



In this feature, we present **Ruth Spencer**, Nominee, Energy Personality Award

In 2017, as part of CARICOM Energy Month, the CARICOM Secretariat organised three regional competitions:

- the **Energy Personality Award**, to recognize someone who has made, or is making, an exceptional contribution to a sustainable energy future in the Region;
- the **Young Energy Artist Competition**, for children aged 12 and under;
- the **Energy Month Youth Essay Competition**, for students in three categories: tertiary (ages 16-30), secondary (Forms 1-3 / Grade 7-9) and secondary (Forms 4-6 / Grade 10-13).

Entrepreneur and winner of the 2015 Energy Globe Award for Antigua and Barbuda, Ruth Spencer has spearheaded a movement favouring the adoption of solar energy, while at the same time promoting this energy conversion as a multi-faceted solution to the development problems faced by this two-island nation. Harnessing solar power is a means of adapting to climate change and embracing a green economy through a community-centred approach aimed at enhancing education, promoting good environmental behaviour and offering income-generating opportunities.

Using the funds of two grants from the Caribbean Export Development Agency to invest in a solar-power unit on the roof of her guesthouse, comprising both full apartments and studios, provided the stepping-stone for Ruth Spencer to become an advocate of solar power as a means of promoting development on a grassroots scale. Citing her personal benefits in terms of reducing the guesthouse’s electricity bill, Ms Spencer has launched an information campaign on a community level, so as to educate and involve people around her and contribute to the generalisation of solar photovoltaic (PV) panels as a viable solution to the country’s energy needs, which also contributes to a reduction of the greenhouse emissions generated by fossil fuels.



Pupils at the St. Anthony's Secondary School unload panels for their 14KWH system

Her own success in the inception and installation of a solar system designed to both function close to the sea and also withstand hurricane-force winds has led her to champion the cause of using sunshine, abundant in the Caribbean and costing nothing as an input, as a means of overcoming the barriers inflicted by a poverty-driven lack of access to electricity, namely schoolchildren unable to do their homework in the dark, or small businesses crippled by astronomical electricity bills that therefore halt job creation and entrepreneurial

opportunities. The challenge, though, remains that of effectively applying existing regulations and of educating the broader public about the win-win potential of using renewable energy sources.

Moving in this direction, Ms Spencer was instrumental in an Organisation of American States (OAS) grant of USD 40,000 being directed to the implementation of eight small-scale solar systems on community structures, chief among them churches of various denominations active in local development projects, but also a private school, an agro-processing centre and a



Installing the PV system at the Antigua and Barbuda Association of Persons with Disabilities

community centre for people living with disabilities. Despite generally being small 1-2KWh systems, these installations have allowed the beneficiaries to make important savings on their utility bills, which in certain cases have been channelled to finance other community-centred ventures, such as a hydroponic lettuce-growing operation using solar-powered water pumps or a refrigeration centre where local producers can bring their fresh produce and which resulted in the creation of a community marketplace on weekends. Antigua and Barbuda's

Department of the Environment provided cofinancing of USD 10,000.00 to supplement the grant from the OAS, thus demonstrating the support that the government provides to these initiatives.

As Ms Spencer herself points out *“it is the civil society groups who know the real needs on the ground ... and they must be strong and bold enough to advocate for their involvement and participation in local actions that impact and affect them and which benefit the people. There must be a level of trust built up for the synergies, connections and linkages to take place leading to their full participation and involvement in the process. This is how the local ownership and buying-in process takes place that allows implantation to come about and run smoothly.”*



Ruth Spencer is the winner of the 2015 Energy Globe Award for Antigua and Barbuda

The initiative aims to include and involve marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as single-parent households headed by women, unemployed youth and people living with disabilities, so that economic development brings about social inclusion. So far, it has led to breaking down mentality barriers towards the adoption of solar power solutions to energy needs and provided hands-on training for the people, especially the youth, involved in the actual installation of the solar systems. It is therefore to be hoped that her initial vision will be taken up by the younger generation and implemented in such a way that collateral benefits reverberate among those most in need of climate-adaptation solutions to entail income-generating jobs. Or, in her own words: *“As the people in the Caribbean become more knowledgeable and aware of our options and viable alternatives, the change will come by the people themselves*

pushing, for we have to make this happen; we have the free resources given by our Creator and it is for us to do so.”

Being currently employed as the National coordinator for the Global Environment Facility’s Small Grants Programme, Ms Spencer is in a position to share her experience and expertise and to provide co-benefits and access technical and financial assistance for greater outreach to the local community groups. While she works primarily at the grassroots level, Ms Spencer has also been given many opportunities to contribute to sustainable development nationally and regionally. For example, she has been selected to serve on several national committees, she is the Deputy Director of the Regional Energy for Sustainable Development (ESD) project and is a lead expert on a regional initiative on gender and sustainable energy spearheaded by the Caribbean Development Bank.