



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, LAND AND FISHERIES

## Innovative Approach to Managing Risks and Facilitating Intra-Regional Trade during COVID-19 Pandemic in the Caribbean Region

A powerful tool to facilitate trade as a stimulus to expand agriculture production and enhance food and nutrition security in the COVID-19 emergency

Guide for the systematization of successful initiatives to address the COVID-19 public health pandemic impacts on agriculture and food security



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# Innovative Approach to Managing Risks and Facilitating Intra-Regional Trade during COVID-19 Pandemic in the Caribbean Region

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## 01 Name of Initiative

Innovative Approach to Managing Risks and Facilitating Intra-Regional Trade during COVID-19 Pandemic in the Caribbean Region.

## 02 Location of Initiative

This is an initiative developed and implemented among Trinidad and Tobago (T&T), St. Vincent & the Grenadines (SVG) and Grenada (GRN), Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the southern end of the Caribbean archipelago.

This initiative is led by Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (MALF) of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (GoRTT). The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (MALF) through the Plant Quarantine (PQ) Unit, has been championing this process through direct bi-laterals with counterpart Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, Rural transformation, Industry and Labour of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands of Grenada. The PQ Service is the first line of defense in keeping Trinidad and Tobago free of pests and diseases. Its role in facilitating fresh produce imports is central to moving away from paper-based, manual inspections to electronic forms and systems. Electronic systems are now critical to ensure continued trade in a public health pandemic, without compromising the regulations embedded in plant import permits, phytosanitary certificates and port and post-entry inspections of import/export cargo.





**ST. VINCENT and the  
GRENADINES**



**GRENADA**



**TRINIDAD &  
TOBAGO**

Several key stakeholders are involved in order to make this initiative operational and successful. Among the key agencies include:

### **Trinidad and Tobago**

- Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) TTBizlink, a Single Electronic Window (SEW) that conforms to international standards, offering businesses and individuals 24/7 access to applications for government's trade and business services and multiple partners via a single electronic platform at [www.ttbizlink.gov.tt](http://www.ttbizlink.gov.tt).
- Customs and Excise Division and Port Authority
- Other Stakeholders -Importers, Exporters, Brokers, Freight Forwarders, Farmers, Vendors etc

### **St. Vincent and the Grenadines**

- Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, Rural transformation, Industry and Labour
- Shipping (General and Maritime Agency, Admiral Bay II (Vessel) and farmers.

### **Grenada**

- Ministry of Agriculture and Lands
- Shipping Agents, Ocean Princess (Vessel) and farmers.

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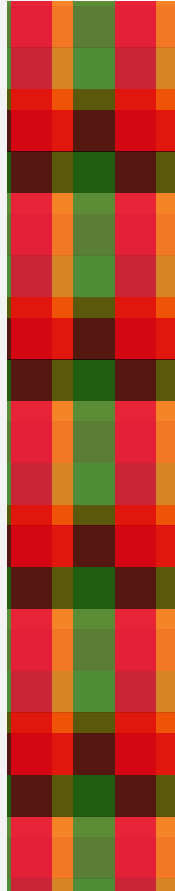
## Duration of the Initiative

The process to transition to an “electronic phytosanitary certificate” (ePhyto for short) was initiated in Trinidad and Tobago in 2015, and has been an on-going exercise, supported by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services (APHIS). The emergence of the COVID-19 and the accompanying containment measures such as economic lock down, border closures, and restrictions in free movement, forced the acceleration of this initiative to move to a digital system for the issuance of phytosanitary certificates. Since early April 2020, the PQS Unit and the MTI initiated efforts to develop and issue ePhyto certificates, to eliminate all paper import permits and mitigate some of the risks associated with the provision of PQ services.



Historically, there have existed vibrant trade between Trinidad and Tobago and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada in fresh agricultural produce through inter-island vessels offloading at the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Jetty, Queens Wharf, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. This trade has been conducted primarily with use of paper copies of plant import permits and original paper copies of phytosanitary certificates. These paper-based documents accompany the consignments and are physically checked and inspected on arrival at the port of entry (Port-of-Spain). These operations would normally, at any point in time, involve approximately sixty (60) persons, gathered and working in close proximity to each other. These include plant quarantine inspectors, customs officials, immigration, traders (importers, buyers, market vendors etc.), brokers and customs clerks. Documentary screening (import permit and phytosanitary certificates) are conducted on site for both imports/exports.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic, physical distancing measures were instituted by the GoRTT for workplace arrangements. This applied fully to border management officials to protect frontline workers (port workers, plant quarantine staff etc.). New measures and changes to daily operations at the CARICOM Wharf were necessary



to keep the PQ offices operational and ensure continued trade flows.



