

CARICOM Energy Personality Series
A Woman of Action: Manorma Soeknandan strengthens
Suriname's resolve towards energy efficiency.

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In this feature, we present Dr. Manorma Soeknandan to the CARICOM Energy Personality Series.

As a career diplomat, Dr. Manorma Soeknandan brings a wealth of experience to the renewable energy front within the CARICOM region. Her distinguished leadership style has indubitably enriched the industry framework in her native Suriname, helping to bridge the gap between policy and implementation of needful programs and services across communities, cities and countries that she selflessly serves. Taking a multi-focal approach that balances legislation, education, and project management, she is well-versed in elevating the profiles on institutions that guide the energy vision for the region. By raising the profile of efforts and investments into clean energy initiatives in her current capacity of Deputy Secretary-General and chair of the CARICOM Secretariat Energy Committee, Soeknandan is a woman of action, who is determined to fulfil the ambitious vision of the Caribbean region as a global example of renewable energy.

Topographically defined by massive swaths of tropical rainforests that border neighbouring Brazil and a serene north-eastern coastal line that gently meets the Atlantic Ocean, the Republic of Suriname is the smallest sovereign state in South America. With a population of just over 575,000

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people, it boasts a melting pot of cultures, religions, ethnicities and languages, intricate Dutch colonial architecture, a diverse culinary scene and, most notably, a beautiful blend of indigenous communities that have enjoyed a centuries-long relationship with the country's abundant natural resources. Harmonious living is one of the signature qualities of the Surinamese, and Dr. Manorma Soeknandan is filled with national pride when she speaks about the unique qualities of her homeland. "We speak about 22 languages, and I'm sure you will not find that anywhere else in CARICOM. The number of groups in Suriname is also a major distinction from the rest of the Caribbean – we still have the descendants of the Maroons and other tribes living in the interior, with their own linguistics, traditions, culture and art," she enlightened. Explaining that the Surinamese traditions are passed down from generation to generation, she stressed on the importance of listening to the experiences of the people. "We live peacefully together, although [there are] so many languages and so many groups. Yes, we have ups and downs, but we always join, because what we say is that politics cannot divide us. You can only respect another if you have respect for your own self. If you don't have peace, you don't have progress" said Soeknandan.

She recalled her time with the Ministry of Justice and Police in the late 80's before segueing her way into CARICOM. "When Suriname joined CARICOM in 1997, in 1995 I was already working in CARICOM Affairs," she said, chronicling the beginning of a long journey in public service where legislative drafting and competitive law had already captured her passion. "When we finally became a member, I started to attend all these CARICOM

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meetings, after which I was asked to become an Ambassador, first to CARICOM and then to Guyana, to Cuba and to Jamaica.” By 2014, she officially joined the organization as the Deputy Secretary General. Having earned a master’s and Doctorate in International Studies and Diplomacy from Washington International University, her experience in legislative drafting served as the foundation for her public service in a number of committee-based capacities where Dr. Soeknandan would have initiated, supported and assisted the formation of numerous regional institutions – including the Regional Sport Academy (RSA), Caribbean Regional Information and Translation Institute (CRITI), Caribbean Health and Food Safety Agency (CAHFSA), CARICOM Competition Commission (CCC). In her view, her greatest honour in her diplomatic capacity has been the appointment of the first female Ambassador of Suriname to Guyana, as well as being the first female diplomat ever assigned to Guyana and the first female Dean of the Diplomatic Corps. “The honour really is that I have been able to represent my country, the people of Suriname and the people of the region – but also, that I have been able to represent my President, the highest authority in Suriname, in a respectful way where I had the trust to do the job and achieve the results,” she noted.

Sustainable development first came on Dr. Soeknandan’s radar during a particularly difficult period for Suriname. “As an Ambassador, you have to make sure that the energy, water, and security bills and so on stays below a certain level, and that you can effectively and efficiently save to do other things. You do not overspend, you spend wisely,” she maintained. In one particular turning point in 2014, she recalled an incident where the

Secretariat's light bill was not paid, and the Guyana Light and Power company was forced to cut the electricity service. "The irony was that there was a meeting happening at the same time on Economic Development, and it was an energy meeting," she lamented. It was in that moment that the Deputy Secretary General knew that change was imminent. "I said to myself 'we cannot continue like this.' It's scarce resources, and we had to do something. We had to improve the work, spend some money in upgrading the infrastructure, and that's how we started. Imagine you are fully dependent financially on member-states, and every financial, social, economic decision will always have an impact on the CARICOM Secretariat. You have to become more effective," she noted.

