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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Best-in-class

NOW in its 45th year of operations, NGC has had a long time to nurture its reputation in energy. Having led a transcendental shift in the national economy from oil to gas, and laid the foundation for local industrialisation and development on an unprecedented scale, NGC has much to commend it as an energy company. However, spurred by aspirations to do and become even more, the Company is committing itself to the highest standards in the industry. At NGC, we are not content with good enough, or even excellent – we want to earn the distinction of being a best-in-class energy company.

What does it take to be best-in-class?

In the energy sector, as in any other realm of activity, being best-in-class involves meeting and surpassing accepted benchmarks and even setting the bar for others. In practice, this can mean using the best equipment available to deliver work, adhering to the highest operational standards and principles as outlined by local and international regulatory bodies, and even innovating tools or processes in one's field of endeavour. It also means being a company that is highly respected and regarded by its peers and stakeholders.

Across all functional areas, NGC is looking to bring operations on par with best-in-class standards. This has required a degree of self-auditing to determine how we measure against other best-in-class companies, followed by appropriate resourcing to close any gaps that exist.

In the area of Health, Safety, Security and the Environment (HSSE), we are using world-class tools and approaches to keep our assets and stakeholders safe. We have led a global initiative for process safety, and we are looking to strengthen our capacity for emergency response. In keeping with the global decarbonisation agenda, we are scrutinising our operations to cut emissions where we can, with methane leaks currently in focus.

In the area of Supply Chain Management, we are using the latest software to revolutionise how we procure goods and manage our customers. We have pioneered e-auctioning among state enterprises and are being called to support internationally connected companies in the implementation of this technology.



Mark Loquan, President, NGC

Technology is also helping us to modernise our Human Resource function – we have largely eliminated paper-based transactions. In this area, however, we are not just outfitting with best-in-class tools – we are also focusing on developing internal skill sets to hold our own with the best in our industry.

Of course, as a state company, we appreciate that all these decisions we take as an organisation must be transparent and in the interest of our shareholders. We, therefore, hold ourselves to the highest standards of accountability and report beyond baseline requirements, setting the bar for other public sector companies. We are even applying technology to improve how we monitor certain aspects of our business ethics policy.

Importantly, we are not just using technology to clear benchmarks, but also to innovate. At NGC, we are keen to become a leader in clean energy and to that end, we have launched a national app to help bring energy efficiency and conservation top-of-mind for citizens.

These are just some of many indicators that NGC – and indeed the NGC Group – is growing into a best-in-class energy company. This issue of *Gasco News* will profile our advancements in several critical areas, and highlight how far along we have come on that journey. ■

Mark Loquan, President



Clearing Benchmarks

DEFENDING VALUE - Protecting NGC's assets







The basic principle of market exchange is trading one thing of value for another. If we want to earn money, we must have something equally valuable to trade for it. In NGC's case, since the Company must purchase the natural gas it sells, it cannot earn profits from the sale of gas without first adding value to increase its worth. NGC achieves this through its services, which include gas aggregation, processing (via subsidiary Phoenix Park Gas Processors Limited), transportation and distribution.

If we grant that this added value is what feeds NGC's earning potential and profitability in the area of gas merchandising, it is clear that the assets that enable the Company to deliver these value-adding services are its true source of wealth. For NGC, these include (inter alia): its infrastructural capacity, skilled leaders and human capital, digital assets and intellectual property, high operational standards, brand equity and social licence to operate.

These engines of value allow the Company to generate income for itself and for the country. For this reason, NGC's success and sustainability rely heavily on its ability to safeguard them.

Within the organisation, several teams work together

to deliver this critical function – the defence of value. Leading the way is the Health, Safety, Security and Environment (HSSE) Division, though it is ably supported by the work of other groups such as Operations, Corporate Communications and Engineering. The teams are notably making use of best-in-class tools, standards, and practices to ensure NGC's value-generating assets are protected.

SAFETY

Safety is one of the foundational pillars of NGC's business strategy, and with good reason. Safety is fundamental to operations as employees would be unable to execute their duties in unsafe environments. Unsafe conditions or behaviours could also precipitate network issues and service disruption to customers, with knock-on effects on the economy.

Moreover, as an energy company piping a potentially flammable substance through populated and environmentally sensitive areas, the adoption of best-in-class safety standards and practices is what grants NGC its licence to operate. The public would not tolerate a business whose infrastructure and operations threaten personal well-being, property or the environment.



Managing asset integrity is crucial from both safety and value-preservation perspectives

On another level, as NGC grows beyond its core business and looks to market its expertise to nascent gas territories, a strong safety reputation is a major selling point. New operators would not want to engage the services of a company whose operational ethos does not value stakeholder well-being.

For all these reasons, for NGC to successfully expand its business and grow its value, it must ensure that safety is reinforced, in much the same way a contractor would need to ensure the foundation of a building is strong enough to support any planned extension. Himalaya Boodoosingh, Senior Manager HSSE, notes that NGC's HSSE strategy is reflective and supportive of the organisational vision to become a leader in the global energy business.

At NGC, safety can be broadly viewed through the lenses of infrastructural integrity, process safety, emergency response and personal safety practices or behaviours.

Asset Integrity Management (AIM)

NGC's 1,000km pipeline network is its most valuable physical asset. However, at the same time, it is also a liability, as its expanse, geographical spread and age introduce different degrees of risk – integrity issues could arise that could lead to release incidents, service disruption, or even endanger communities. Management of this network, a function of the Operations Group, is therefore crucial from both safety and value-preservation perspectives, and NGC has dedicated teams who monitor and maintain the pipelines and associated facilities.

NGC redoubled efforts in AIM in direct response to a National Facilities Integrity Audit that was conducted in 2015 by international firm Det Norske Veritas (DNV). This audit, which investigated over 30 local companies, assigned NGC a score of 1.79 (for Systems' evaluation), below the national average of 2.02. NGC then undertook an aggressive remedial campaign on its equipment and systems to address concerns raised by the auditors and managed to raise its score above the national average.

The organisation has since begun to focus on bringing its AIM capability in line with best-in-class standards. To keep the Company accountable, AIM has been pegged to its corporate scorecard, so that work in this area is taken to be a key performance indicator. As part of the wider NGC Group, an AIM Steering Committee was also formed, which provides the platform for sharing best practices, methodologies and technologies.

In 2019, NGC adopted a new AIM Framework based on 10 functions, aligned with ISO 55000 Standards in Asset Management. This framework is built on four main pillars:

- Leadership and Governance
- Administrative Management Systems
- Technical Management Systems
- Functional Execution and Performance

This framework specifies the requirements for an effective asset management system and integrates AIM with other business areas such as human resources, governance, technical document management and supply chain management.



Drone surveillance is used to monitor land movements, such as landslips, which could compromise pipeline integrity

Maintenance Automation

One key function of the AIM Framework where significant strides have been made is in the area of Information Management, with the computerisation of maintenance planning and scheduling. Through the Computerised Maintenance Management System (CMMS), NGC has made great progress with planning and scheduling preventative maintenance works on NGC's manned facilities and generated valuable data to streamline maintenance performance in the future. The Tobago Gas Receiving Facility was the first asset to be completely integrated into this system.

Risk-Based Inspection

In 2019, in line with the overall goal of reduced risk to operations, NGC began transitioning from a traditional time-based asset inspection programme to a Risk-Based Inspection (RBI) programme. This best practice approach focuses on reducing risk by channeling resources and priorities towards inspecting assets in areas that are high risk and more prone to failure. The transition to RBI is expected to be completed in 2021 for all gas receiving facilities and valve stations.

Technology

Technology is also being integrated to help sustain best-in-class capability in the maintenance function. A specialist drone has been drafted into use, capable of carrying payloads such as infra-red cameras, Light Detection & Ranging (LiDAR) sensors and gas detection sensors, all of which can aid in asset integrity efforts.

