Diversification and digitalization give economy a boost

The ambitious island nation is taking advantage of new technology and diversifying its economic portfolio.

Long reliant on large and lucrative reserves of oil and natural gas to power steady economic growth and socioeconomic development, the dual-island nation of Trinidad and Tobago is accelerating an economic diversification drive to attract foreign investors and businesses to promising sectors.

Strategically-positioned between two vast consumer markets that offer preferential access to its many goods and services, the republic of 1.4 million people is opening up the economy and exploring investment opportunities in sectors that include high-value manufacturing, logistics and distribution, maritime, tourism, creative industries and financial services, as well as state-of-the-art business process outsourcing (BPO) and call centers. In addition, the administration of President Paula-Mae Weekes has launched a comprehensive digitalization program to help streamline public and private sector entities through rapid access to digital systems and technology.

“Trinidad and Tobago possesses several strategic advantages that will make the many investment opportunities feasible and fruitful for foreign entities through rapid access to digital systems and technology. The government intends to create a more attractive and enabling environment really started to bear fruit,” states Karen Darbasie, Minister of Trade and Industry. “These include low electricity costs, market access to international markets, compete fairly, provide high quality services, develop and grow.”

“Expenditing our digital agenda was clearly articulated by the government.” - Karen Darbasie, President, BATT/Group CEO, First Citizens Bank

The government intends to create a more attractive and enabling environment for businesses and investment by implementing measures to increase efficiency and productivity, while also reducing the time and cost of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago. “Our focus is on diversification and for increasing access to alternative channels for clients to transact,” she says. “Our role is to enable organizations to enter the various industries, compete fairly, provide high quality services, develop and grow.”

ICT revolution to enhance prospects

Substantial public and private sector spending on telecoms infrastructure means the latest advanced technology is helping the country embrace the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The scale, scope and complexity of the changes required to digitalize Trinidad and Tobago will be unlike anything experienced before, according to the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation. “The government has embarked on a very ambitious program to digitize the public sector. It’s going to be a tremendous task and as the incumbent telecommunications provider, we are well positioned to support the national development goals.”

Cynthia Reddock-Downes, CEO of The Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT) is a leading industry figure as her entity’s list of responsibilities includes regulating telecommunications and broadcasting sectors, managing spectrum and number resources, and establishing equipment and service quality standards. “A large proportion of what we do is about creating an enabling environment or promoting investments,” she says. “Our role is to enable organizations to enter the various markets, compete fairly, provide high quality services, develop and grow.”

Driving the digital economy

The leading player in Trinidad and Tobago’s telecommunications sector, TSTT plays a vital role in advancing the country’s digital ambitions, says acting CEO Lisa Agard. “As the incumbent provider, we are exceptionally positioned to support all the government’s digitalization plans. Our constant investment in state-of-the-art infrastructure is a critical foundation for national development.”

“Any investor in the country can be assured that we have the robust and advanced telecommunications systems that are necessary for their operations,” Agard says. “The telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT) continue to offer early access to enabling technologies.”

Key Market Data

- $5.02 billion
- 100% Mobile Cellular Network Coverage.
- 145% Mobile Voice Penetration Rate.
- 52% Mobile Internet Penetration Rate.
- 80 Fixed Internet Penetration per 100 households.
- #greaterconnectivity
- #digitalevolution
- #innovation
- #smartliving

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Telecoms industry guardian ensures sector thrives

Cynthia Reddock-Downes, CEO, Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT), reveals how the respected entity is helping the teleworking trend take off quickly and smoothly.

TATT clearly recognizes the importance of its key role in facilitating investment and further improving the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago via an affordable and reliable communication sector. What concrete measures are you taking in this direction?

A large proportion of our work is about creating an enabling environment or promoting investment. Our regulatory framework has been organized to ensure we have an open market for telecommunications, allowing many of various operators to provide telecommunication services fixed, wireless, internet and broadcast. Our role is to enable operators to enter the various markets, compete fairly, provide high-quality services, develop and grow.

