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Food Security in the Caribbean

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Colaboradores

Duncan Turnbull (/taxonomy/term/142)

For decades the Caribbean has been **over-reliant** on expensive **food imports**. The World Bank estimates between **80-90%** of all food consumed in the region comes from abroad, and only three Caribbean countries (**Guyana, Belize** and **Haiti**) produce more than **50%** of their own food.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities across the board, including in employment, housing, healthcare and food security.”

The **COVID-19** pandemic has **exacerbated** existing **inequalities** across the board, including in

employment, housing, healthcare and food security. It is estimated that there are now **2.7 million “food-insecure”** people in the English-speaking Caribbean, and according to the third round of the *CARICOM COVID-19 Food Security and Livelihoods Impact Survey*, “71% of respondents observe higher than usual **food prices**” [link (<https://www.wfp.org/publications/caribbean-covid-19-food-security-and-livelihoods-impact-survey-round-3-february-2021>)].

According to that survey, the burden is disproportionately felt by **low-income** householders: 68% **reduced** their food **consumption**, 40% struggled with food stocks, and, as the results indicated, this part of society is “much more likely to meet their food needs at the expense of **selling productive** assets and **cutting spending** on other priorities such as health and education”.

The impact also disproportionately cuts across other demographics. For example, only **7%** of Spanish-speaking respondents in Trinidad and Tobago had more than a week's worth of food stocks, compared to **54%** of English speakers. Spanish speakers in the country (many of whom are **migrants** from Venezuela) are comparatively reliant on informal/casual labour for income and thus faced significantly contracted incomes at a time of rising food prices.

The pandemic has highlighted the **fragility** of **regional supply chains**. Sea freight **costs** and **delays** increased, the cold-storage chain was **under-pressure**, and farmers reported a **lack of supplies**. None of this was new – the region suffers frequent disruption from hurricanes – but after months of vastly **reduced tourism** (and tourist dollars), foreign reserves dwindled, and **food prices** became a serious and prolonged **concern** for much of the population.

“Solving [the challenges to achieve zero-hunger] requires redesigning the Caribbean food supply-chain in a way that considers water, energy and food security in the same breath.”

Looking forward, the Caribbean **population** and **income** per capita are expected to **grow substantially** in the next 20 years. Yet the UN's *Sustainable Development Report 2020* (https://www.uma.es/smart-campus/navegador_de_ficheros/SmartUMA/descargar/2020_sustainable_development_report.pdf) warns of “significant **challenges** remaining” or “major challenges remaining” for each Caribbean state's efforts to **achieve** their **goal** of “zero hunger”.

Solving this problem requires **redesigning** the Caribbean food **supply-chain** in a way that considers water, energy and food security in the same breath. These topics are intricately related in terms of **synergies**, **linkages** and **trade-offs**. Water is a finite resource yet both agriculture and energy depend heavily on it; tackling the food security challenge necessitates **efficiency measures** to reduce **water** and **energy** consumption yet simultaneously increasing yields and nutrition. However, given the wide

variation in environmental, economic and technological **systems** in the **Caribbean**, both policy and technical interventions will look different across the region. For example, **water is not distributed evenly** within the Caribbean: Antigua and Barbuda has around 600 cubic meters (cbm) renewable freshwater resources per inhabitant per year, compared to over 350,000cbm per inhabitant per year in Guyana [[Link \(https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0360544219325198?token=8098030F06E880045C4F53582B07AB10AB9C90F093627CE27EAF5747&originRegion=us-east-1&originCreation=20210408192211\)](https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0360544219325198?token=8098030F06E880045C4F53582B07AB10AB9C90F093627CE27EAF5747&originRegion=us-east-1&originCreation=20210408192211)].

Until now, the Caribbean is predominately a **raw material producer** and in recent years the region has largely grown **crops** that are either in **structural decline** (such as tobacco and sugar) or simple crops that require little or **no processing** (such as bananas and sweet potatoes). Exporting unprocessed primary products means the region captures less of the value-chain, thereby reducing **local revenues** and new **job opportunities** and skills **training**. It also means **farmers** are more **exposed** to raw commodity **prices** as they have no differentiated product.

Therefore, leaders in the Caribbean agriculture sector must shift to encompass greater **vertical integration**. There will be a pivot to **value-add crops**, construction of processing facilities, and a focus on exporting finished products. This requires **investment** in internationally certified **food facilities**, cold-chain **distribution**, and building **human capacity** across the sector. Careful consideration must be given to **water management**, both in the **agriculture** and the **processing** legs of the industry. **Micro-grids**, powered by **renewable energy**, will increasingly provide localised and consistent power to island communities, and can be strategically positioned next to large industrial customers (such as food processing facilities) but also service **dispersed** residential communities. Large-scale farmers will grow alongside smallholder farmers, both selling into the same processing facility and thereby opening up **new markets** for **smallholders**.

“A more expansive Guyanese agriculture sector positively contributes to the Caribbean food security balance abroad, and helps Guyana diversify its economy and avoid the resource curse back home.”

Guyana – the Caribbean’s **fastest growing economy** – has all the ingredients to **be the breadbasket for the region**. It has rich agricultural **traditions**, fertile **soils**, excellent **climate** and plentiful **land**. Moreover, it has the ingredients to be a **processing powerhouse**: high availability of **freshwater**, a young **workforce**, an under-capacity **port** with regular routes to the Caribbean and North American markets, and a promising outlook for micro-grid **renewable energy** solutions. With the billions of dollars of **international investment** currently flowing into the nation (as part of the recent **oil** discoveries), the nation is in a **critical stage** of development. A more expansive Guyanese agriculture sector positively

contributes to the **Caribbean food security balance** abroad, and helps **Guyana** diversify its economy and avoid the resource curse back home.



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