Exploration of applications for Extended Reality technologies, which can assist with work planning, scenario modelling, emergency response training, and even virtual tours for visitors, is in progress. These would reduce the exposure of NGC's infrastructure to the risk of third-party interference, and the exposure of people to the inherent risk in its operations.

Process Safety

It is one thing to have sound infrastructure, and quite another to have safe operations. Between one and the other, lie the work processes and procedures that are used by employees in the execution of their duties.

Process Safety Management (PSM) is the management and mitigation of risk of chemical process incidents due to failures of technology, human errors, management shortcomings, external circumstances, or natural events. PSM, and more specifically Risk-Based PSM (RBPSM) is a core focus area for NGC.

In the April 2020 issue of *GASCO News*, it was reported that NGC principals, including its Vice President of Operations Ramesh Harrylal, played a seminal role in the publication of new Centre for Chemical Process Safety (CCPS) guidelines that will help companies around the world manage operational risk in times of crisis. These guidelines included insights from NGC's own experience of risk management during the COVID-19 pandemic. The inclusion of NGC's experience in an international Process Safety guidebook distinguishes the Company's PSM strategy as utilising best-in-class, exemplary approaches



NGC is looking to strengthen its emergency response mechanisms through closer partnership with TTEMAS

worthy of emulation. It is a notable instance of NGC setting the bar for the global industry.

Not falling into complacency, NGC is looking to further strengthen its PSM capability. The Company is pushing for the full adoption of CCPS guidelines into operations across the NGC Group. It is also seeking to leverage its membership on the CCPS Committee to get ten (10) staff members certified in PSM. Such asset development will help cement NGC as a leader in PSM, and strengthen its value proposition to current and potential business partners.

Emergency Response

Even with robust systems in place to prevent operational incidents, NGC has implemented emergency response mechanisms for activation in the event of dangerous releases, natural disasters, health crises and the like which could affect its stakeholders. Given the national footprint of its network and the support that would be needed to respond to non-localised emergencies (eg. widespread infrastructural damage due to a hurricane or earthquake), NGC is looking at closer integration with the Trinidad and Tobago Emergency Mutual Aid Scheme (TTEMAS). Building this partnership will greatly enhance the Company's response capacity, and maximise the resources that can be mobilised in the event such need arises.

Within the organisation, measures are being implemented to bring emergency response procedures in line with best-in-class standards. A virtual Emergency Operating Centre (EOC) is being created that will enable faster team mobilisation and enhanced communication across the NGC Group. A contract has also been signed for delivery of a mass-distribution SMS service to send alerts and updates directly to all employees during emergencies.

These emergency response mechanisms dialogue with the Company's Business Continuity Planning (BCP) protocols, which aim to keep operations going in the event of a destabilising emergency.¹

Personal Behaviours

The fourth prong of safety is personal behaviours and practices. If employees are not committed to the principles governing safe operations, the risk of job-related incidents surges. To cultivate a strong safety culture and heightened awareness within the organisation, NGC has introduced a number of performance hurdles tied to safety into employee appraisals. Staff must complete mandatory training modules on Process Safety and Life Saving Rules as part of their annual performance plans. Mechanisms such as 'Let's Connect' conversations and Workplace Inspections are also utilised to keep safety top of mind.

¹ Read more about NGC's BCP team and its COVID-19 activities in the April 2020 issue of *Gasco News*.



HEALTH

Employees constitute a frontline value-generating asset for NGC. Ensuring their physical and mental wellness is, therefore, a key focus of the organisational strategy. Routine initiatives spearheaded by the Human Resource Division encourage employees to pursue a healthy lifestyle, make free medical screenings available, and seek to promote work-life balance.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, safeguarding employee health became a primary business concern, and steps were taken accordingly. In keeping with local and international guidelines, non-essential staff was asked to work from home, while frontline workers were properly outfitted with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Sanitisation efforts were ramped up across facilities, as were communications around proper hygiene and safety practices.

With restrictions eased, new protocols have been implemented to re-introduce staff into the office on a phased basis. Temperature checks and health declarations are mandatory preconditions for entry into facilities, contactless doors and bins have been introduced, and social distancing will be enforced through spatial reconfigurations, room occupancy limits and mandatory masking at certain distances.

NGC will continue to monitor and be guided by local and international developments with regard to the pandemic. The Company has taken the position to keep protective measures in place until a vaccine becomes available.

SECURITY

The third pillar of HSSE treats with the security of assets. Whereas AIM focuses largely on protecting assets against deterioration and damage from natural causes, the Security function seeks to protect assets against malicious interference.

To make infrastructural assets more secure, NGC is expanding its surveillance capability with the installation of first-rate CCTV cameras at its facilities, and motion detectors to alert operators of any intrusion.

To strengthen personnel security, the Company is moving towards the installation of a full-body and handheld scanner facility at Head Office. This will further enhance access control capabilities for all personnel and visitors entering the facility. The space will be outfitted with a training room and a secured area for the storage of arms and ammunition during state and executive visits.

In the digital age, any security strategy would be incomplete without addressing cybersecurity. As more

Cybersecurity has now been subsumed under the traditional Security portfolio



resources and functions become digitised, a significant proportion of NGC's value-generating assets now reside in a virtual space. Threatening these assets are wide-ranging species of intrusion tactics, malware and viruses.

In recognition of the evolving risks that present in the digital space, and the need for constant vigilance, NGC decided to integrate the Information Security function under the HSSE Division. This move to combine cybersecurity into the traditional Security portfolio is a pioneering move among local state companies. Not only does it rightly ascribe increased importance to the protection of digital assets, but it reflects the progressive thinking that underpins NGC's growth strategy.

ENVIRONMENT

As stated earlier, one of the elements enabling NGC to carry out its business and create value is its social license to operate. In today's business climate, consumers demand that companies demonstrate a commitment to corporate social responsibility. While this subsumes such principles as philanthropy, fair business practices and social justice, the near-universal ask of companies is environmental care and consciousness.

In defence of its licence to operate, NGC, spurred on by Corporate Communications, adopted a principle of 'no net loss', which committed the Company to replant hectares cleared during pipeline construction activities. In 2018, it undertook a carbon sequestration study to measure the carbon impact of its large-scale reforestation programme begun in 2005. In the national energy efficiency and renewable energy spheres, NGC and the wider NGC Group have assumed a leadership role as a lobbyist for clean energy.

The most recent project being undertaken turns attention to measuring and reducing the Company's methane emissions. A potent greenhouse gas, methane is calculated to be "about 28 times more powerful than carbon dioxide at warming the Earth on a 100-year timescale, and more than 80 times more powerful over 20 years."²

Methane is the primary component of natural gas. Natural gas venting and leaks along the gas production and supply chain can, therefore, be a significant contributor to methane emissions. It is incumbent on operators such as NGC to closely manage their operations, maintenance and asset integrity to reduce the likelihood and incidence of natural gas releases and leaks on their infrastructure.

The expanse and complexity of NGC's infrastructure present ample opportunity for leaks to develop. Currently,

NGC uses a Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) system to monitor gas flow and pressure in the pipeline network for any variation that would indicate major leaks in addition to gas detectors at strategic locations. Routine manual inspections and maintenance of infrastructure is simultaneously used to identify minor leaks that would not be detected through SCADA and installed gas detectors.

These systems notwithstanding, the possibility of methane escaping into the atmosphere through minor leaks still exists, especially in installations and facilities where pipelines are fitted with many valves, joints, fittings and couplings, such as the NGC gas receiving stations and plant environment of Phoenix Park Gas Processors Limited (PPGPL).

In an effort to further reduce the incidence of such leaks, NGC has decided to invest in an optical and infrared camera capable of detecting and visualising fugitive hydrocarbon emissions from the gas infrastructure. This technology has been used with great effect in other world-class facilities, and will allow NGC and the wider NGC Group to close in on its operational target of near-zero methane emissions. The camera is expected to be integrated into work processes across the Group in the coming months.