In Trinidad and Tobago, it’s not just national or regional operators, we also have international operators that provide facilities. We have a regulatory environment that enables these organizations invest, we have a process—which is fair and transparent—we authorize these organizations to provide services here. We make sure that, as far as possible, we enable fair competition. Disputes that arise are dealt with promptly. Regulation is therefore all about a regulatory framework that enables fair competition, high-quality affordable services and continued investment in Trinidad and Tobago.

The government’s quest for the digitalization of the economy goes well beyond the impact and consequences of COVID-19. Has teleworking put extra strain on the networks and the various internet providers?

Internet providers recently told us that between March and October 2020, their traffic increased by over 50 percent year-on-year. Prior to April 2020, operators expected there would be times when there would be downtime, signifying extra strain on the networks and the various internet providers.

Thankfully, network operators have been able to handle the additional volume and traffic for several reasons, one of which is TATT moved very quickly to provide additional spectrum so they could provide the services to a larger number of users at the same time.

The two mobile providers received additional spectrum in April 2020 following their requests. TATT provided the additional spectrum free of charge and will continue to do so until the end of 2021. Based on the circumstances at that time, we will decide whether an extension of this period is required.

Certainly, that additional spectrum has really helped mobile network operators to enable the remote activities that have been taking place in homes and elsewhere. A lot of the “on the go” network traffic has reduced, as well as commercial traffic. So has the traffic that you would have with individuals using their mobile phones in the street or in outdoor areas has reduced, the internet traffic is now at home.

Fixed and mobile internet traffic from residential premises has really increased substantially. In the business environment, it’s quite different from before as you would have put in the office using the facilities, the facilities are largely residential and indoor now. As such, service providers have made different arrangements to manage the change in traffic patterns. Now, because a large percentage of the working population and students are at home, what we found in terms of our own organization is that employees are able to take part in many more meetings and discussions than if they were in the office, or had to travel to overseas meetings.

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Now you find your doing meetings all day and all evening and have a priority list for the ones you can attend. For businesses, providing employees have the required connectivity, they can access all the various meeting platforms all of which are available right here.

The Chairman of TATT, Gilbert Peterson, has expressed a strong desire to incorporate 5G in your systems and networks. How soon do you think interest and mobile users in Trinidad and Tobago may have access to this state-of-the-art technology, what is the next step for its implementation?

TATT is formulating a 5G framework which is intended for implementation in the next 18-24 months. We must first ensure that the ecosystem is in place including equipment, phones and other facilities which support 5G. We need to make sure that whatever policy we develop and the sort of environment we create, that we evaluate the technology that we’re using, especially the benefits of the technology to Trinidad and Tobago and its impact on how companies conduct business here.

We already have organizations operating here that provide 5G services in other parts of the world, so those organizations would also be included in the introduction of 5G technology and systems to Trinidad and Tobago.

What final message would you like to deliver to the readers of Newsweek who would be able to incorporate 5G technology? What is the next step for its implementation?

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One of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic is many highly qualified professionals are getting used to teleworking and have realized they can work from anywhere in the world. What services can local telecoms operators offer these individuals so that Trinidad and Tobago is recognized as a competitive place to live and work?

We have excellent internet services, since the minimum megabits per second (Mbps) speed in households is now around 5-10 Mbps, which is sufficient to stream videos and games without issues. We can go as high 600 Mbps, depending upon the type of package. This means the internet is faster, more accessible and reliable, and so businesses can continue to operate remotely in a seamless manner.
Robustly advanced ICT networks and services

Lisa Agard, Acting CEO, Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT), reveals how the company continues to drive digitalization in the country and region.

Until the sector’s liberalization in 2006, Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT) was the country’s only telecommunications operator and it remains the leader in fixed and mobile solutions, as well as the deployment of wireless and fiber-optic networks, among other things. Could you introduce the company and describe its importance today?

TSTT is the incumbent telecommunications provider. It is 51 percent owned indemnity by the government through National Enterprises Limited, while Cable and Wireless owns the other 49 percent. In terms of mobile communications, TSTT’s brmobile is one of two brands in Trinidad and Tobago. Its 3G network covers approximately 90 percent of the population, while its 4G network covers around 70 percent. We have recently received the spectrum allocation to expand our 4G LTE coverage to 90 percent of the population. This will also improve indoor coverage, we estimate that at peak usage, average download speeds will easily exceed 15 Mbps. We have also launched limited 5G service on some sites. As for fixed internet, after billions of dollars of investment over the years. TSTT has a state-of-the-art fiber network. We currently pass about 155,000 of the 401,000 households in Trinidad and Tobago with fiber. We have also deployed a robust fiber network for businesses: whether a customer needs a metro ethernet or an international private leased circuit, we are able to deploy solutions to meet all requirements. Additionally, TSTT’s 4G LTE fixed wireless network covers roughly 70 percent of the population. It is designed for more rural and less dense urban areas.