In most CARICOM countries, agriculture was explicitly listed as an 'essential service and industry' under the Public Health Ordinances revised for COVID-19. Farmers therefore continued to produce with the expectation that their usual markets, including the Trinidad and Tobago



export market, would continue to be available. During the first week of the lockdown and border closures, there was uncertainty with respect to how to proceed. Similar COVID-19 lock-down measures in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada also challenged the authorities in these countries in providing their exporters with original paper copies of phytosanitary certificates. Concerns about the possibility of trade disruptions required a quick, but sustainable response. Therefore, this initiative, in addition to allowing for the process of digitizing the phytosanitary certificates for greater traceability, also permitted protection against transmission of the virus amongst persons, while ensuring maintenance of the requisite strict quarantine conditions for goods at the ports.

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## Purpose of the Initiative

Exceptional measures, including the rapid activation of ePhyto certificates were undertaken to avoid delays and disruptions in fresh produce trade flows between Trinidad and Tobago and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada. This formed part of a GoRTT effort to secure the supply of food and facilitate trade (import and export) with specific reference to plants and plant products during the extreme measures taken to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

- i. Early identification of a problem: free movement of inter-island vessels supplying fresh agricultural produce to Trinidad and Tobago was temporarily disrupted due to border closure measures announced the week of 16 March.
  - » On 1st April, the usual CARICOM vessel from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada did not dock at the Port of Spain (Trinidad and Tobago) port on Wednesday as it usually did. This break in schedule was flagged by the vendors (middlemen) who play an important role in domestic agricultural marketing. However, a different CARICOM vessel docked later that same week, offloading fresh agricultural produce. Subsequently, vessel arrivals became 'ad hoc' as all parties readjusted to the new COVID-19 induced operating realities.
  
- ii. Bilateral coordination actions between representatives of the ministries of agriculture:
  - » Direct involvement of the Ministers of Agriculture of Trinidad and Tobago and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines: The Agriculture Ministers of Trinidad and Tobago and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines had urgent bilateral talks to arrive at practical solutions.
  - » The International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) Contact Points for both Saint Vincent and



the Grenadines and Grenada were also contacted with respect to rapidly activating electronically exchanged Phytosanitary (ePhyto) certificates. Trinidad and Tobago committed to accept and receive electronic [PDF] copies in lieu of original phytosanitary certificates/import permits for consignments of regulated plants and plant products.

- iii. Rapid activation of the ePhyto system to facilitate trade flows: Trinidad and Tobago proposed changes in the requirement for the original paper phytosanitary certificates and plant import permits to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada. These changes were suggested, in part, to avoid unnecessary delays at entry points for: (a) Trinidad and Tobago exports of plant products to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada, and (b) for Trinidad and Tobago imports of plant products from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada.

» This involved:

- designating and enabling specific email addresses for the exchange of the e-certification (phytosanitary certificates for imports/exports): dramroop@gov.tt and plantquarantine.centeno@gov.tt
- scanning (pdf) and emailing the Phytosanitary Certificate from an official email address (IPPC Contact Point or as advised, for exports/Imports) by the trading partner country's

National Plant Protection Organization (NPPO). Clear and specific guidelines are provided and must be met for the e-documents to be valid and acceptable. Once the emergency is over, importers must present the original documents.

- prohibiting persons onboard incoming vessels from disembarking and having any contact with customs and border control agents, plant quarantine officers and others involved in receiving and clearing the consignments. Vessels were required to have on board, forklifts to offload all consignments from the vessel to the port surface with minimal human interaction and contact. A forklift from the Trinidad and Tobago port would then transport offloaded product to also avoid/minimize the level of contact.
  - design of virtual coordination and random inspection mechanisms to strengthen the electronic certification initiative.
  - Activation of the ePhyto system.
- » On 21 April, the Vessel from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines docked at the CARICOM Wharf, Port of Spain with a range of root crops (yams, dasheens, eddoes, tannia, sweet potatoes), plantains and bananas, ginger and turmeric and dry husked coconuts. This shipment represented a first in the use of the ePhyto submitted by Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to Trinidad and Tobago, making it easier to facilitate trade and expedite clearance.