Besides allowing NGC to rein in methane emissions, this camera would also help the Company increase the safety of its installations, as undetected leaks could result in process safety incidents, causing injury to personnel or endanger communities and property. Leak detection would also help reduce the number of gas molecules lost in transit through the network, which in times of tight supply, is an important function to conserve value.

Alongside this purchase, NGC will be working with the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) to measure its methane emissions. This will help the Company to track progress towards its emissions target, and allow for greater transparency and accountability from a reporting standpoint.

ENABLING THE VISION

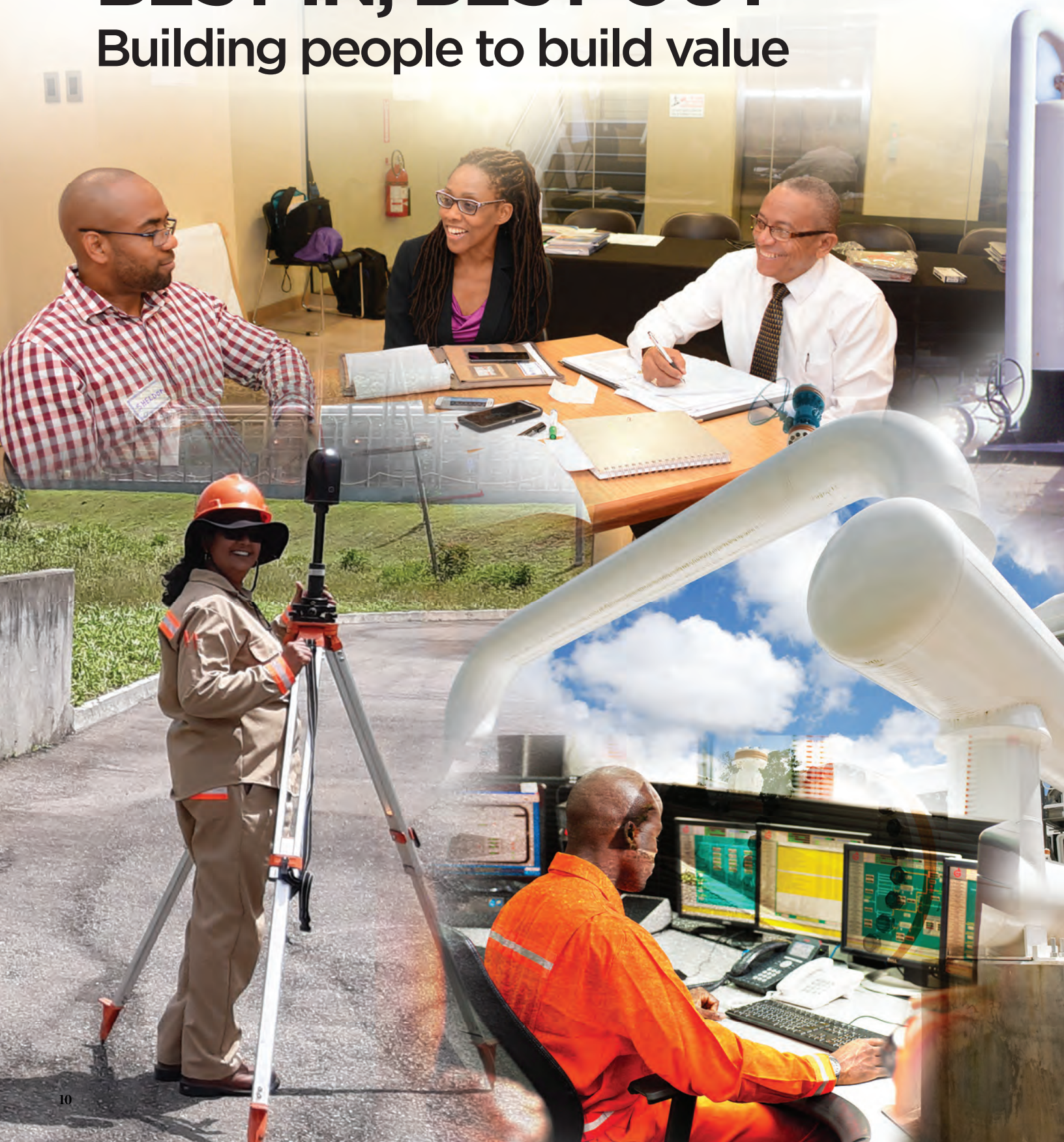
NGC and the wider NGC Group are intent on evolving, as the industry, and indeed the world, evolves around them. That change and growth must be anchored in a solid foundation - there can be no launch without a platform. Accordingly, the HSSE and all supporting teams across the Company stand committed to defending the advance of the organisation, by safeguarding its foundational assets and the trove of value it has built over four and a half decades. ■

² <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/global-warming/methane/>



BEST IN, BEST OUT

Building people to build value







No matter what the future of energy might look like, or what's in store for NGC in particular, one thing is for certain - that future cannot be realised without people. People will need to craft strategy, take investment decisions, lead projects, harness technology, innovate processes, close deals, envision, grow and change.

If NGC's story will be shaped by its people, any investment in the future of the Company must consider the development and support of its employees. Moreover, if the Company intends to grow into an international energy leader, it must be staffed by people who are the best at what they do.

In order to promote employee excellence, NGC's HR Division has implemented and is working to complete several employee-focused initiatives. These are aimed at matching needs with the right talent, strengthening capabilities and providing tools to maximise efficiencies and productivity.

TALENT MANAGEMENT

One of the major functions of the HR Division is ensuring the Company attracts and retains strong talent and that staff is constantly developing. This is key to the overall development of the organisation, and involves nurturing talent from the point of entry straight through retirement.

Recruitment and onboarding

Every company values having talented employees who understand and fit well with the company's business and culture. For this reason, the recruitment process must

be an effective filter that presents only the best-suited candidates for a position.

On any given vacancy notice, NGC can receive hundreds of applications. The Company has a solid reputation as an employer of choice in the energy sector, and its growth strategy is particularly attractive to young professionals. In order to help sift through potential candidates, the HR Division has introduced a new element into the screening process. As of 2020, HR has introduced an Assessment Centre methodology for all levels of hire. This can assume different formats such as group activities, individual activities and other tasks that mirror what the potential candidate would be expected to perform on the job. This assessment will enhance the selection process by generating more reliable data on which to gauge a candidate's suitability for a position.

To further ensure a seamless fit with the Company, new hires are now required to complete a structured six-month onboarding process, which would methodically introduce the employee to NGC's work and organisational culture. In the past, new employees were onboarded over a two-month period, but HR recognised that employee acclimation can take much longer and there was need for greater support. In 2020, a new Onboarding Plan was approved for implementation, which would involve a broader programme of activities for new hires.

These include orientation presentations, facilities tours, a welcome event, introduction to policies and procedures, a one-on-one meeting with the President, mandatory training and routine check-ins by HR to assess the progress and comfort of the employee. As envisioned,



the increased number of touchpoints between the new hire and the HR team would help build the employee's trust, sense of ownership and engagement with the Company, and expedite productivity. In the long run, this programme would build a solid foundation for the employee's relationship with the Company and would help to reduce employee turnover.

Competency, Knowledge and Skills Development

Once employees are settled into the Company, the HR team must work to strengthen their capabilities through continuous learning and improvement. This is a cornerstone for organisational growth.

With NGC setting its sights on growing globally, employees must have the requisite skills and competencies to carry and sustain the business in new markets. Accordingly, training and development have assumed new importance and a new approach. Programmes are no longer limited to enhancing the skill sets that already exist, but seek to identify and fill gaps that need to be filled for NGC to operate as a global company.

In 2017, NGC launched a Competency, Knowledge and Skills Development (CKSD) project to map and benchmark the competencies and skill sets resident within the organisation. The objective is to determine where the organisation stands in terms of skills relative to other best-in-class companies so that appropriate training interventions and recruitment campaigns could be undertaken to ensure NGC is tooled for the future.

