

Disability-inclusive enterprises get \$600,000 boost

THE Digicel Foundation, in partnership with the Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme (GEF SGP), has announced the six winners of its inaugural Innovation Challenge for Persons with Disabilities.

One of the first initiatives of its kind in the Caribbean, Digicel says the Challenge invests in business ideas led by or designed for persons with disabilities.

With over 50,000 people—approximately 4% of the national population—living with disabilities, the programme attracted diverse and innovative submissions from across Trinidad and Tobago, highlighting the potential of persons with disabilities as innovators, entrepreneurs, and agents of change, according to Digicel.

Each of the six organisations will receive grants of up to \$90,000 to launch or scale entrepreneurial ventures that promote inclusion, independence, and social impact. Speaking at the award ceremony hosted at Goodwill Industries on November 4, Penny Gomez, CEO of the Digicel Foundation, reaffirmed the Foundation's belief in inclusion as a driver of progress.

'At the Digicel Foundation, we believe that inclusion is essential— not only for social good but for national development. It's what makes our society stronger, more compassionate, and more innovative. When everyone is included, everyone benefits,' Gomez said.

'This programme is about empowering individuals and organisations that are led by, or serve, persons with disabilities—people with brilliant, revenue-generating ideas that incorporate sustainability, digitalisation, or technology,' she added.

Through its partnership with the GEF SGP, implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Foundation will also provide mentorship and capacity-building support to ensure the projects' long-term success.

Resident Representative for the UNDP Multi-Country Office (MCO), Ugo Blanco, commended the initiative for aligning with the UN's goals of inclusion and sustainable development. He emphasised that 'Inclusion is not charity. It is a must; it is a right. This is why we are so pleased to be a part of this initiative, which is helping persons with disabilities build their own businesses.'

Speaking at the function, Nirmala Maharaj-Sawh, Director, Disability Affairs Unit, Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Affairs, also praised the programme. She noted: 'This is the progress that we strive for as we work towards providing social services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago through strengthened social protection systems, financial assistance and partnerships. It is initiatives like this that shift the narrative from 'what assistance is needed' to 'what solutions can be created'.'

Overall, the Digicel Foundation and the GEF SGP will invest \$600,000 in funding, mentorship, and training to ensure the success of their business plans.

The six organisations awarded funding are:

-Cashew Gardens Community Council and Cristy Bagwandeen