

# APP Thematic Feature No. 4

Intra-ACP Agriculture Policy Programme (APP) Caribbean Action, with funding by the European Union under the 10th European Development Fund (EDF)



Intra-ACP APP Caribbean Action

## Examining the Importance, Interest and Engagement of Youth in Caribbean Agriculture and Exploring Actions to Further Empower Them

Ask any child in grade two what they want to be when they grow up and you will get some fairly standard answers; a doctor, a fireman, a soccer player, or perhaps even a superhero. Rarely do you hear farmer.

With an aging farming population, challenges in agriculture due to climate change and competition from global imports, it will be challenging to meet the expected 70% increase in demand for food by 2050. If the Caribbean is going to keep up, we need to engage the bright minds and innovative spirits of our youth.

Michael Bowleg didn't know exactly what he wanted to do when he was a child, but after starting a garden with his mom at the age of 12, he was hooked.



Michael Bowleg, Aquaponics Manager at the Center for Sustainable Development, The Island School, on the island of Eleuthera in The Bahamas. (Photo: Michael Bowleg)

## YES! Youth Are Interested, Engaged and Ready to Get Agriculture Moving

"We grew tons of watermelons", he said when asked why he became involved in agriculture. "We had so much we gave melons to neighbours, family, and friends. The sense of pride that I felt from growing a product that I can eat in my own back yard, not having to buy it at a food store was a special feeling. It was that special experience that I feel promoted me towards becoming involved in the agricultural and food production sector."

This feature highlights the importance of attracting youth to careers and entrepreneurial opportunities in agriculture. It also illustrates the fact that youth are indeed interested by introducing several enthusiastic, committed, young agripreneurs. It tells their stories which reflect passion for an often under-rated and under estimated industry. Finally, this feature examines the important work of the Caribbean Action under the Agriculture Policy Programme (APP) to support youth in this vital industry, and the continued focus that is required to ensure the future success for agriculture in the Region.

### Important

In the forward to an IICA-CTA 2012 publication, 'Choices: Caribbean Agriculture Our Way', Steve Maximay admits that he used to view farming as a poor career choice for young people. "Back then", he says, "I suggested that to choose a career in agriculture was to publicly admit that you were not bright enough for the glamour professions."

He has a different view point today. "Agriculture and food production should not be about occupations of last resort", he writes. "There are many bright, well-educated, unheralded young people and seniors choosing to earn a very comfortable living from the provision of agricultural goods and services."

A 2012 'Institute for Development Study' suggests that this positive perspective on agriculture as a profession has not yet made its way into the general youth population. Jennifer Leavy and Naomi Hossain interviewed 1500 people in 10 countries and found that young people wanted formal sector employment and modern urban lifestyles instead of the rural, entrepreneurial life of a farmer.

A concerted effort to determine and document the percentage of youth involved in agriculture in the Caribbean, or what percentage of agricultural enterprises are led by or employ youth, is yet to be undertaken. A 2010 FAO/CDEMA study puts the number at 3.2%. However, an APP Baseline study carried out in 2014 puts youth participation in the industry at less than one percent.

Many plans and projects are underway in the Region to build resiliency into Caribbean agriculture; addressing climate change adaptation, improving crop varieties and facilitating access to financing are just a few. Including youth in those plans is a must to ensure the sectors health and survival.



Youth planting at the Belle Vue Farmers Cooperative in Saint Lucia.  
(Photo: Belle Vue Farmers Cooperative)

We cannot afford for the industry to shrink as the current farming population ages. The Region does not boast mega-farms, which produce mega-tonnes of food from one business. Instead, small family farms characterize the Caribbean industry. Agro-processing is also underdeveloped in the Region, which limits options for creating value-added products.

There is hope on the horizon though. Rather than look at all of these factors as negatives, there are youth in the Caribbean who see them as opportunities; opportunity to capture a large part of the market that is available to them; opportunity to apply exciting innovations and technologies to grow the sector; and opportunity to help build a vibrant and important industry in support of Caribbean well-being.

"Agriculture in all its dimensions, is once again being promoted as a viable career choice, an under-exploited investment opportunity and an industry of strategic importance to national and regional security", wrote Diana Francis in her introduction to 'Choices: Caribbean AgriCulture Our Way'. Diana is the Officer-in-Charge of the APP PMU. Her passion for supporting youth in agriculture is tangible.