This phased project is well underway. Phase I involved employees across the organisation mapping their skills and qualifications. Phase II is now focusing on assessing the competencies of employees. Different groups within the Company are receiving training from a consultant on the principles and practice of assessing competencies against defined standards. Ultimately, this will help NGC determine where strengths exist and where there are competency gaps.

Although COVID-19 temporarily disrupted the CKSD process, the HR team intends to work with line supervisors to move the CKSD Phase II into other areas of the business later this year.

Succession Planning

A major objective of staff development is to ensure that talent is groomed to fill higher-level positions that may become vacant due to the retirement or departure of the incumbent. Succession planning is integral to business continuity and is, therefore, an area of renewed focus for NGC.

In an effort to open more opportunities for staff to develop, a Group-wide policy was signed in 2019 that

would allow employees, for the first time, to be selected as successor candidates for roles across the NGC Group of Companies. Removing the limitation of succession solely within companies allows the Group to reduce its turnover rate, and acknowledges that experience gained at one company in the Group could add value to another. It also strengthens the collective resource pool of the Group, as talent will now be managed with an eye on all possible avenues for growth, not just intramural opportunities.

CONSUMER SERVICES

If NGC is aiming to be a best-in-class energy company, then all its internal functions must evolve accordingly. For the HR Division, this involves improving its service delivery to employees using best-in-class tools and processes.

As recently as five years ago, most HR services were paper-based, with forms for leave application, performance appraisals, training registration, update of personal information and so on. These manual forms required staff to physically present in the HR Division to conduct their business.

Since then, NGC has rolled out specialist *SAP SuccessFactors* software that has automated many of those processes. This human capital management software has been used with great effect by large international corporations including American Airlines, Coca-Cola, EY, Oxford Global Resources and the Toronto Transit Commission.

Not only has the software reduced the environmental footprint of the Company, but it has also made HR transactions considerably more employee-centred and convenient. Employees now have personal dashboards from which they can track leave balances, register for and even take certain courses, monitor progress towards performance targets, update personal information such as home address or emergency contacts, and even access payslips.

This software has many additional functionalities that NGC will invest in over the coming years to further enhance the consumer experience for employees.

WELLNESS

Around the world and across all industries, companies are becoming more aware of the importance of healthy and engaged employees to their bottom line. Top organisations such as Google and Virgin are renowned for their employee programmes which focus on work-life balance and creating opportunities and spaces for physical and mental wellness activities.



Fitness classes are made available to NGC staff to promote healthy lifestyles

The linkages between wellness and productivity are self-evident. Healthy employees have more energy for their tasks, are more present and involved in work activities, and naturally apply for fewer sick days and compensation. Reducing stress levels improves concentration, which can mean fewer accidents at work sites. Companies that look after the well-being of staff demonstrate that they value their employees, and reap the benefits of a more engaged and invested workforce.

It is small wonder that more and more companies are introducing structured wellness programmes to address the physical and mental health of employees. NGC's HR team manages a number of long-standing wellness initiatives, and a recently revamped NGC Group Wellness Committee is working to bring more on stream. NGC employees can make use of free on-site gym facilities at various locations, as well as recreational amenities such as pool tables, table tennis equipment and massage chairs. Employees also have access to guided classes, including spin, Zumba, yoga and even self-defence. During the period of the COVID-19 lockdown, the Wellness Committee worked to bring virtual aerobics and yoga classes to employees, to help staff keep fit and relaxed at home, and plans for the first-ever virtual 5K are underway for July/August 2020.

For many years, NGC has hosted health fairs where employees could participate in free screening for diabetes, high cholesterol and certain cancers. Healthcare professionals would deliver talks on topical issues, make literature available for staff education, and offer therapeutic massages on-site.

To further support mental and emotional health, NGC partners with Families in Action (FIA) to offer free,

confidential counselling and mentorship services to employees. Through this organisation, staff can receive support around parenting and relationships, managing grief, addiction and even personal self-esteem and image issues. During the peak Covid-19 phase, HR through this agency supported the emotional well-being of employees with a Self-Care pulse check using its Virtual Knowledge Café series.

Financial health is not overlooked. The Company has routinely sponsored financial planning guidance sessions to ensure staff is well apprised of options for managing their personal portfolios.

As the Company plans for a post-COVID 'business unusual', the HR team is working closely with the relevant internal departments, including HSSE, to make necessary adjustments to policies and work culture to keep employees safe, healthy and productive on their return to the office environment. These changes are being informed by international standards and best practices, as the world settles into a new way of working that prioritises employee well-being.

BUILDING THROUGH PEOPLE

NGC acknowledges that without investment in employee development and wellness, business would stagnate and fail. The HR function is therefore increasingly important to the advancement and sustainability of the organisation, and will be assuming a greater role in leading future strategic interventions. At the heart of the Company's approach to managing its human resources will remain an emphasis on international best practice – after all, you must put best in, to get best out. ■



NGC automates Conflict of Interest Declaration Process

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST
POLICY**



In today's market economy, a company's integrity can play a major role in the brand's success. Increasingly, customers and stakeholders demand that companies deal openly and honestly with customers and suppliers, afford equal opportunities in the workplace, demonstrate concern for environmental and community welfare and adhere to the highest governance standards.

The ethical standard that an organisation aspires to uphold can be ratified in its core values or written into policy. Ultimately, it is the behaviour, decisions, and indeed ethics of the company's people that shape the reputation of the company.

A respected national brand

Transparency International ranked Trinidad and Tobago 85th out of 180 countries on its Corruption Perception Index in 2019, with a score of 40/100 (0 being highly corrupt, 100 being very clean).¹ This ranking implies that polled experts and businesspeople perceive the country to overlook an appreciable level of corruption in public enterprises.

As a state entity, NGC is intent on changing that perception by keeping its operations above reproach. The Company is already a respected national brand, but to retain this status – and its license to operate – it must ensure employees continue to uphold its ethical standards. To that end, the Company strictly enforces a Business Practices and Ethics Policy, which addresses corporate gifting, workplace harassment, political contributions, collusion and a number of other improprieties that could negatively impact the Company's business or perception of its brand.

Closely managed under this Policy, is the risk of Conflicts of Interest ("COI") arising among employees and leadership. As part of NGC's growth strategy, in the Corporate Governance and Compliance ("CGC") area, the process for reporting and treating with COI, which is a key area in the governance and compliance programme, has recently been automated to better align with current international best practice.

The importance of recognising Conflicts of Interest

What is COI and why should NGC be concerned with COI in the first place?

NGC's policy position is that: "A Conflict of Interest is deemed to exist or arise whenever a Director or employee of the NGC Group, as a result of:

- i) the nature or responsibilities of his/her employment; or



A COI can lead to unethical business practices

- ii) his/her relationship with the NGC Group; or
- iii) his/her decision-making ability and/or influence and/or disclosure;

is placed in a position:

- i) to further any personal financial interest, either directly or indirectly, through immediate family, related parties, personal friends or acquaintances; or
- ii) that could potentially impair his loyalty, judgment, objectivity, or independence."

In practice, a COI could manifest as:

- i) an employee or Director with an ownership or financial stake in another company, having authority over the choice to engage that external company to do business with NGC;
- ii) a supervisor/manager who has oversight of a direct relative, and who leverages that position to promote or in some way influence the advancement of, or benefit to, that relative; or
- iii) in the realm of Corporate Social Responsibility ("CSR"), if an employee is a member of an organisation that receives funding from NGC, and that employee is involved in the decision-making process for disbursing CSR support, this could also constitute a COI.

At the heart of it, the potential for a COI exists any time the personal interests of an employee or Director intersect

¹ <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results>



with their professional interests at the Company, in such a way that they stand to profit unfairly or dishonestly, or to unduly or inappropriately influence the Company's processes.