As the incumbent telecommunications provider, we are extremely well positioned to support all of the government’s digitalization plans.

Lisa Agard, Acting CEO, TSTT

Another major investment has been our development of a Telecommunications Industry Association certified Tier 3 data center—one of only nine in the entire hemisphere. In the 10 years that we have operated it, we have had 100 percent uptime. Trinidad and Tobago is uniquely placed to provide cloud solutions to the Eastern Caribbean due to its location outside of the hurricane belt and its direct undersea cable network currently connected to Barbados, St. Lucia, Grenada, Antigua and St. Vincent. Cloud services offered by TSTT include infrastructure, disaster recovery and backup as a service. We also have the ability to provide software-as-a-service (SaaS) solutions at a fraction of the cost of purchasing these software applications directly.

What is the uptake of advanced telecommunications in the country?

As a result of billions of dollars of investment by TSTT and other operators, we have experienced exponential growth in telecommunications. The country has 3.5-2.1 million mobile subscribers—about 1.85 per 100 inhabitants. Around 52 percent of people now have internet connection on their mobile device. Similarly, fixed internet has seen enormous growth utilizing technologies like fiber to the home, fiber to the curb and fixed wireless. Today, there are 351,000 internet subscribers, which represents 84 percent household penetration.

The government has made digitalization a priority. What role does TSTT have in advancing the government’s digital ambitions?

ICT infrastructure is a critical foundation for national development. The government has embarked on a very ambitious program to digitize the public sector and, as the incumbent telecommunications provider, we are extremely well positioned to support all of the government’s digitalization plans. Another illustration of how we are making its ambition is our establishment of an innovation lab at the University of the West Indies (UWI), the first of its kind in the English-speaking Caribbean, last year. The brmobile-UWI Innovation Lab powered by Huawei will be fertile ground for research. It supports the National ICT Plan and is a milestone for education. As a country, we have to focus on the development of ICT skills and use—the lab will be a phenomenal assistance in this. A further example is the brmobile foundation, which, among many other corporate social responsibility initiatives, is playing a significant role in advancing national development by donating refurbished computers to non-governmental organizations and upgrading broadband telecommunication infrastructure in public places while continuing to invest in sport, culture, health and education.

How did TSTT respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Our technology team worked fervently to monitor and optimize our network to ensure that our service was seamless. In terms of technology infrastructure, we responded in two key ways: firstly, we invested in additional subsea capacity. TSTT connects Trinidad and Tobago to the world through extensive, robust and resilient submarine fiber-optic cable systems that terminate directly on island. There are four cable systems coming into Trinidad and we have service on all four, with an ownership stake in two and leased capacity on the others. We purchased additional capacity to ensure we remained responsive to the growing needs of our customers. As a result of this investment, we now have 75 Gbps of capacity on our various subsea systems. We also received additional spectrum from the regulator. This allowed us to expand our 4G LTE fixed wireless network and enable families in more remote communities to access the internet.

In the early stages of the pandemic, misinformation around the virus was rampant. In response, we zero-rated a host of pertinent websites, including that of the World Health Organization, to give our customers free access to accurate COVID-related information. We also partnered with non-governmental organizations such as United Way to assist families most affected by the pandemic and we provided support to students preparing for exams. While we were expanding our network and supporting the people and communities we serve, we made it a priority to support our employees as well. We facilitated staff working from home, to the extent that their jobs permitted, enforced physical distancing work solutions, and provided counseling and other services through our Employee Wellness program.

What are TSTT’s strategic priorities for the next five years?