This is, and will continue to be, a win-win situation for various stakeholders, from public sector agencies, to private sector traders (importers, exporters, brokers, freight forwarders) farmers and agricultural vendors, and ultimately, consumers in Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada.



- **Food vendors and consumers benefitted from** assurance of continued flows of inter-island trade in fresh agricultural produce and continued availability and access to these agricultural products during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- **Shippers, importers, exporters, brokers, freight forwarders, benefitted from faster consignment processing in Trinidad and Tobago,** due to the 'pre-screening' of all documentary requirements (phytosanitary certificates/plant import permits) received electronically from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada. Pre-arrival processing also allowed for a higher level of release for low risk consignments.
- **MALF benefitted from enhanced risk management systems and improved internal coordination.** The systems implemented at the Trinidad and Tobago border, combined with random inspections to confirm compliance with the Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada requirements, enhanced capacity for effective risk management. Internal coordination was enhanced through a strategic decision to coordinate all service requests for export certification for Trinidad and Tobago commodity exports to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada from one central coordinating office, the Research Division (Centeno). This enabled MALF to maximize the limited human and financial resources for coordination and to mitigate unnecessary delays and interaction with

clients and a range of employees within a short time frame.

- **GoRTT services benefitted from increased internal and external border agency collaboration** enabled by information technology tools (Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.) to engage internal and external agencies (Ministry of Trade/TTBizlink; Customs and Excise; Importers/Exporters/Brokers/Port Authority). This provided an opportunity for smooth implementation of expedited clearances of imports, certification of exports and avoided duplication of efforts. It also allowed for standardization of measures to be adopted at the ports of entry by all border management officials for safe handling of cargo to reduce the risk of contracting the virus by practicing the recommended precautionary measures.
- **Intra-regional trade and regional integration will benefit from** increased collaboration through engagement between Trinidad and Tobago PQ Unit and exporters of commodities to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada to undertake pre-assessment/inspection of the items to be exported. For example; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has about 44 active “higglers” (fresh produce traders) who ply their trade in agricultural commodities, between several islands in the Caribbean. These “higglers” have relationships with a wide number of farmers who provide them with multiple produce, but mainly roots and tubers, plantains and bananas, shipped weekly. Trinidad and Tobago is an important



regional market for about 21 active Saint Vincent and the Grenadines ‘higglers.’

This e-Phyto system could be rapidly activated because of advances made by Trinidad and Tobago between 2018-2019 to the Import Permit Module (TTBizLink). This was upgraded to facilitate a faster process from review to approval and delivery to the client. Trinidad and Tobago has achieved a 100% online processing of plant import permits. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada officials had also received prior training on the ePhyto system in June 2019, under the USDA/APHIS Greater Caribbean Safeguarding Initiative (GCSI) project with IICA to improve efficiency in trade of plants and plant products.

The rapid activation of the ePhyto certificates has been a major accomplishment in improving the “Ease of Doing Business’ in Trinidad and Tobago, supporting the implementation of the World Trade Organization Trade Facilitation Agreement. The specific measurable results are summarised as follows:

- **Enabled ICTs for trade**, in compliance with best practices, through:
  - » digitized plant import permits (Trinidad and Tobago) processed and transmitted (electronically) to importers for commodities originating Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada (about 50 per country),
  - » digitized phytosanitary certificates (about 15-30 per week) now sent electronically (scanned and e-mailed) for both imports and exports of commodities originating in Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada
  - » application of Mobile Inspection Service (on TTBizLink) which enables MALF PQS inspectors to inspect imports at the main Port of entry and undertake all relevant processing on tablet devices procured by the MTI, rather than paper forms and associated paper checklists. This allows for real-time decisions with immediate clearance of goods after inspection, leading to lower costs to the public and private sectors, greater transparency and

accountability, improved knowledge management and implementation of standardized procedures.