NGC is a state enterprise, handling nationally held resources and public funds. The Company, therefore, has an obligation to ensure full transparency, accountability and indisputable ethics in the conduct of its business. It should not be seen indulging systems or behaviours which favour the interests of any one stakeholder, at the expense of another in the same, or equivalent, category.

Unchecked, COI could open the door for self-dealing transactions, misappropriation of public funds and assets, and expose the Company to risk of punitive legal action. If brought to public attention through the media, the brand could lose credibility and reputational currency, which would negatively impact its attractiveness to potential business partners and how current relationships are managed. In an extreme case, the public – the ultimate shareholders – could even pressure the Government to restructure or overhaul the business.

It is therefore imperative that NGC carefully scans for potential COI, and takes necessary mitigating actions before they manifest. This is where the Corporate Governance and Compliance team and the COI Declaration Process come in.

NGC's COI Declaration Process

At NGC, it is routine procedure for employees to complete COI Declarations on an annual basis. This has essentially involved completion of a form wherein employees note any organisations or companies they may be affiliated with, any immediate relatives working at the Company, and any other relationships or associations that could lead to COI situations.

These declarations have allowed NGC to align to best practice in governance, by helping the Company understand the scope of potential and actual conflicts and take action to mitigate the identified risks.

In the interest of efficiency, and in line with the global shift toward paperless transactions, NGC moved the COI Declaration process online in 2020. This change has returned many notable benefits to the Company.

According to Venishea Paynter, Manager Governance and Compliance, automation has tightened the end-to-end process. There is no longer a need to print and complete forms, have them signed and physically turn them in. Employees are simply required to input data online, and the system automatically routes the form to the relevant signatories and reviewers who review the data and input

recommended controls and mitigating actions. The CGC team no longer needs to keep manual track of outstanding declarations as there are now system prompts in place, and the task of sorting through and organising stacks of forms is a thing of the past thanks to digital filing. This new online COI system has also meant that all data arising out of the Declarations are deposited and stored electronically in a centralised location, accessible around the clock and from any location. CGC Officers can easily extract data from the forms, without chance of human error in the transposing process, and electronically generate reports to share with the leadership team or other key departments.

"All these process improvements help to reduce risk for the Company, as they allow for COI scenarios to be quickly flagged and managed," she noted. "Understanding the existence of a potential COI helps NGC better tailor internal controls to treat with COI situations at all levels, in all areas across the Company – for example, policies and procedures for recusal of persons from functions or decisions that could cause conflicts."

Once controls are implemented, the CGC team can conduct intermittent Compliance Reviews to test their feasibility and effectiveness and adjust as required.

Of course, the ultimate effectiveness of the process relies on the honesty of the individuals making the COI declarations. For this reason, an important element of the process is informing staff of the reasons why truthful declarations are necessary, and the legal ramifications of an unreported COI. This pre-emptive approach is supported by a Whistleblower Policy, which allows staff to confidentially report any behaviours or actions deemed to be illegal or dishonest. This adds another layer of protection to the organisation against unethical behaviour. The Company's Consequence Management policies provide the final layer of support to the COI policy by reinforcing the need for compliance.

Towards better


As NGC looks to build out a new Strategic Plan to 2025, Governance and Compliance will continue to be a foundational pillar of the organisation. The CGC team will continue to seek ways to strengthen the transparency, accountability and governance standards and behaviours of the organisation, its employees and Directors, leveraging technology where possible to collect, measure and report relevant data, which can then be utilised to identify and mitigate risks. Driving all change will be a commitment to preserving the Company's reputation as an upstanding corporate citizen and achieving the Company's strategic goals in the Corporate Governance and Compliance area. ■



Clearing Benchmarks



International vessel loading at Savonetta Pier No.4 in Point Lisas Harbour



National Energy - Learning and growing from COVID-19



The mark of a strong, best-in-class company is the ability to adapt and grow in the face of challenges. National Energy Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago, an exemplar of port operations in the region, has once again demonstrated its strength in the way it has adapted to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to process innovations implemented over the past few months, business continuity response mechanisms and the experience of keeping business running in spite of a derailing pandemic, the company is now even better equipped to hold its own among international best-in-class operators.

Working through COVID-19

Under the Public Health Ordinance Regulations Ch. 12 No. 4 Clause 3, effective 23 March 2020, Trinidad and Tobago closed its borders. Movement of people into and out of the country would only be allowed with approval from the Minister of National Security; a stringent measure taken to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus by preventing its importation from abroad. Under the Regulations, energy, and energy-related services as well as port and marine operations were categorised as essential services and were therefore expected to continue.

As the agency responsible for the operations of Savonetta Piers 1 – 4, ISCOTT Dock, the Port of Galeota and the Port of Brighton, as well as a fleet of towage vessels, National Energy was required to ensure that its commercial activities continued without compromising the health and safety of persons and security of property during the pandemic. Against the backdrop of the mandatory shutting down of several businesses, it was even more crucial that port and marine operations continued to allow import and export of goods and materials needed by citizens and to generate revenues.

National Energy immediately activated its Business Continuity Plan. Although the plan did not specifically refer to a health-related scenario, it provided a framework within which specific responses to any unfolding situation could be addressed, including the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. Two aspects of the business were prioritised for implementation of business continuity protocols – Port and Marine Operations and Human Resource Management.

Port & Marine Operations

National Energy's management of its Port and Marine Operations was centred around the tenets of:

- Compliance with Government-mandated health and safety protocols as the situation evolved;
- Strengthening of relationships with stakeholders to ensure their compliance with established protocols and procedures; and
- Collaboration with port health officials



Social distancing markers have been installed at National Energy's office

Key stakeholders were identified including port health officials, customs and excise officials, National Energy's crewing contractor, port users, and industry partners such as the Point Lisas Energy Association (PLEA). Through a process of ongoing collaboration and communication, enhanced cargo handling procedures were developed and implemented to ensure that there were no disruptions at the marine facilities. Additionally, no shore leave was granted to crews from international vessels in keeping with the status of Trinidad and Tobago's borders being closed.

To ensure that the marine vessels remained fully functional while protecting the crews onboard, crew rotations and marine asset configurations were amended to 14 days instead of the usual seven-day rotation. This period of sequestration was aligned to the minimum quarantine period being implemented by the Ministry of Health. Standby crews were also engaged as a redundancy measure to ensure that operations would continue should a crew member become ill. To minimise contact opportunities, maintenance activity was also limited to critical defects and safety activities during the pandemic. Letters of authorisation informing of their required mobility were issued to essential contractors as needed.



Human Resource Management

Across the NGC Group of Companies, priority was given to the protection of employees. Therefore, measures were developed and implemented, including Pandemic Leave and a Work-from-Home Policy. Provisions were made for non-essential employees and those who were immunocompromised to work from home and where applicable, Pandemic Leave was applied to eligible employees.

All essential employees required to be physically present at the office and other work sites, such as the ports and piers were issued with Company authorisation letters to support their mobility for work activities during the period of restriction. Where possible, these workers were rostered, to reduce contact. Disposable face masks were provided to all essential workers daily and reusable cloth masks were distributed to all other employees.

Communication with employees was facilitated through several technological platforms available to the organisation, including Microsoft Outlook, Microsoft Teams, Zoom etc. National Energy's Human Resource and Corporate Communication Departments ensured that employees received regular notices of Ministry of Health and Post-Cabinet media conferences as well as the live links to said conferences. Relevant updates were also shared with respect to any changes in the provision of utilities and other services to the public.

Post-Pandemic 'Business Unusual'

Having most of its employees working from home provided the ultimate test of the Company's resilience and flexibility, as staff at all levels were required to adopt new ways of connecting and collaborating. It became evident that the Company's investment in Information Communication Technology (ICT) over the years was well placed, as the existing ICT platforms were used to enable the business to run efficiently and effectively. National Energy intends to continue to capitalise on its ICT products and systems in creative ways, especially since Work-from-Home may become part of the new working arrangements for the medium term.