"The concept of sustainability rests heavily on the issue of 'for future generations'", she says. "These future generations emerge from the youth of today. Therefore, it stands to reason that the policies, platforms and actions that we, the current crop of senior leaders, planners, professionals and entrepreneurs, put in place now, are intended to allow and enable the 'future generations' to continue and build on the development process. To effectively do this, the youth, who make up the future generation of leaders, planners, professionals and entrepreneurs, must be part of and invested in the process, from now on."

## Interested

Ms. Francis notes that for decades the Region has lamented the 'lack of interest', 'lack of involvement' and 'lack of engagement' of youth in agriculture. There is a long held view that due to the drudgery of farming, and its associated stigma to the uneducated, unskilled and unambitious in society, that youth are not and will not be interested. "However, farming" she says, "has advanced in systems, technologies and practices that act as a serious pull factor for today's youth. There are several examples in every country of the Caribbean that show that youth have embraced these advances, have become themselves, home-grown innovators, finding solutions through their own applied research, trials and error, to overcome some of the challenges they face, and excel in their chosen agri-enterprise, including farming."

## Engaged in Aquaponics

Michael Bowleg is one of those youth that has embraced technology advances in agriculture and is excited about applying them for the betterment of the industry.

“Living in a small island developing state”, he says, “has allowed me to be exposed to an array of sustainability issues, primarily those affiliated with food security, as The Bahamas is heavily reliant upon foreign imports where more than 80% of food is imported. The need for good and healthy locally produced food is not only apparent but should be in the forefront of everyone’s mind. Personally, the ability for me to not only be able to have the opportunity to work directly in aquaponics but to also spread the word on its benefits and how it can be utilized in the agriculture industry to sustainably produce food is rewarding”, he said.



Michael Bowleg at work. (Photo: Michael Bowleg)

Michael has been the aquaponics manager at the Center for Sustainable Development at The Island School on the island of Eleuthera in The Bahamas for the past two years. According to [aquaponicssource.com](http://aquaponicssource.com), aquaponics is basically the marriage of aquaculture (raising fish) and hydroponics (the soil-less growing of plants). The system grows fish and plants together. The fish waste provides an organic food source for the growing plants and the plants in turn purify the water, allowing for limited monitoring and measuring, reduced land use and no requirements for environmentally harmful fertilizers.

As part of his duties, Michael manages a 20,000 gallon aquaponics system, co-advises a research class and teaches educational programmes about sustainable food production and aquaponics, and how they can benefit in supporting green food production on a small island like the Bahamas. He is passionate about the future of agriculture and food security on his home island.

“For agriculture to build traction in The Bahamas it must start with education and giving persons a reason to care

not only what they consume but where it is produced, how it is produced and who is affected in the production process”, he says. He admits that farming has gained a negative connotation amongst the younger generation in his country and that needs to change. “I hope, as a young Bahamian, to lead a paradigm shift and influence that change in the food production sector in The Bahamas; to strive for a more food secure nation, effecting change on the local and national level. I view attempting to create that change as my greatest challenge.”

## Engaged in Agriculture

Food security is also important to Raveen Ramtahaling. His business started as a hobby with his father. They wanted to have a safe, reliable food source for their family and so they built a greenhouse. When friends and extended family found out about their healthy, local veggies they started to buy from them, and they kept buying.

“We had to build another greenhouse”, says Raveen, “and still that was not enough, so we expanded. We now have seven greenhouses, have expanded to commercial sales and are planning our fourth and fifth expansion programmes.”

No longer a hobby, Raveen now runs Spirits Grun2 N.V, a horticultural company located in the Lelydorp district of Wanica, Suriname. The mandate of the company is to grow fruits and vegetables in a safe and sustainable way that guarantees continuity and quality for consumers at an affordable price. Today, they use both open field and greenhouses in the cultivation of their crops and, their customer list has grown from friends and family to now include supermarkets, butcheries and corporate clients such as, international franchise hotels and restaurants. Raveen is convinced that agriculture can be an extremely viable and attractive opportunity for Caribbean youth.



Spirits Grun2 N.V. operations in the Lelydorp district of Wanica, Suriname.

“Youth need to know how big the profits in agriculture can be and that the modern way of agriculture is not as it once was”, he says. “But, the first thing that youth should learn is how to efficiently run a business.” He stresses the importance of understanding basic finance and financial options, as well as labour and human resource issues. “If you don’t understand the basic rules, you will get frustrated and lose your motivation”, he says. “To be successful in agriculture you should have a lot of patience and be prepared for failures...you must keep investing in your business and in yourself.”

