

A Policy for the Green Fund of Trinidad and Tobago

FACT SHEET

THE AUTHOR

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Executive Summary

The Green Fund is the national environmental fund of Trinidad and Tobago offering a solution to our environmental challenges and an opportunity to further our national development in an environmentally sustainable manner. Unfortunately, the fund with its current balance of approximately three billion dollars (\$3bn) is being underutilised leaving protection and the integration of the environment and development below capacity. Civil society projects marrying community development with the protection of our natural resources is a target area for improvement toward making the most of our environmental gifts and the financial resources of the Green Fund. This policy recommendation seeks to address the delivery of the Green Fund through civil society partnerships toward the goal of environmentally sustainable development.

Introduction

Trinidad and Tobago is among the leading developing countries in working towards environmental sustainability and has made impressive steps toward taking care of our environment. We possess a dedicated financial instrument geared toward the protection of the environment with the Government establishing a Green Fund via a levy in 2001 and established an executing unit in 2008 to translate the fund into activities of environmental conservation. The Green Fund Regulations as arranged in 2007 recognises the best practice of civil society participation in environmental protection through its outlined provisions. Global trends also support our national approach with the United Nations establishing a Green Climate Fund to transfer money to developing countries to assist in climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. The value of civil society partnerships for environmental conservation through the disbursements of the Green Fund has the potential to have meaningful impact in transforming the environmental landscape and resulting in socio-economic development. Ambition in seeing the Green Fund as a strong driver of environmentally sustainable development is necessary for the fund to operate to its full potential.

This paper seeks to highlight the underutilisation of the Green Fund and make recommendations on the way forward in ensuring the protection of the environment is married to civil society partnerships to foster sustainable development.

Issues and Context

Trinidad and Tobago is heavily dependent on our natural resources as it is the main driver of our prosperity through the energy sector in Trinidad and the tourism sector in Tobago. This unique juxtaposition underscores the Global struggle to balance development with the protection of the environment. Armed with a national environmental policy with a stated goal of achieving environmentally sustainable development and a Green Fund with resources dedicated to producing environmental projects action is needed in establishing Trinidad and Tobago as a model of development backed by a commitment to protecting our environment. Best practice in 21st century environmental conservation suggests the key to interventions intended to protect the environment is engaging stakeholders closest to the issue in finding solutions. Civil society partnerships create a sense of ownership of environmental resources and strengthen commitment and appreciation for the value of these resources. The Green Fund is a tool dedicated to financing these badly needed civil society interventions and although accessible through the framework established by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago its delivery to the intended civil society beneficiaries can be improved by addressing the major challenges to civil society organisations willing to access the fund.

One area which has provided great challenges in allowing the Green Fund to be more effective in producing civil society partnerships is the application process and the criteria for assessment of projects. Community based organisations generally have knowledge of their environmental problems and can be encouraged to contribute to solving these problems and bring social benefits to their area. However, most of these organisations have noted great difficulty in completing the application form at a level which would be acceptable to the Green Fund and be considered for funding. Issues of formulating activities, detailing baseline information, explaining the expected benefits of planned activities and proposing a budget has proven to be a nightmare for several organisations hoping to make an impact environmentally. The Green Fund Executing Unit employs Community Liaison Officers to assist applicants in the preparation of applications but the process has proven tiresome with the extent of information necessary to ensure the proposal can stand the scrutiny of the evaluation criteria. Efforts have been made to simplify the process but given the fact that public funds are involved there is not much room to amend the current structure which is based on the Green Fund Regulations.

Knowledge and understanding of the Green Fund and its usefulness to impact Trinidad and Tobago as a tool of environmental and socio-economic development is minimal. Promotion of the Green Fund has not been extensive with stakeholders such as companies contributing to the fund, state agencies and the general public having limited information on the purpose of the fund, how it is accessed and the great potential for creating solutions to environmental issues. Civil society organisations in particular must be targeted for promotion activities which would empower them to believe that they can make a significant contribution to fixing the problems they face. Activities to promote the fund must be made a priority in order to plant the seeds for applications to the Green Fund by organisations eligible to receive funding for environmental conservation projects. Outreach has been done

on an ad hoc basis but there has never been a strategic communication campaign to engage the public due to challenges related to the readiness of the fund to accept applications and chaos brought on by the instability as it relates to the Environment Ministry being constantly realigned.