In fact, developmental work continues on one of the Company's boldest ICT-related projects to date – the Digitisation and Automation of Processes for Marine Asset Management. In the coming months, the order-to-payment process for National Energy's fleet of towage vessels will be fully digitised. This will reduce time delays and costs from the process, since requests for towage services, payments, bookings, and invoicing will be automated. Digitisation of other processes for marine assets is also planned for 2020.



Employees must wear masks and sanitise before entering the facility

The delivery of mandatory HSSE training for Users and Operators at the Savonetta Piers, ISCOTT Dock and the Port of Galeota will now be conducted online. The information is being presented with the use of produced videos as well as online Question and Answer sessions. Representatives of National Energy's HSSE Team will guide the sessions, fielding and posing questions to the participants who will be registered electronically. At the end of the training, participants will receive the requisite permits to work in accordance with established protocols at the facilities.

The importance of communication was also underscored during the period of restriction. Through National Energy Communications, timely and relevant updates were disseminated to staff on an ongoing basis and several employees indicated that they relied upon these communiqués for up-to-date information. Deeper communication and collaboration with our essential service providers and key stakeholders will also be a feature of the Company's future business approach, to further enhance the level of service provided to our customers.

With the phased return to work following the nationwide Stay-at-Home period, National Energy will implement all relevant protocols to ensure the safety of its employees and stakeholders. While it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic challenges business processes and the company's ability to adapt and grow, it is equally evident that by embracing new ways of working, it has been and will continue to be able to rise to the challenge. National Energy embraces the opportunity to emerge as a modern, technology-driven, learning organisation – best in its class – ready to meet and conquer the challenges of the future energy business. ■



Innovating supply chain management

A close-up photograph of a computer keyboard. The central focus is a large, rectangular key with a vibrant green, textured surface. On this green key, there is a white icon of a hammer striking a horizontal line, followed by the text "e-auction" in a bold, white, sans-serif font. Surrounding this key are other standard grey keyboard keys, including one with a white "7" and "hon" (honor) and another with a white upward arrow and "shift". The lighting creates a slight shadow on the right side of the green key.

e-auction



As a state enterprise, NGC is held to more demanding standards than energy companies in the private sector.

This is particularly true within the supply chain and procurement function, which must be strictly governed by such principles as transparency, accountability, value for money and fairness.

Over the years and across many state entities, public procurement practices in Trinidad and Tobago have come under criticism for being partisan or lacking transparency. In the interest of bringing its own operations in line with statutory requirements, and discharging its duty at the highest possible standards, NGC has been working assiduously to streamline and strengthen its procurement function. In so doing, the Company has been guided by the experience of internationally connected companies such as Wood Group, BPTT, Shell and Atlantic LNG.

In recent years, several policies, innovative tools, processes and workflows have been implemented that allow the Company to stand as a leader among state companies in this crucial area.

Leveraging technology

Where so many paper-based transactions are being moved online, the Supply Chain Management (SCM) Division has been overhauling its traditional processes in favour of technology-driven solutions.

In 2019, a specialist Procurement Portal was launched to open a direct interface between the Company and its suppliers. This secure portal links to the SAP Ariba platform – a best-in-class cloud solution which integrates the entire supply chain. It brings all the procurement services available to suppliers into one dashboard, from which suppliers can receive invitations to tender, submit bids, request information on payments, access pre-qualification packages and generally keep tabs on transactions from start to finish. The accessibility and flexibility of the system enhance the ease of doing business with NGC, and add end-to-end accountability to the procurement process.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, NGC was able to activate and leverage functionalities of the SAP Ariba system to keep business running optimally. E-tendering became the norm, with tenders and bids being issued and submitted electronically across the board. The communication channels available on the Procurement Portal ensured suppliers never lost contact with SCM staff handling their payments and enquiries. The platform

also allowed suppliers to electronically submit invoices – a process improvement that will save time and resources going forward.

E-auctions

Of the features of SAP Ariba that have been put to use by NGC, one of the most game-changing has been the e-auction functionality. In the past, suppliers for major projects were selected through traditional tendering. Suppliers were given tender packages and then submitted bids independently of one another, based on the scope of services.

The process of e-auctioning has radically changed how big projects can be awarded going forward. The basic premise of an auction is competitive bidding – participants would compete to outdo the others in terms of pricing offered to win the auctioned item.

In the case of e-auctioning, the auction room is a digital space, but the principle of competitive bidding remains the same. Participants are able to see their ranking relative to the lowest bid price, and have the opportunity to adjust their bids accordingly. NGC's e-auctions work in much the same way, but instead of forward auctioning, which is used to *sell* items, the Company makes use of reverse auctions to purchase services. This means that participants must try to *underbid* their competitors in order to gain the advantage.

The process is simple. NGC would issue a scope for a project, and invite suppliers who are technically prequalified to submit a technical proposal for evaluation. The contractors that are successful with the technical evaluation are invited to a live online auction for the award of the tender. Suppliers would post their initial bids, then based on the cost that other participants indicate, might choose to drop their service price to become more competitive. Within the allotted auction time, participants have the chance to change their offer prices as often as desired, until no supplier can go lower than the lowest bid.

The benefits of this new process have been considerable. Since the first e-auction in 2019, NGC has auctioned 13 contracts. The functionality has since been extended to subsidiaries National Energy and PPGPL who collectively presided over a further eight auctions. Millions of dollars have been saved relative to in-house estimates, which can now be put toward further technology enhancements in procurement and enterprise management.

The process of e-auctioning has also allowed NGC to refine in-house estimation, as it has given some insight into the threshold pricing for certain services and the concessions suppliers are willing to make. At the same time, the process has helped remove some of the



NGC is supporting continuous improvement of contractors and suppliers

premium pricing from the market, as suppliers witness first-hand how their competitiveness is eroded by high pricing.

NGC is now an industry leader in respect of this procurement practice and has been actively sought out by other energy companies to assist with the integration of similar technology into their workflows.

Building Local Content

As a national company, NGC is duty-bound to seek the interest of the local population. When it comes to the award of contracts, the Company is guided by a local content policy, and aims to create opportunities for local, and where possible, community-based suppliers and contractors. The policy also addresses the use of local resources in the execution of contracts.

In recent months, NGC has recalibrated its prequalification procedure to allow for greater participation of local businesses in the Company's supply chain over the long term. In the past, prequalification criteria tended to exclude companies whose resource capabilities and experience did not meet with NGC's standards and expectations. Now, suppliers wishing to be prequalified who do not meet all the criteria are given the appropriate guidance so they could improve their chances of being engaged.

The Vendor Management team under the SCM Division is directly responsible for working with suppliers and contractors who fall short of prequalification criteria.

The officers identify the shortcomings – be they related to finance, HSSE, legal requirements and so on – and coordinate with the respective internal departments to help the applicant address and overcome those deficiencies. In this way, the prequalification process has become more of a continuous improvement tool rather than a barrier to inclusion. It gives suppliers with an interest in doing work with the Company, and a willingness to grow, the chance to remain in contention for future projects.

The Company's emphasis on building local capacity by supporting local contractors and suppliers in this way is another indication of its commitment to the country and to best-in-class operational standards. Strong local content is widely accepted as a means to maximise endogenous value creation, for its multiplier effect in the economy, and its role in strengthening local skill sets and capabilities. NGC's particular approach is further helping to enhance the competitiveness of suppliers so they can build their businesses and profitability.

Looking ahead

The recent gains in the area of SCM have underscored the value to be derived from embracing change. Technology will continue to open new opportunities for further improvement and efficiencies, as will the deeper integration of the SCM function across the entire NGC Group. Whatever the future holds, the SCM team will continue to evolve to stay on par with best-in-class standards and practices, and strengthen the reputation of NGC as an exemplary state entity. ■

Using tech to drive efficiency

NGC introduces 'EnergySmarTT' mobile app





In 2020, The National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (NGC) celebrates 45 years of distinguished service to country at the forefront of the energy sector. Over that lifespan, the Company's innovative and forward-thinking business strategies have enabled it to build a world-class model for gas-based development.