And, Raveen is motivated to do exactly that. “Agriculture is a business that counts for the future”, he says, “especially in the Caribbean. We have to feed more mouths everyday with less resources”, and to Raveen, that should be motivation enough for the youth of the Caribbean to get involved.

### Engaged in Agro-processing

Vanessa Grootfaam is also from Suriname, and though it wasn’t a motivation to feed other people that brought her into an agriculture related business, it was the desire to help. Vanessa is a hairdresser by trade. When a good friend of hers became ill and started to lose her hair, Vanessa started looking for solutions.



Vanessa Grootfaam preparing her organic hair products. (Photo: Vanessa Grootfaam)

“I wanted to know what I could do to help her get her lustrous hair back,” she said. “I started to read about the benefits of natural products such as onion, garlic and aloe vera. I even consulted a chemist to explain to me what dangers a lot of chemicals can do to your hair.”

That is what motivated Vanessa to begin working with farmers who grow herbs. She started out by making

organic hair products and then added smoothies to her line of products. “The most rewarding part to me is when I see that people get their hair back and are happy again, and when they have a healthy lifestyle by eating nutritious food”, she said.

Vanessa never imagined that she would become involved in agro-processing however she has always wanted to become a famous entrepreneur. “I have always kept that dream alive”, she says, “and I foresee a bright future. With young people becoming involved in agriculture, it means the creation of jobs and a country that can import less and export more.”

### Empowered

These are but a few encouraging stories of how the future of Caribbean agriculture could look. Determined, creative, hard-working, dedicated and passionate are just a few words that can be used to describe these professionals and agri-preneurs. They have chosen a challenging yet rewarding career path that can have long-lasting impacts on the health of the Caribbean people and economy, and they deserve some help.



Brainstorming business ideas at the Agri-CEBO workshop. (Photo: APP)

In 2011 a joint project was carried out by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and International Movement of Catholic Agricultural and Rural Youth (MIJARC) on ‘Facilitating Access of Rural Youth to Agricultural Activities’. The project identified six principal challenges to youth becoming involved in agriculture. These included insufficient access to knowledge, information and education; limited involvement in policy dialogue; limited access to markets, land and financing; difficulty accessing green jobs.

The Caribbean Action under the APP is working to address these concerns. The APP is funded by the European Union (EU) under the 10th European Development Fund (EDF) with the Intra-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) as Executing Agency, and the CARICOM Secretariat (CCS) and the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI) as Implementing Partners.

The specific objective of the APP action is to increase the capability of Regional Agricultural Development Organizations of the Caribbean to address the development needs of smallholder agriculture, including targeted support to women and youth.

### Improving Access to Knowledge, Information and Education

“Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society” , said Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary General. Providing all three of these elements to youth in agriculture will be essential keys to unlocking the door for more youth to join the sector.

“In order to get youth more involved in the agricultural sector; it must start with improving educational initiatives geared towards the importance of a strong agricultural sector and the benefits it can provide to the local community”, said Michael Bowleg.



Youth working in PA structures at Abbey Garden Farm.  
(Photo: Abbey Garden Farm)

The APP has sought to provide education and enhance knowledge through several training programmes offered to youth. The 'Regional Training Workshop on Product Development, Marketing, Food Safety and SMPs for SMEs' included 10 youth. Attendees of the workshop learned about proper product development, safe packaging, effective labelling and successful marketing practices.

They also reviewed food safety and good manufacturing practices, which are vital for entrance to supermarkets and export markets.

Fifteen youth were also introduced to the modified Creativity for Employment and Business Opportunities (Agri-CEBO) training programme where they learned about the makings of a good business plan, the importance of the pitch, good marketing and responsible financial management.

### Youth Opportunities for Learning under the APP:

- Regional Training Workshop on Product Development, Marketing, Food Safety and SMPs for SMEs
- Creativity for Employment and Business Opportunities (Agri-CEBO)
- Internship on Greenhouses in the Caribbean
- YiA Business Forum
- Green Intensive Farming Technologies meeting
- Regional Training workshop on Producer Group Governance
- Invest Caribbean 2015
- 8th Caribbean Bee Congress
- Regional SME-DFI Working Capital Development Meeting

Expert mentoring and hands-on experience was provided to 19-year old Mikkel Rodgers from Barbados as a direct outcome of APP actions. Veteran practitioner, Jervis Rowe, and his daughter Diandra, supported Mikkel in a 12-week internship in the constructing, operating and managing of greenhouses. It is anticipated that these protected agriculture structures will be an integral part of future farming practices in the Caribbean in response to the changing climate. With his new found knowledge, Mikkel is ready to become a part of that important movement.

