

IMPROVED FARMERS' ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORT CARIBBEAN ECONOMIES



WORKING FOR small commercial-oriented farmers in the Caribbean islands

WORKING TO improve food security by employment creation, income generation

WORKING WITH regional and local farmers' organizations, farmer-based organizations

WORKING THANKS TO EU, Italy



Whether the goal is to improve marketing of Irish potatoes in Jamaica, yam in Granada or taro in St Vincent and the Grenadines, market success depends on having a strong value chain and well-established farmer-market links. This is particularly true in the Caribbean, where countries previously focused on one or two export crops. As they came to recognize the need to diversify both crops and markets, they also recognized the need to set up new production and marketing channels. FAO, working in partnership with the Caribbean Farmers Network (CaFAN), a regional network of farmer organizations, supported nine Caribbean countries in their efforts to build their agribusiness capacities by encouraging farmers to think and plan before putting seed into the ground.

In St Vincent and the Grenadines, FAO supported the local CaFAN member, the Eastern Caribbean Trading and Agriculture Development Organization (ECTAD). At the time, ECTAD was new, with little experience working in regional or export markets. FAO offered

When the regional banana industry collapsed in the Caribbean in the past decade, farmers in St Vincent and the Grenadines took a proactive stance and increased their focus on the production and export of dasheen, a Caribbean variety of the starchy staple food taro. The new direction, which more than doubled farm-gate prices for dasheen, owed much of its success to an FAO project launched in 2008 to provide alternative income opportunities for commodity-dependent farmers. FAO worked with the Caribbean Farmers Network (CaFAN) to improve the professionalism and capacities of farmers' groups throughout the Caribbean. Today, thanks to the commercialization process promoted by the project, farmers in the region see and treat their farms as businesses. In turn, this has strengthened value chains and established stronger farmer-market links in nine Caribbean countries.

advice to help ECTAD improve its professionalism and its capacity to network with its members and provide information including details of support services. FAO's assistance included training sessions in production technologies, recordkeeping, cost-of-production calculations, marketing and post-

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harvest activities, along with moderated grower-buyer meetings that helped to increase trust and transparency along the value chain and led to agreement on steps needed to improve market supply.

As local farmers began marketing their dasheen through ECTAD and its market link with the United Kingdom, they participated in practical training sessions to improve production and learn how to organize and work through farmer groups. For example, they learned to grade and pack their own dasheen before sending it to ECTAD. All of this added up, with returns increasing by 100 percent.

INCREASED EXPORTS AND BETTER PRICES

Today, ECTAD has improved the services it provides to St Vincent and the Grenadines' taro farmers, advising them on how to coordinate and add quality and value to production, in order to command higher prices and secure a reliable export market. With its support, farmers from three of the main taro-producing areas came together and initiated regular meetings to develop their value chain.

The project also organized region-wide lessons-learned workshops and training courses, and encouraged ECTAD farmers to meet with other,

more experienced cooperatives and farmers' organizations, and learn from them. Thus, in addition to providing basic learning materials on marketing and agribusiness-related activities, the project also supported farmer-to-farmer visits, through which farmers could visit other countries. On these visits, they learned new production techniques and how other farmers solved problems such as start-up financing and post-harvest handling.

PRACTICAL AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

FAO also involved the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI) and government extension services.

They brought practical expertise and provided training on topics ranging from increasing yields through plant spacing to introducing field crates. The field crates added value to the produce by increasing shelf life, but also improved appearance, which increased consumer appeal.

No doubt the farmers' organizations have raised their marketing skills and increased their professionalism. With FAO's support, CaFAN has now expanded its reach from 7 to 15 countries, and membership in regional farmers' organizations has increased by 50 percent. In St Vincent and the Grenadines, more

than 700 producers now belong to ECTAD. In addition, ECTAD also has expanded its reach and now supports farmers in other areas of the island who wish to form producers groups.

Impact can also be seen at the policy level. In addition to working directly with participants in the field, FAO supported CaFAN members in establishing partnerships with national governmental agencies and ministries, thereby providing farmers with a voice in government policy decision-making. Farmers' organizations are now participating in regional fora to guide Caribbean food and nutrition planning.

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