Another challenge as it relates to the delivery of the Green Fund to civil society partners is the disparity between the capacity of these organisations and the skills needed to plan, implement and monitor an environmental project. Addressing this deficiency should be a priority issue among decision makers as it forms the basis of the goals contained in several Government policies which encourage community involvement in the development process. The Green Fund Executing Unit has made efforts to point organisations in the direction of other community development institutions with remit for capacity building in the civil society of our nation. Alternatively the organisations have been encouraged to write into the application proposals to increase their capacity through project implementation by budgeting for training and hiring skilled persons with responsibility to transfer skills to members of the Green Fund beneficiary. Effectiveness and efficiency of environmental interventions by civil society will depend on their capacity to deliver. Serious thought must be given to the intended beneficiaries of the fund if there is no resolution to implement a formal program of capacity building. Government must consider whether the top down approach to remedying environmental problems would be more suitable if effort is not made to address capacity building in community organisations.

Partnerships involve stakeholder cooperation toward the achievement of shared objectives. The Green Fund process places great emphasis on applicants communicating with stakeholders of the proposed project in order to strengthen the proposal. Civil society organisations are tasked with making contact with any group or institution that may positively or negatively impact the proposed project. Though a very productive process in theory several challenges have been met by organisations seeking contributions in the form of permission and approvals or other forms of support from state stakeholders. Bureaucracy in state organisations has frustrated many civil society groups. This particular challenge has highlighted the need for interagency dialogue as it relates to supporting civil society projects in a meaningful way. Further challenges such as the threat of micromanagement has also hampered the process of cooperation between state and civil society. Capacity is also a challenge highlighted by several state stakeholders as they are unable to follow through on their willingness to assist the process of delivering Green Fund projects.

In moving forward with the delivery of the Green Fund as a tool of environmental and socio-economic development there must be recognition that several state institutions are indeed eligible to receive grants for environmental projects. State institutions eligible to access the Green Fund have been exercising their right to apply and have indeed been beneficiaries as they deal with their environmental mandate. Careful attention must be paid to the signal this may send to civil society organisations that may now view themselves to be in a disadvantaged position as these much larger institutions seek to address environmental issues. Civil society must be engaged to fill gaps left in the implementation of state managed projects if the state Green Fund access modality is to be continued as there is no substitute

for the benefits such as community ownership and capacity building to be derived from civil society taking on the responsibility of protecting our environment. There is clear need for strategic thought on this issue with a view to establishing boundaries state and civil society interventions through the Green Fund.

Approaches and Results

Further study needs to be conducted by the Heliconia Foundation in the future to determine how to maximise the impact the financial resource of the Green Fund as a tool for environmentally sustainable development. Academics, state and civil society organisations must study the existing framework which governs the delivery of the fund and provide solutions which would increase civil society participation. The findings of the Joint Select Committee of Parliament which investigated the administration of the Green Fund would complement this paper as it is the most thorough assessment of the fund that has been produced so far. In the interest of national development the Heliconia Foundation must dig deeper into this issue and engage decision makers and the national community to ensure the untapped potential of the Green Fund is realised.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The Green Fund with its significant financial resources cannot continue to be underutilised as Trinidad and Tobago aims for environmentally sustainable development as outlined in the National Environmental Policy. Attention must be paid to ensuring the intended eligible organisations fully understand the framework which governs the fund and are imbued with the confidence that any organisation with a desire to assist in tackling environmental challenges will receive grant funding in line with the regulations set out.

Consideration must be given to making the criteria by which proposals to the Green Fund are evaluated by the Green Fund Advisory Committee public.

The Green Fund must embark on a campaign to promote the fund to the national community and highlight the opportunities available to the public through accessing grants to tackle environmental issues. This process should give proper information to the public and inspire confidence that the state is serious about tackling environmental challenges and using the implementation of the fund to create socioeconomic benefits.

State run Green Fund stakeholders need to be given the independence and resources necessary to make them effective, and should improve their collaboration with each other and civil society in creating real value from Green Fund projects. Cooperation agreements are necessary in order to efficiently manage these relationships with a view to strengthening projects by accepting the interdependence necessary to produce sustainable environmental projects.

Trinidad and Tobago should innovatively address the issue of capacity building in civil society organisations. There is need to develop this sector as it has the potential to transform the delivery of services the public currently enjoy. Participation in civil society organisations must be promoted and seek to engender a spirit of ownership and responsibility in citizens of all classes and education backgrounds. Particular attention should be given to a strategy to involve beneficiaries of the GATE in the civil society development process hereby building the skill base in these organisations.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago should examine the myriad of opportunities that may be possible with proper utilisation of the Green Fund and align the fund to the mandates of state agencies to produce interdisciplinary environmental projects that also tackle challenges faced by Ministries such as National Security, Transport and Tourism.

The Government should also evaluate the usefulness of the Green Fund as a tool to generate commercial opportunities born out of the desire to protect our environmental resources.

The Government should embark on a drive to strengthen existing civil society environmental partnerships through the resources of the Green Fund hereby recognising the valuable contribution made by these organisations in the past and making them key partners in the development of this sector in the future.