PROJECT ICT INNOVATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MASQUERADE INDUSTRY OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

1. Background

The Trinidad and Tobago carnival is one of the largest and most well known festivals in the Americas along with Rio Carnival in Brazil and the Mardi Gras in New Orleans. It has inspired the structure of several carnivals throughout the Caribbean region and is the most replicated Carnival in the world. More than 29 carnivals in the United States, seven in Canada, more than 52 in England, and four throughout Europe are the product of Trinidad and Tobago's Diaspora and are now welcomed by the larger populations in their adopted homes. This is making Trinidad and Tobago's carnival the world's most globalized festival.[1]

Trinidad and Tobago is known as a world leader in organizing and delivering high-class carnivals. The local Masquerade industry has become one of the flagships of the Carnival industry landscape of Trinidad and Tobago. Having emerged primarily as a creative activity and a socio-cultural practice, the Masquerade industry has evolved to also become a substantial contributor to the local economy.

Within the past decades, the Trinidad and Tobago Masquerade industry has become one of the flagships of the Carnival industry landscape of Trinidad and Tobago[2]. Carnival visitor arrivals have grown by 60 per cent since the late 1990s and in 2007 there were over 40,000 visitors who spent approximately US$28 million, over 10 per cent of the annual visitor expenditures[3]. Most recent data from the Central Statistics office (CSO), coupled with University of West Indies (UWI) research show that three weeks of revenue from Trinidad and Tobago's carnival exceeds US$100 million. The mas industry also generates significant economic activity in a range of sectors in the local economy such as entertainment, media, hospitality and retail sectors. Additionally, overseas Diaspora carnivals generate hundreds of millions dollars in revenues.
Carnival therefore, has grown over the years into a viable and sustainable global economic industry supported by talent, expertise, skills and knowledge that is almost exclusively Trinbagonian. It is considered Trinidad and Tobago's most important cultural export.

[1] The Economics Of Bacchanal: The Economic Impact Of Trinidad And Tobago Carnival; Dr. Keith Nurse (Sunday Guardian, March 2007)
[2] The Economics Of Bacchanal: The Economic Impact Of Trinidad And Tobago Carnival; Dr. Keith Nurse (Sunday Guardian, March 2007)
[3] NCDF Strategic Plan for the Transformation of the Masquerade Industry of Trinidad and Tobago, January 2009.

In spite of this, the MSME sector, an integral part of the Carnival, have traditionally not gained financially from the festival. The published study by the National Institute of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology (NIHERST) about the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival's economic potential recommends to increase economic activities for MSME in the Carnival as mean for the industry to be ahead in year 2016.

There are over 450 micro and small enterprises involved in the Masquerade industry and it is clear that they lack the entrepreneurship and managerial skills necessary for a company's survival in a modern business environment. Most of those enterprises operate a life style business that would employ the owner on a permanent basis and 2 to 10 employees hired on a seasonal basis from October to February /March. They are far to attain sustainable growth and bigger market shares: they do not know what they produce, what their services are or their market space, and have little or no marketing for the promotion of their products and services. Additionally, their weak managerial an unstructured approach put at risk the growth potential of the masquerade industry.

MSME are still functioning in a traditional way – usually as seasonal, family-operated entities - and do not appreciate the potential benefits of using ICT as a means to enhance the productivity and therefore their competitiveness. There is a need for business solutions to enhance the MSME's competitiveness through the development of a strategic and sustainable management and marketing plan that will create the opportunity for spill over business opportunities within the MSME sector.

The proposed project seeks to contribute strengthening and promoting economic growth in the small and medium size businesses in the Masquerade sector, which have traditionally not been able to sustainably or substantially exploit the special character of Trinidad and Tobago's globalized Masquerade industry beyond the periodic time of a few months preceding Carnival. To this end, the project will implement a web-based platform, the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival HUB to enhance their business models and their competitiveness.

This Trinidad and Tobago Carnival HUB will act as a tool to provide substantial support and services to improve their productivity and efficiency levels through specific online functionalities addressed to reduce raw materials costs, increase the research capabilities for their Theme Presentations, market their products and services at individually, nationally, regionally and internationally levels, and support vertical and horizontal integration within the sector while innovating their business practices. It will become the one-stop feel for visitors and the premier virtual Carnival space.

By incorporating ICT into their businesses, MSME will be able to access new markets, reduce operational costs, facilitate global connectivity and attract new business. This will contribute to the expansion of employment and preservation of Trinidad and Tobago's cultural legacy and community based businesses.

The project is aligned with the strategic plan developed for the Masquerade Industry developed by the National Carnival Development Foundation (NCDF) to solve the imbalances that exist within the sector and critical issues impacting on the industry's sustainability and global competitiveness.

2. Project objectives, components, and activities

The general goal of the project is to support the globalization of the Trinidad y Tobago Masquerade industry. The purpose is to develop and ICT platform to enhance Masquerade industry's MSME competitiveness, market reach and sustainability.

To meet these objectives, the project includes the following components:

Component 1: Building ICT capacities and promoting collaboration among Masquerade industry's MSME.

The objective of this component is to provide MSME with the required knowledge and infrastructure for adopting ICT. To this end this component includes the following activities: (i) development of the MSME capacity building and collaboration strategies; (ii) preparation of Business Management, ICT, and collaboration training programs and materials; (iii) training MSME in Business Management, ICT and collaborative work; and (iv) providing MSME's ICT infrastructure (hardware, standard software, and Internet service). As a result of this component, 50 MSME will be equipped and trained to use ICT, and working collaboratively.

Component 2: Development of the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival HUB.

The objective of this component is to develop the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival HUB. The activities considered in this component include: (i) definition of the HUB requirements and specifications; (ii) development and implementation of the HUB; and (iii) training MSME in the use of the platform. As a result, the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival HUB will be operational and 50 MSME will be accessing its functionalities and services.

Component 3: Promotion of the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival HUB.

The objective of this component is to launch and promote the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival HUB. This component include, among others, the following activities: (i) define market strategy for the HUB; (ii) develop marketing campaigns for HUB branding and recognition; (iii) integration of the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival HUB into international search engines; (iii) promotion of the HUB in mass and specialized media, organizations and events; (iv) establishment of partnerships with key public and private stakeholders to support promotion efforts; and (v) evaluation of project results in terms of the industry and participant MSME. The expected results for this component include HUB market strategy and promotion plan, partnerships with stakeholders, and reports about HUB evolution and business volume.

Component 4: Development of the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival HUB scale-up strategy.

This component will define the strategy to expand project services to new MSME in the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival Masquerade and Carnival industries, while ensuring HUB's sustainability. Following are some of the activities included in this component: (i) preparation of project business plan; (ii) establishment of partnerships with key stakeholders and potential investors; (iii) development of the HUB scale-up strategy and plan, including sources of funding; (iv) validation of the scale-up strategy and plan by beneficiaries and stakeholders. The expected results for this component include the project sustainability plan, and the HUB scale-up strategy validated by stakeholders.