- **Reductions in:**

- » processing time for Plant Import Permits, from 14 days to 3 - 5 days, with the advances made between 2018-2019 and now, to 1-3 days, due to the more recent feature of 'e-Signatures', which comprises the signature of the approving officer and the MALF PQ Stamp, with the approved permit emailed to the client, removing any need for visiting the office.
- » time for clearance of commodities at port of entry from 2- 3 hours to 30 minutes (linked to the Mobile Inspection Service).
- » the workload for processing import permits from 6 months to one year, due to the extension to the period of validity of plant import permits.
- » the need for the validation functions required by PQ personnel at Queens Wharf and possibilities of fraudulent documentation.
- » the number of persons required at Queens Wharf to conduct the necessary clearances or export certifications, from 5-7 persons to 2 persons

- **Improvements in:**

- » security in transmission of documentation.
- » planning for the arrival and clearance of plants

and plant products. The documents were received ahead of the arrival of the consignment thereby allowing for ease of clearance.

**Fig.1: Trade Flows, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines > T&T: January – April 2020**

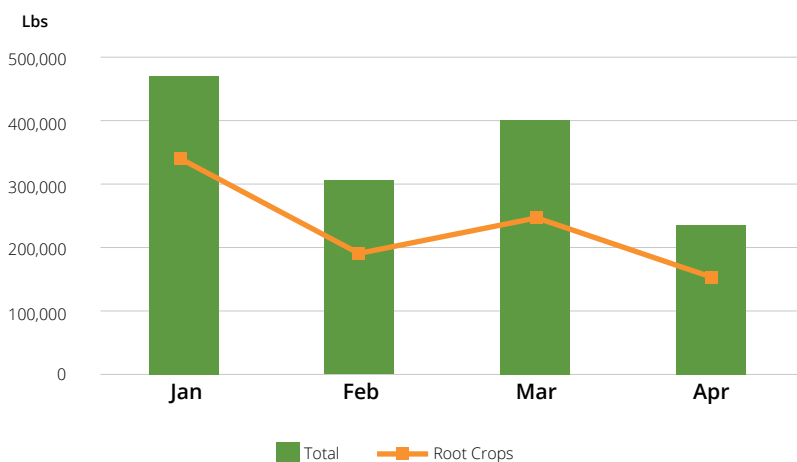
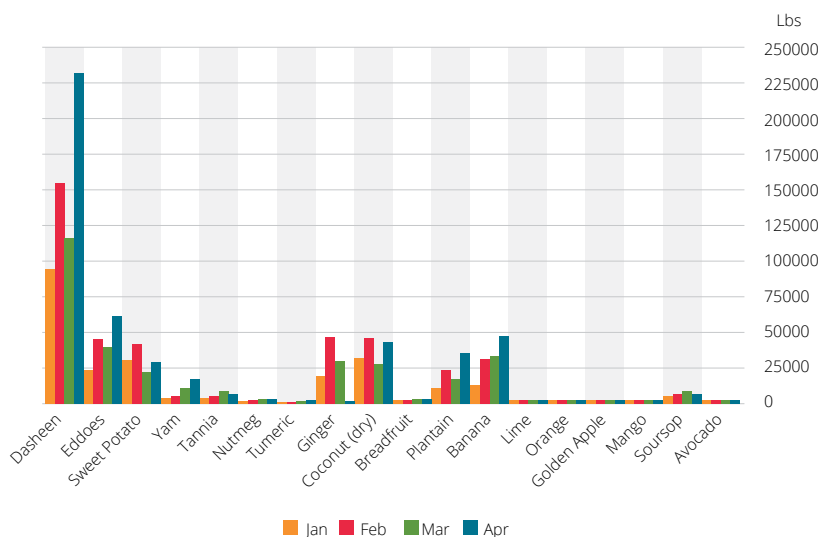
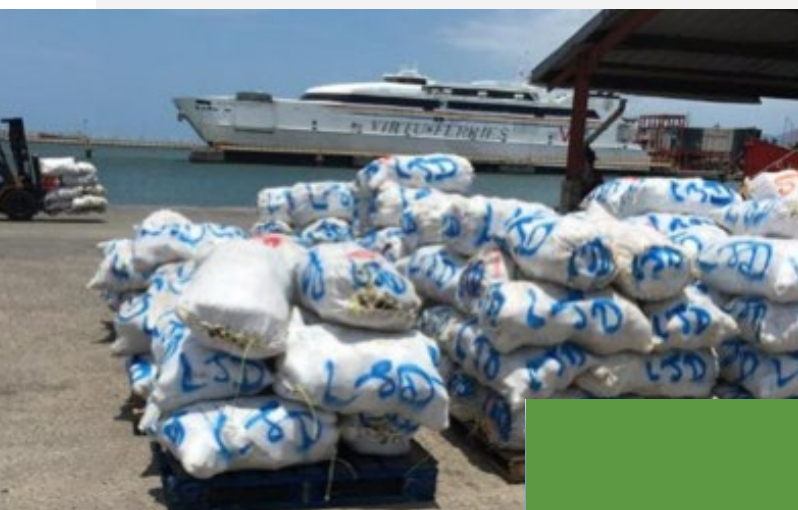
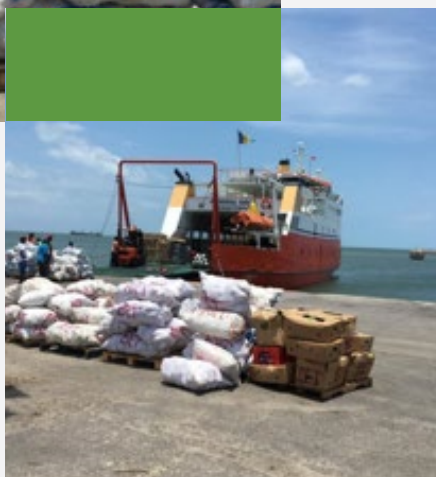


