

GCCA+ targets energy culture change in T&T

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TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO has a culture of energy wastage, and a cultural shift is necessary, according to an official from the Global Climate Change Alliance Plus (GCCA+) project.

In a recent interview with Express Business, project manager Kiran Harnanan expressed hope for a cultural shift in how energy is conserved, emphasising that changing mindsets is a crucial factor.

The programme is designed to enhance the country's resilience to climate change by promoting renewable energy as an alternative source for electricity generation, helping achieve its Nationally Determined Contribution of reducing carbon emissions by 15% by 2030.

'We have a culture of wasting energy because of our low energy prices. I would like to see a culture shift in us being more energy conscious,' he said. Although the country may not be there yet, Harnanan remains optimistic that this is a viable path forward for T&T.

The GCCA+ project, which is expected to conclude this year, started in 2020 and is funded by the European Union (EU) with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as the implementation body for the project, and the government arm, is the Ministry of Planning and Development as a project partner and sponsor.

Since the inception of the GCCA+ project, 12 sites across T&T have installed solar PV systems: Ten in Trinidad and two in Tobago. Some of these areas include the Trinidad and Tobago Red Cross Society, Speyside High School, Aquaculture Unit (AU), Fisheries Division, Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and Caribbean Institute of Astronomy (CARINA), to name a few. In 2024, the project savings were used for six additional sites which will be installed in the first quarter of 2025, said Harnanan.

Three leading goals

According to the project manager, the project has three leading goals, which includes to demonstrate the viability of solar energy through the installation of small-scale solar PV systems, and these were done at 12 sites, at NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations), schools and community centres. The second goal of the project, he added, 'is to provide technical assistance to the government as it pertains to policy development relating to and encouraging renewable energy.'

And the third goal, 'is to execute a public awareness campaign to bring about change in public perception and possibly behaviour in a positive way as it relates to renewable energy, being energy efficient, and pricing'.

Asked about the accomplishments of the project thus far, Harnanan explained that 'one of the major successes of the project, I think was paving the way for establishing a process for obtaining the renewable energy generator license for all the sites. Before this wasn't a requirement, but recently it's a requirement over the last few years. However, there has not been an established process so what the project did to pave the way, we had to work with the relevant bodies, the Ministry of Public Utilities and the government Electorate Inspection Division to sort of collaborate and develop the process for obtaining this generator license.'

Another area of success, he pointed out, was technical assistance via consultancy to provide various policy documents for the government, specifically the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries.

'Two of the major consultancies that we provided for them were the development of a draft Feed-in Tariff implementation plan as well as a draft renewable energy policy with accompanying action plans. So, those are two draft documents; the consultants were brought on board to develop those policies for the ministry of Energy and Energy Industries,' he said.

Additionally, he indicated, there was capacity building for State agencies and ministries 'as it pertains to renewable energy power purchase agreements and financial modelling'.

'In terms of capacity building the project also provided two study tours to State agencies and ministries to Chile, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica. So, ideally, we took the ministries' representatives there to learn about those countries, their legislations, their policies, what the best practices are and how the sector works in those countries to see what the best fit for Trinidad could be,' he said.

Public awareness is key

Equally important, the project launched a national public awareness campaign on renewable energy, energy efficiency, and energy pricing. The six-month public awareness campaign has received significant traction thus far, said Harnanan.

Noting that the campaign is ongoing he said 'we are midway there, so we have about three months to go. The campaign focuses on essentially the benefits of using renewable energy compared to fossil fuel, how to be energy efficient when it comes to energy use in your house or your business and practical ways to save energy.'

He continued: "So, it also highlights the use of solar devices like calculators, outdoor perimeter lighting, and torch light.'

When asked about the public's buy-in so far, Harnanan said it was positive and inquisitive. 'A lot of individuals have questions. We wanted to provide a platform for people to ask questions...there has been interest, a lot of people are interested in solar.'

He disclosed that a 2023 survey conducted by Market Facts and Opinions on people's perception of energy, renewable energy, and energy pricing found that 81% of people were interested in installing solar panels at their homes. Also, 71% indicated that should the price of electricity increase, this would 'reduce their energy consumption, which shows that they are conscious of the energy that they use, and they want to maintain not only electricity bills, but they also want to be energy conscious'.

He said the baseline survey also showed that only a quarter of responders shared that they often look for energy efficient appliances with energy efficient labels when purchasing appliances. This, he said, can be improved as the campaign continues to make impact by educating people on energy efficient behaviours. Another finding he noted, is that 'seven in ten persons still hang their clothes out on a line to dry....it shows that people use the power of the wind and the sun to dry their clothes, maybe it's an economic thing where people can't afford dryers.' But he believes it's a positive sign.

Their advertisements on several traditional media and social media platforms have been intentionally animated and relatable with the hope that people will start making changes in their everyday behaviour towards energy consciousness. Harnanan said the results at the end of public awareness campaign will indicate how significant of a mindset shift there is. Also noting that a substantial amount of the total project budget of \$2.4 million euros, goes into public awareness. Apart from this, Harnanan said, the project entailed outreach programmes at schools and several stakeholders. In relation to the businesses showing interest, he said while the interest in solar systems exists for small businesses, the initial investment cost and legislation hinders them. He said during the project it was discovered that 37% to 40% of the cost goes into battery systems, 'so part of the policy in what we assisted the government in developing feed-in tariff implementation plan. Now with a feed-in tariff you ideally remove the need for battery, so you remove 40% of cost which will allow it to be more accessible and affordable for the average joe.'

He commended the collaborations done so far with the government and other stakeholders, noting that 'the policy development that now lies with the government.' However, it is not only politics because people should also take an active role in acknowledging the rapid changes in the environment by taking the necessary steps to make improvements.

With project's campaign tagline 'Solar power to the people' he believes the strong messaging can assist in shifting the public's mindset. "The effort that we put into campaign and key targeting messaging, will have a long-lasting effect on individuals and how they perceive energy, and simple things they can do, like turn the light or air (conditioning units) off when they leave a room, we hope that those messages stick with them. Especially with the younger people who are making their way into the world, we hope that they encourage older persons as well,'he said.