Conducting business differently without compromising the quality of the service has been a recurring theme for Dr. Soeknandan in her professional duties and has been one of the more notable challenges that the people of Suriname face in fully pivoting the shift towards sustainable lifestyles. "I think in regard to forestry and eco-tourism, there are some economic factors that have an impact on the people to want to earn money that might be very harmful to the interior," she stated. "When you talk about sustainable living, it's also when you build in forested areas, which is what is happening these days. Urban planning (...) all of that forms a part of sustainable development. It is not only energy, but also a lot more – it is climate change and there are so many things attached to it." Actionable solutions from Soeknandan have met these challenges head on – including the 5-year Strategic Plan for the Surinamese Community, which identifies agriculture as one of the priority focal areas for propelling the region in its

efforts towards economic resilience and sustainable growth and development. The buy-in from that agricultural stakeholdership has stimulated required increases in productivity to adapt to the reality of climate change in Suriname and other CARICOM member-states and has spawned new opportunities to transform the industry. ” I am sure that if before, people did not recognize the importance of agriculture becoming self-sustainable in our region, I am sure that now with COVID-19 we realize that we cannot do it without agriculture. We have to invest in agri-industries, and it really needs a change in mindset and priorities,” she stressed.

In addition to bringing an energy-saving lightbulb program from Guyana to Suriname through her diplomatic leadership, Dr. Soeknandan also introduced a number of programs that set Suriname on a direct path to encourage countrywide sustainable living. She noted that a lot is being done to configure how the region can market products in what she describes as a ‘combined approach’. “In agri-industry, we have to deliver avenues for other sectors – such as tourism and hotels – so that we’re providing services with mid-to long term planning towards achieving results, and each member-state should be able to find itself in what we want to achieve together,” she rationalized. In referencing the establishment of the Caribbean Agricultural Health Food Safety Agency (CAHFSA) in 2010, where Dr. Soeknandan played a significant implementation role, she recognized the importance of the agency to meet the evolving needs of Caribbean people. “They are playing a crucial role in recommending standards for products, but I’m sure that they will agree with me that we

really have to step up our efforts with our health and food safety standards,” she explained. Expanding on this critical reality by saying that the private sector is the driving force of the economic landscape (with Governments acting as a key partner), Soeknandan also emphasized that risk is necessary, and failure to act will hinder regional development. “We really have to be solutions-oriented, and I am convinced that if we work together – because one country cannot work to produce everything – and do the things in which we excel, we will have less competition among ourselves.”

With energy resilience rising to the forefront of the regional agenda, Dr. Soeknandan’s teaching experience and public support of youth-led programs breathe new life into the involvement of Caribbean youth with ideas, conversation and action through resilience and innovation. Such initiatives include the AgriHack Talent Caribbean Programme, which encourages young people to develop computer applications that will be of practical use to the farming community, and the Guyana Solar Challenge – a national competition where leading professionals engage and educate youth between the ages of 12 and 26 about the benefits of renewable energy, and embolden them to harness their creative energies to raise awareness about the potential to deliver long-term economic benefits to the region. The legacy of Suriname depends on the innovation and resilience of the next generation of thinkers and doers, and for Dr. Soeknandan’s highest priority is to alleviate the burden of the country’s current financial crisis. In coming out of that, the sustainable aspect is very important for her homeland’s future. “I will say to the youth: invest in yourself, gain

knowledge, instant coffee is good, but if you make it yourself it will taste better,” she smiled. “You have to plan, and as a young CARICOM citizen, be aware that when you plan, it should be in a sustainable way. What can you do today that you cannot do tomorrow? I hope this COVID time is a real lesson: that human beings – no matter how advanced we are – some aspects of nature we need to have respect for. Life is precious.”

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