As NGC now looks to its next 45, innovation and future-minded investments continue to drive its growth strategy. Since the next few decades are projected to see increased deployment of renewable and energy efficient technologies, it is imperative that NGC enter the clean energy space to remain relevant, and indeed to become a best-in-class energy player. To that end, the Company has built several initiatives into a new sustainability strategy, which collectively aim to reduce its environmental footprint and increase internal accountability for its carbon impact. External to the organisation, NGC has also sought to build national capacity and consciousness with regard to energy efficiency and renewable energy (EE/RE).

It is within that context that NGC recently developed and launched the country's first mobile app around energy efficiency and conservation - 'EnergySmarTT'. This app, available for free download by the public, targets changing behaviours and attitudes toward energy consumption, particularly at the domestic level, and aims to increase awareness about the big picture environmental impact of personal choices.

Context – the new energy future

The Trinidad and Tobago energy landscape is being steered into a strategic reconfiguration with greater emphasis being placed on:

- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs),
- Energy diversification utilising clean energy technologies (Wind, Solar, Hydrogen) and
- Energy efficiency and conservation (EE&C).

Within the last three years, EE&C has been placed within the spotlight, as the message for the way we should consume energy has changed. As a country, we are known for our wasteful energy culture and any pathway transitioning to renewable energy technologies and GHG emissions reductions must encourage EE&C as the foundation. It directly deals with addressing user behaviours and choices which impact overall energy consumption and demand.

The role EE&C will play in reshaping our energy future on a national level has been continuously highlighted between 2019 and 2020, through government initiatives such as:

1. Development of a National Energy Efficiency and Conservation Plan for Trinidad and Tobago;
2. The nationwide LED bulb exchange programme;
3. Pilot study audits of government buildings; and
4. Final First Report of the Post-COVID-19 Road to Recovery, which includes stimulating activity in EE

Developing an EE&C society will require addressing our energy intensive behaviours encouraged by access to cheap and abundant energy. Energy education for citizens to make smarter energy choices has always been around, but messages have been fragmented across many media and platforms. Indeed, there are no **local** resources which constitute a 'one-stop shop' for answers to:

1. why we should invest in EE and the impact of using an energy-efficient appliance;
2. where products can be acquired;
3. tips for improving behaviours; and
4. assessing the return on investment for spending extra on EE products.

In recognition of this need, NGC decided to undertake a project that would centralise EE&C education resources, make them specific to our local context, and bring them within reach of the general population.

Introducing 'EnergySmarTT'

The concept of utilising a mobile application for reshaping the message on EE&C seems fitting given the recent focus on using technology in Trinidad and Tobago to improve the way we do business. The COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing measures accelerated the transition to more online services. Mobile applications that are now changing how we purchase and consume include ride-sharing applications, accommodation booking applications, delivery applications for food and utility apps for paying and viewing bills.

NGC's 'EnergySmarTT' app fits within that trend. It is the first local energy education mobile application in Trinidad and Tobago and through its platform, anyone with an Android or Apple device (phone or tablet) can access it. The app was built by an in-house team.

The first iteration of the mobile application offers five main functions:

1. The 'My Consumption' feature allows users to calculate their estimated electricity cost and carbon footprint for using a specific household appliance on a daily, monthly or yearly basis. Rates and wattages used



for this function referenced the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission (T&TEC) Appliance Usage Brochure with calculations based on the 2009/2010 price at the lowest tier of 26 cents per kWh.

2. The 'Switch and Save' feature helps users understand the true cost of purchasing an EE product. The app calculates the estimated payback period, over which the purchase cost of an EE product would be amortised - i.e. how long consumers would have to wait before realising savings on their energy bills because of that purchase. Calculations illustrate the simple payback, monthly savings, and an estimated carbon savings breakdown per day/month/year.
3. Energy Saving Tips are included to highlight the simple measures users can implement to reduce their consumption habits for 12 common household appliances/products. Tips provided are illustrated as infographics and follow similar guidelines as those provided by T&TEC and the Regulated Industries Commission (RIC).
4. 'Locate Energy Saving Products' is a unique feature that is not commonly found within energy saving mobile applications. It uses location-based services linked to mobile devices to highlight for app users where EE products can be purchased within Trinidad and Tobago.

Types of products available on the feature listing are:

- Air Conditioners
- Lighting
- Refrigerators
- Washing Machines

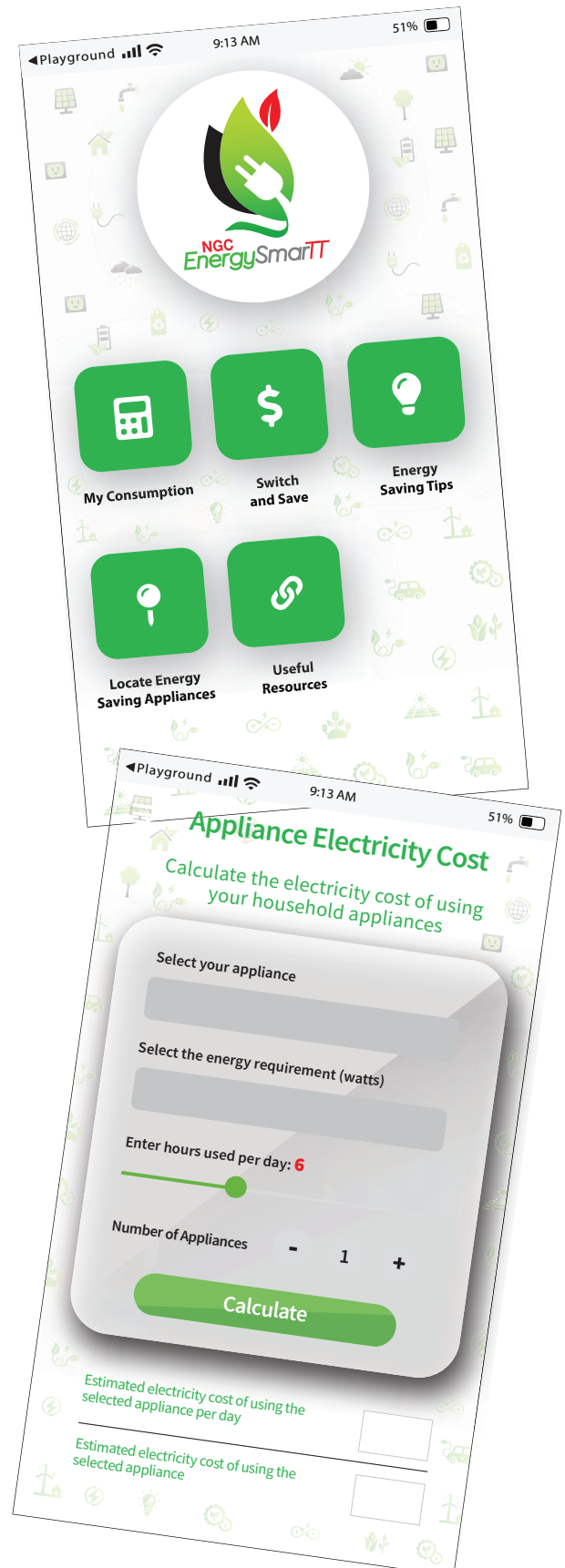
Over time, this list will be extended.

5. The 'Useful Resources' feature provides links for local, regional and global entities promoting and providing the latest news/learnings on energy efficiency.