We’re about to start our planning exercise for the upcoming period. We plan to build up the strategic pillars of the current 2016-2021 plan, which are our core business, grow revenue through broadband, mobile data, digital services and data centers; improve customer satisfaction with retail transformation, converged provisioning and billing systems, plus a zero-copper policy; and an organizational redesign to drive efficiency. In terms of technology investment, we will continue to deploy fiber solutions to residential communities, augment our offerings to business customers, enhance our mobile 4G LTE network and explore further investment in 5G. We will also further pivot our business to advance services and develop alternative revenue sources. For example, in 2018, TSTT wanted to offer its in-house electronic digital procurement solution to customers as an SaaS hosted in our data center. Another area is fintech. The pandemic revealed the inefficiency in distributing monies in a non-contact way throughout the Caribbean. It is quite clear that a digital mobile solution, even a simple one, could help governments and companies. Additionally, we will continue to expand our cloud services locally and internationally.

Do you have a final message for potential investors in the country about its telecommunications systems?

Any investor can be assured that we have the robust and advanced telecommunications networks that will enable them to operate seamlessly. All that’s left to say is “Welcome to Digital Trinidad and Tobago.”

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POWERFUL PORTFOLIO OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES

Paula Gopee-Scoon, Minister of Trade and Industry for Trinidad and Tobago, showcases some of the many sectors and investment openings her country has to offer leading international investors.

The U.S. is your largest trading partner, please provide a brief overview of the opportunities available for American and other foreign investors. What sectors are the most promising at the moment?

The government of Trinidad and Tobago attracts and facilitates investment by matching the country's attributes with investors' requirements. Trinidad and Tobago possesses several strategic advantages that will make such investment opportunities feasible and fruitful for foreign investors from the U.S. and elsewhere. These include low electricity costs, market access to over 1.2 billion people through international trade agreements, our strategic location as a gateway to North and South America. In addition, we have a large, naturally sheltered deep harbor, and our developed maritime infrastructure and industry support mechanisms facilitate maritime and other trade. Key investment opportunities include high value manufacturing logistics and distribution, maritime, tourism, creative industries, financial services, BPO and voice contact centers.

At the centre of our diversification efforts is the Phoenix Park Industrial Estate, which occupies 144 acres and is close to our largest port—Point Lisas. The Phoenix Park industrial Estate is ideally suited for businesses operating in the areas of manufacturing, assembly, logistics and distribution. There are 76 lots of varying sizes available for light industrial activity. In the maritime sector, our goal is to become the Gateway to the Americas as we have a favorable geographic location and are very experienced in services such as ship lay-up, offshore transhipment, ship repair and drydocking.

"We possess many strategic advantages that make investment opportunities feasible and fruitful for foreign investors."
Paula Gopee-Scoon, Min Trade+Industry, Trinidad & Tobago

What is your strategic vision for the nation in the short to medium term?

In a word: diversification. Trinidad and Tobago will diversify into new, more innovative products and services while also maintaining a strong and robust energy sector. We intend to expand our export base, not only in traditional markets, like the U.S., CARICOM and Europe, but also non-traditional markets. We intend to create a more attractive and enabling environment for businesses and investments by implementing measures to increase efficiency and productivity and reduce the time and cost of doing business in the country.

Finally, what is your key message to the readers of Newsweek?

We are an experienced marketplace, used to facilitating foreign investment. Trinidad and Tobago is well established as an energy province in terms of our natural resources and are used to facilitating large international companies. We have a cadre of very highly educated and skilled personnel, available for all the sectors I have identified. We also have preferential access to billions of consumers in the global market space.

The role of the digital economy is growing globally. As the fourth industrial-revolution looms and countries seek to adapt to rapid change, what key priorities do you have for digital penetration and e-commerce?

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, we commenced the implementation of several initiatives and reforms to expand the public’s access to information and communication technology and create and facilitate a digital economy. These initiatives and reforms target the country’s digital penetration capacity and are intended to improve the ease of doing business in Trinidad and Tobago.

With regard to creating a digital economy, some key developments have been undertaken by the government, specifically through the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation. Measures include the development and implementation of a national data governance policy and framework, the update of the government’s cloud policy, assisting local tech entrepreneurs to get international accreditation and information technology, bridging the digital divide by developing and implementing policies to address affordability, and equity of digital access for every segment of the population.

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