Figure 1 shows the trends in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines exports of fresh agricultural commodities to Trinidad and Tobago over the January to April 2020 period. While data for the comparative period for 2019 would be instructive, the almost 50% drop in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines exports in April, from January, could be seen as a COVID-19 impact, led by a 42% drop in the volumes of root crops. Root crops account for roughly 70% of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines's total fresh agricultural produce exports to Trinidad and Tobago, led by dasheen (roughly 60% of total root crop volume), followed by eddoes and sweet potatoes.



Offloading of Fresh Agricultural Produce from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on the CARICOM Wharf at the Port of Port of Spain

**Source:** Deanne Ramroop, MALF, April 2020



Trinidad and Tobago is ranked 105 among 190 economies in the ease of doing business, according to the latest World Bank annual ratings. The rank of Trinidad and Tobago remained unchanged at 105 in 2019 from 105 in 2018.<sup>1</sup> As part of its thrust to create a business-enabling environment to attract and retain investors, the GoRTT embarked on a number of institutional, legal and administrative reforms to improve the Ease of Doing Business in Trinidad and Tobago.

A further advance to the ePhyto system was achieved when, as at 11 May 2020, the MALF announced that *“Plant Quarantine Service (PQS) Unit will be processing and transmitting all approved Plant Import Permits to its clients electronically. This measure is in line with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago’s national guidelines issued to safeguard the health and safety of the nation’s citizenry in respect of the global COVID-19 pandemic. While this measure will enable Business Continuity in the current circumstances, this will remain in effect beyond the pandemic.”* The announcement also confirmed that the *“application which will be processed within three (3) working days. This intervention is not only in line with physical distancing recommendations intended to minimize the spread of COVID-19 but will further enhance the speed of delivery of Plant Import Permits by streamlining the business processes of PQS.”*

1 | Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/trinidad-and-tobago/ease-of-doing-business>

Trinidad and Tobago will continue with the procedures as outlined and has already initiated the process to further improve use of ePhyto through the IPPC's Generic National System (GeNS), which is open for use by countries, to reduce manual paperwork in trade, and reduce forgery of such certificates by unscrupulous traders.

The Minister of Agriculture of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, who is the current Chair of the CARICOM Task Force established in the wake of COVID-19, to develop the CARICOM Agri-Food and Emergency Plan on 24 March, called his colleague, Minister of Agriculture in Trinidad and Tobago "a hero for St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago" for facilitating demand for his country's agriculture exports amidst COVID-19 fears. Both Ministers agree that this initiative is one which can be replicated throughout the Region to facilitate quicker and increased intra-regional trade.