Looking Ahead

With the first iteration of EnergySmarTT app launched in June, users can expect app updates to occur in the fourth quarter of 2020. New features to anticipate include:

1. Push Notifications for promoting daily energy saving tips and articles, and
2. A feature promoting 'Green Networking' - a designated hub that will focus on connecting schools, community groups and NGOs with experienced practitioners of energy efficiency and renewable energy projects. ■



ALTA Stands Tall for Literacy



ALTA student hard at work



An ALTA student receiving support from her tutor

In 2017, NGC launched its Above and Beyond Programme to honour preeminent citizens of Trinidad and Tobago whose work and achievements merited recognition for their impact – whether nationally or internationally – across the fields of arts and culture, sport, business, agriculture, community and social work, education, environment and energy.

As envisioned, this initiative (then called the NGC National Heroes Project), would celebrate one honouree each cycle through a series of activities aimed at raising awareness and preserving legacies. Hasely Crawford, the country's first Olympic gold medallist, and Dr. Pat Bishop, prolific artist, intellectual and musician, were the first two heroes commemorated through this project. In the past two years, children and adults across Trinidad and Tobago were introduced to their achievements through exhibitions, performances, a graphic publication, a documentary and other media.

In 2020, NGC decided to turn the spotlight on an organisation doing exceptional work for an underserved subset of the national population. NGC is honouring the Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA), a network of dedicated tutors and volunteers taking on a very pressing challenge.

The importance of literacy

United Nations statistics posit that upwards of 99% of Trinbagonians aged 15 and over are literate. By dictionary definitions, that means that nearly everyone over 15 can read and write, which would be a point of pride for any nation.

Looking deeper, however, the UN defines literacy as the ability to read and write, with understanding, *a short, simple statement on one's everyday life*. By so meagre a metric, a 99% literacy rate suddenly becomes less impressive. Moreover, local surveys have confirmed there is a very different reality on the ground. Studies by both ALTA and The University of the West Indies (The UWI) in 1994 and 1995 revealed that nearly one in four persons in Trinidad and Tobago grappled with everyday reading and writing.

Literacy is a skill so fundamental to existence today that one can easily assume it is a universal ability. However, the truth is that thousands of youths and adults in Trinidad and Tobago are not literate or struggle to read and write and face unimaginable difficulties in a world dominated



Collaboration between classmates is built into class sessions at ALTA

by print communication. From such quotidian tasks as grocery shopping, text messaging or helping a child with homework, to matters such as securing a Driver's Permit or gainful employment – there is hardly a sphere of modern life which does not demand some measure of literacy.

In as much as it is a precursor for successful integration into society, promoting literacy can be a powerful tool for addressing social inequalities. A literate person can land better jobs, better support their children, and participate more actively and productively in society. It is therefore small wonder that the United Nations has made literacy among the targets of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

With so many citizens struggling with reading and writing, literacy can still be considered a development hurdle for Trinidad and Tobago. If illiteracy and low literacy could be eliminated, the result would be increased stability, opportunity, and enhanced quality of life for thousands of individuals and families.

With so much on offer, the people working to ensure this need is met are delivering an important public service. When they are giving freely of their time to make it happen, they are humanitarians that deserve to be recognised as heroes. Therein lies the motivation behind NGC's decision to honour ALTA through its Above and Beyond Programme.

ALTA

Founded in 1992 by Paula Lucie-Smith, ALTA is the only comprehensive, structured, adult literacy programme in Trinidad and Tobago. Its visionary founder saw a gap in adult education that needed to be filled. Adults with challenges in reading and writing had limited opportunities to overcome them, not least because of the judgment that would often come with admitting illiteracy.

Recognising the numbers that would benefit from a dedicated literacy programme, Mrs. Lucie-Smith set about building a network of tutors and repository of teaching materials. Since its inception, ALTA's programmes have grown in scope and reach, with classes offered at over 50 venues across Trinidad and Tobago, including prisons, and approximately 1,500 students in attendance each year. ALTA also introduced a youth literacy component to support English teaching in schools.

Setting ALTA apart is its acknowledgement of local creole dialect and how it can influence the way students learn to read and spell. ALTA has accordingly given the dialect a place in instructional material such as its spelling dictionary. Students are taught how to differentiate between standard English and the local vernacular, and the way they speak is considered when teaching spelling and grammar.



This has been recognised as a best-in-class approach to English instruction in a region with many dialects of the language, and other Caribbean islands have enlisted ALTA's support in training tutors in their own countries. In fact, such has been the impact of ALTA's work that the organisation has been recognised by UNESCO as a model for replication worldwide¹. For her founding role, Mrs. Lucie-Smith was awarded the Hummingbird Medal (Gold) in 2001, and was conferred an honorary doctorate by The UWI in 2018.

NGC has supported the work of ALTA through past Deeds of Covenant and its own volunteerism programme, under the umbrella of its Corporate Social Responsibility portfolio. This relationship opened a window into the impact and relevance of ALTA's work, and at the same time, gave insight into the work still to be done – work

¹ <http://www.ansacaribbeanawards.com/laureates/paula-lucie-smith/>

which has positive, long-term socioeconomic implications for Trinidad and Tobago. As a company which is itself heavily invested in sustainability, NGC believes that work must continue.

The 2020 Above and Beyond Programme

This intent of this project is first and foremost to raise awareness. In previous editions, the project focused on building awareness around the life stories and achievements of two individuals to foster a deeper appreciation for their contributions to the nation.

This year, while the programme of activities will involve similar reflection on the *past* achievements of ALTA, it will simultaneously seek to raise awareness around its potential to impact the *future* of Trinidad and Tobago, if given the right support.

Readings Under the Trees is ALTA's signature event that brings local authors and ALTA student writers together to share in the joy of reading





Volunteer tutors deep in discussion at ALTA's Annual Tutor Meeting

(Archive image)

Several ALTA initiatives will be highlighted over the coming months, under the 2020 programme theme 'Stand Tall'.

'I am ALTA Stand Tall' campaign

ALTA's work is only as effective as its network is strong. It relies on volunteer tutors, and the participation of youth and adults who are willing to admit their struggles with reading and writing. There is still a stigma attached to literacy challenges that prevent people from seeking the help they need.

The 'I am ALTA STAND TALL' campaign seeks to combat this stigma through the testimonies of ALTA graduates which highlight the rewards to be derived from learning to read and write, and celebrate the victories already achieved. It is hoped these testimonies will help draw more volunteers and students to the cause by being a microphone for ALTA's work.

Pilot of ALTA Online application

While ALTA classes are highly accessible with venues throughout the country, many who might wish to enrol refrain from doing so due to logistics of attending or a sense of shame. To reach these individuals, ALTA has piloted an online application that will allow students to access resources and instruction from any system, for private and independent study.

ALTA Spelling Instruction

In identifying the root causes of low literacy, it is easy to see how ill-suited or inadequate learning resources can contribute to the problem. In Trinidad and Tobago, English instruction in schools tends to focus on British English standards, and often ignore the peculiarities of the local dialect that could invade the language of students and confuse spelling and writing.

ALTA's spelling dictionary is already a great endogenous resource that is used by ALTA in its classes. This year, the organisation will be extending the reach of this resource by distributing it to schools for incorporation into spelling instruction programmes. ALTA is also working on another resource to share - a phonics chart is being produced that will be distributed to schools in need, which specifically aims to help students differentiate between local and standard English when it comes to spelling.

Standing tall for literacy

For 28 years, ALTA has been giving citizens of Trinidad and Tobago a lifeline through literacy. This critical service deserves to be recognised and celebrated. NGC is proud to shine a spotlight on the heroes of ALTA - the administrators, tutors and students themselves - whose efforts are helping to raise the national standard of education, and ultimately, the quality of life enjoyed by citizens across the country.

For more information about ALTA and its programmes, visit <http://alta-tt.org/> ■

An aerial photograph of a beach with a large, curling wave. A vibrant rainbow is visible within the wave's crest. The water is a deep blue-green, and the sand is a light tan color. The overall scene is dynamic and beautiful.

One Moment Please

**TO REFLECT ON THE BEAUTY
THAT SURROUNDS US HERE IN
TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

Macqueripe waves, by Shaun Rambaran



THE NGC GROUP OF COMPANIES
