



## Linking agriculture, food systems and nutrition: what's your perspective?

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***What is the role of farmers in improving nutrition along the food system? What support they need from other players (of the food system) in order to accomplish this task?***

One of the most critical public health problems in the Caribbean is related to food and nutrition. According to the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (CFNI), almost 60% of all deaths are in the form of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Over the past three decades there has been a dramatic rise in heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes, often directly related to obesity and poor eating patterns. But it is not only our physical health that is suffering, the economic burden of treating these NCDs alone accounts for over 66% of current expenditures on Public Health in the region.

This in part can be attributed to the deficit in the availability of regional food “staples” – specifically roots and tubers, vegetables, and legumes. These indigenous crops have excellent nutritional value and health benefits, yet the Caribbean diet is dominated by highly processed and refined imported foods. It is largely an issue of accessibility and attitude, and the Caribbean Farmers Network believes the solution lies in our ability to link agriculture to health and nutrition.

The vital role of farmers

The Caribbean Farmers Network (CaFAN) is a regional NGO comprised of farmers' organizations that collectively represent over 500,000 smallholder farmers across 15 Caribbean countries. Since 2002 with the support of the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA), CaFAN has been working to enhance Caribbean food and nutrition security, improve the quality of life for small farm communities, and assist these farmers to gain economic empowerment by repositioning agriculture through capacity building and the institutional strengthening of farmers' organizations.

Our extensive network, in collaboration with regional and international partners, is focused on producing nutritious indigenous foods not only to generate wealth for farmers, but also to contribute toward food availability and stabilizing food security systems.

With support from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United

Nations (FAO) under the EU's All ACP Commodities Programme, over the past few years CaFAN has implemented a project that successfully boosted the production of roots and tubers in four member countries. This was achieved through training and capacity building initiatives, sharing experiences and best practices, and identifying new market opportunities. Moreover, this project aimed to promote the consumption and integration of these crops into local diets and contribute to import substitution.

CaFAN has adopted an approach that encourages farmers to work in clusters. This cooperation will significantly increase farmers' ability to produce high quality, healthy, and nutritious food consistently, efficiently, and in the right volumes for the right cost. The benefits of this approach are evident in greater economies of scale in production, marketing, and value addition. Cross-border coordination within the network also allows smallholder agricultural producers to fill gaps in supply and demand in order to fulfill national and regional food requirements.

It is obvious that farmers have an irreplaceable role in the sustainability of our food systems. As a result, the needs of farmers are particularly vital in any attempt to achieve food and nutrition security across the region. CaFAN is committed to mobilizing financial, social, technological, and infrastructural resources to enable sustained public access to locally-produced, safe, high quality, and nutritious food commodities, but we also recognize that there is need for greater synergies and support from Ministries of Agriculture, other government sectors, and private institutions to accomplish this feat.

#### Support from the Regional Food and Nutrition Security Policy

One such effort to affect change has been the collaboration between CaFAN and the CARICOM Secretariat to draft the CARICOM Common Agricultural Policy (CCAPS), which features regional food and nutrition security as one of its key pillars.

This Regional Food and Nutrition Security Policy is based around a vision of domestic and regional agriculture as a foundation from which sustained national and regional development can be launched and maintained. It incorporates a fundamental understanding of the interconnected relationship that exists between food and nutrition, with the promotion of basic health, poverty reduction, environmental conservation and infrastructure development in the rural sector. By exploring risk mitigation strategies, it also takes into consideration the diverse economic and environmental realities increasing the vulnerability of the Caribbean small farm sector.

On a local level, small initiatives also have a big impact - getting youth involved in backyard gardening and supporting local farmers by shopping at community markets are examples of ways CaFAN aims to link agriculture to health and nutrition. Ultimately, we need to cooperatively address this critical issue with creative and innovative solutions that bridge the gap between how

and where we get our food.

#### The benefits of linking agriculture to health and nutrition

Shortening the distance between farmer and consumer and shifting consumption from processed imported foods to local, nutritious indigenous crops has endless health benefits. Enhancing production and creating new market opportunities will improve the livelihoods of farmers, and the financial position of national economies in countries heavily dependent on agricultural production will see a recovery. The environment will benefit from the creation of a local, seasonal food system less reliant on extensive industrial distribution channels responsible for harmful emissions. And by influencing the eating patterns of local populations from a young age, together we will encourage a widespread adoption of healthy, nutritious eating habits, thus reducing the prevalence of diet-related illness and non-communicable diseases.

Farmers play the most fundamental role in securing global access to affordable food, yet without properly responding to their needs in this volatile economic, social, and environmental landscape, we risk losing our source of indigenous crops. This is why policymakers, development institutions, and governments must prioritize support for smallholder agriculture. CaFAN's farmers have proven themselves to be resourceful, capable, and innovative in their field; they are not asking for a handout, just a cooperative effort to create a sustainable local food system.

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