Offloading of Fresh Agricultural Produce from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on the CARICOM Wharf at the Port of Port of Spain

**Source:** Deanne Ramroop, MALF, April 2020

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## Funding Needs

This initiative can form the basis for the modernization of quarantine services to increase the traceability of Agricultural Health and Food Safety measures in a comprehensive manner, benefiting the Region in the control and improvement in competitiveness of intra and inter regional trade in the medium term.



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## Associated Legislation

Plant Protection Act, Chap. 63:56: Trinidad and Tobago is currently reviewing the Plant Protection Act, Chapter 63:56 in conjunction with the Plant Health Model Bill (CARICOM). This will allow for Trinidad and Tobago to revise its legislative framework for plant health in several areas inclusive of the systems in accordance with international agreements and obligations.



There is the potential for replication as trade is being successfully conducted and with a reduction in the processing time. There are various phases/steps some of which do not require exorbitant resources (human and financial). The MALF is currently reviewing the list of regulated plants and plant products with a view to the removal of commodities requiring import permits consistent with International Standards: Commodities (processed) were recommended for the removal of the issuance of import permits (minimal plant health risk). This is in keeping with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations and the International Standard on Phytosanitary Measures (ISPM 32).

The national authorities in the three countries involved in this initiative, have recognized the institutional support provided to the countries by some of its development partners. There is broad recognition of the importance of using information technology to strengthen phytosanitary systems in particular in the area of PQ systems. As such, several regional partners have been sensitizing countries to the ePhyto system by which phytosanitary certificates are produced and exchanged electronically between NPPOs. The Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) in particular, through its collaboration with the USDA APHIS PPQ under the GCSI, sensitized 24 professionals from the Eastern Caribbean and Regional agencies to the ePhyto System in June 2019. This was achieved

through the hosting of a workshop which introduced the concept of an ePhyto system and processes involved in its development and implementation. The workshop was significant for harmonizing and improving the efficiency of information exchange at borders in the Eastern Caribbean. Follow-up actions are being conducted to facilitate the adoption of the system. Emphasis will also be placed on working with IICA and other regional partners to explore opportunities for scaling up the interventions and to replicate them throughout the Caribbean Region.

## 15 Links

- 2020 (May 11); Paperless, digitized import permit system in Trinidad and Tobago [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=2900623753358043&id=788716687882104](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2900623753358043&id=788716687882104)
- 2020 (May 10); Newsdat.co.tt: <https://newsday.co.tt/2020/05/10/import-permits-no-longer-needed-to-buy-seeds/>
- 2020 (March 24); St.Vincent & the Grenadines News784: <https://news784.com/local-news/demand-for-svgs-agriculture-exports-increases-amidst-covid-19-fears/>
- 2019; Ramroop, D. V. The Trade Facilitation and the WTO SPS Agreement: The Relationship Presented at the Twelfth Meeting of the Caribbean Plant Health Directors' Forum, Nassau, Bahamas. (e-presentation)

- 2018 (Mar 22); TrinidadExpress.com: [https://trinidadexpress.com/features/local/agriculture-ministry-reduces-processing-time-for-plant-import-permits/article\\_09631668-2dda-11e8-8b30-afbac1fa0f4b.html](https://trinidadexpress.com/features/local/agriculture-ministry-reduces-processing-time-for-plant-import-permits/article_09631668-2dda-11e8-8b30-afbac1fa0f4b.html)
- 2018; Ramroop, D.V. CPHD Success Stories: TBizLink – Single Electronic Window (SEW), Trinidad and Tobago. Presented at the Eleventh Meeting of the Caribbean Plant Health Directors’ Forum, Montego Bay, Jamaica. (e-presentation)
- 2018; Ramroop, D. V. CPHD Success Stories: Trinidad and Tobago Import Requirements - Categorization of commodities according to their pest risk. Presented at the Eleventh Meeting of the Caribbean Plant Health Directors’ Forum, Montego Bay, Jamaica. (e-presentation) <http://www.cphdforum.org/members/index.php/2018/07/16/cphd-11th-meeting/>
- 2017 (October 03); FAO News & Events: Online Permits highlighted by the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations <https://www.ippc.int/en/news/trinidad-and-tobago-launches-new-online-application-form-for-permits-to-import-plant-products/>
- 2016 (October 13); News (video clip) <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=news+on+ttbizlink&docid=608022967743940031&mid=1FAFB555138BEDD6CDAE1FAFB555138BEDD6CDAE&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>