the traditional way of doing that is that people would turn up to an office, spend a long time in queues. To stop that we have started a number of programmes, one of which is called TTConnect in which we are looking at four new channels to deliver services more efficiently and effectively to our customers. These channels include an item called Kiosk, a programme that we are looking to carry forward so that a person can get government services and information from an ATM or cashpoint-type machine. We are looking to distribute them to different areas of Trinidad and Tobago. We believe that it will save in terms transportation and congestion, by not having to go to several ministries for that same information.

With TTConnect we also have other services. From your office or home, you can gain access to government information online. We also currently have seven Service Centres across Trinidad and Tobago which we plan to increase. These are one stop shops for all government services. We are placing them at strategic locations so that when somebody walks into the centre, they have at their disposal staff who will help them with their request, completing forms at that Service Centre and undertaking background work with prescribed times and dates.

► **Q: Are you looking for help in this?**

**A:** We have to become more creative but we are not trying to do it on our own, meaning that we are not trying to develop a capability entirely internally, we are looking to learn and acquire the expertise and skills from outside. Consequently, the government has gone abroad to engage a number of countries who have a record doing it far faster and probably cheaper.

We have engaged with several countries including the UK, Singapore and Canada. Through that approach we are also working with China. China has been involved in the construction sector, moving very quickly to help us build programmes here. What we are doing there is trying to have an arrangement where they can lend their expertise to us to help us take the learning curve much faster. We are also pursuing Public Private Partnerships (PPP). Where we do not have the money up front, we partner with major institutions that can and we contribute by making facilities such as land available. That comes with a caveat that in the long term, we have an option to buy that back or own it outright. In the early days we owned, now we may not have to own because

we just don't have the money, so PPP will remain important to us.

What we have also sought to do is redefine how we do business. We started engaging the rest of the region, we understand our region among ourselves and we have expertise that is as good as any from outside. We would like to provide the same service that had previously been bought from outside the region. We have looked at broadening and redefining our customer base and probably even partnering with them. One of the things that we are also doing is that we are taking the decision that our current business structure is the best way forward in the current business environment.

**Q: What has been regional feedback on that idea?**

**A:** We have engaged with them. Recently there was a conference here in Trinidad and Tobago and we seized the opportunity, not only to engage them on one and one in private conversations but to talk openly about it. Our Prime Minister (PM) is on record as saying that one of the next best currencies for getting out of this recession is technology and ICT and it has to be put at the top of

the agenda. The PM of Grenada is the appointed PM with responsibility for ICT in the region. My own Minister is the President of the Caribbean Telecommunications Union dealing with regulation and policies. We are confident we can help one another.

**Q: What about government ownership?**

**A:** Having nationalised industries probably worked well in the past and some people are saying that we need to revert to that. In the case of ICT, our government has just taken the decision to redefine the way in which we do business with ICT. They have moved us out of being a division or department within government and have instead created a company to deal with all ICT. This state enterprise company will now have the benefit of speed and will allow us to look at large scale efficiencies and economies across government.

What we have also done is to centralise some capabilities. Rather than having ICT dispersed in many areas, with many people doing the same thing, being centralised helps in dealing with the issues. On the human resource side of things, we have started to utilise our local resources, many of our scholars can be part of the solution. We are also working to train them so that they are sufficiently competent so that they can train someone else going forward. Of course, we have to look at the number of projects that we are doing and asking which ones are relevant and which ones are critical.

**Q: How will this help the client?**

**A:** Client service delivery will have a greater focus on client satisfaction. There are a number of initiatives that we are working at, such as refurbishment projects, projects that deal with enterprises, a business portal that businesses can post opportunities on. We are at the same time, looking to revise our legislation to be more robust to the current environment for liberalisation and regulation, we are at the same time developing policies, dealing with cyber crime and secure electronic transactions and payments, we also have programmes looking at computers for the child, computers in teacher training, quite a number of programmes and projects to engage business groups to work with us. We can't do it all ourselves and we need to partner with the best at the same time.