In the realm of information sharing, a Youth in Agriculture (YiA) Business Forum took place at the Regional Dialogue for Development (D4D) meeting in early 2016. It included

35 youth representing 14 CARIFORUM countries. This forum facilitated peer-to-peer information sharing, with the goal of defining a practical approach to youth engagement and entrepreneurship in the agriculture value chain in the Caribbean.

Through the sharing of experiences and ideas, the young people carried out brainstorming and identified areas of opportunity in the agricultural value chain and how to open them up; thematic areas for YiA enterprise development; key support needs of youth enterprises; and youth mandated action to support future youth entrepreneurship.

Another exciting outcome of that forum was the creation of 'Caripreneurs', an informal group of young Caribbean agripreneurs. These youth are now connected through social media with an emphasis on networking for business development, information sharing about business ideas, training, investment opportunities and problem solving.

### Facilitating Youth Involvement in Policy Dialogue

A more formal organization for engaging and supporting youth is 'The Caribbean Agricultural Forum for Youth (CAFY). Through the APP, CAFY has become more deeply engaged in discussions with the wider agriculture community. Representatives from CAFY have been invited to the table at Regional Planners' Forums, Technical Advisory Committees and workshops.



Youth participants at the 9th RPF. (Photo: APP)

At a regional training workshop on Producer Group Governance, CAFY was part of the panel that discussed challenges involved in group governance and sustainability. Also, at the 9th Regional Planners' Forum

(RPF) on Agriculture, youth presented their "Vision 2030" plan which highlighted their hopes and ideas for the future of Caribbean agriculture.

Under support of the APP, two youth members of the University of West Indies (UWI) Agribusiness Society were supported to attend 'Invest Caribbean 2015', in Washington, D.C. This conference was part of an international dialogue on policy in agriculture. Additionally, four youth involved in apiculture were supported to attend the 8th Caribbean Bee Congress in September of 2016.

### Encouraging 'Green' Jobs and Youth in Agriculture

Youth were also invited to participate in the Green Intensive Farming Technologies (GIFTS) technical planning meeting, sponsored by APP Component 2, which is led by CARDI. The APP sees GIFTS as an excellent opportunity to draw youth into agriculture through the use of innovation, technology and a concern for the environment.

#### Suggestions as to How to Engage More Youth in Agriculture from the GIFT Technical Meeting:

- Profile successful youth in agriculture and use them as ambassadors for agricultural entrepreneurship
- Use 'business incubators' as a mechanism for developing entrepreneurship among youth
- Provide 'mentors' or 'shepherds' to youth in agriculture
- Promote agriculture as a business and career opportunity through youth oriented platforms
- Retrofit abandoned structures for PA and use them to offer gainful employment for youth across the Region
- Work to redefine the traditional image of the farmer

The forum hosted Brent Eversley, a Protected Agriculture (PA) Farmer in Trinidad operating under the name of 'Green Nation', who shared his experiences

transitioning from a technician in agriculture to a young farm entrepreneur. Brent is building a successful business using PA for the production of lettuce to be sold in niche markets. Michael Bowleg also participated, sharing his excitement about the use of aquaponics as a potential solution for the lack of local food production and issues of sustainability.

In total, four Caribbean youth attended the meeting. They were able to share in the workshops, reviewing the potential for the use of GIFTS in regional agriculture, and were part of a panel that discussed challenges and opportunities in the industry. At the close of the meeting, both the youth and other participants provided suggestions as to how to better engage youth in Caribbean agriculture.

## **Supporting Better Access to Markets**

For youth to be successful once they enter the industry, they will need to be able to access markets. The 'Regional Training Workshop on Product Development, Marketing, Food Safety and SMPs for SMEs' provided plenty of training however, it also contributed to opportunities for market access for the youth attendees. Participants were exposed to regulations which must be met to enter markets and direction on how to meet those regulations. They were also introduced to labelling and packaging experts who shared their knowledge on how to improve products for wider acceptance in the market. Youth were also introduced to opportunities in the hotel and tourism industry, as well as supermarkets chains.

The APP has also supported updates to the Caribbean Agribusiness Web Portal where youth can go and access relevant business tools, find buyers and sellers in the Region and link up with service providers, suppliers and marketing boards.

## **Taking Steps to more Accessible Financial Services**

Getting ready to enter markets however, will require upfront funding. Developing and enhancing products requires capital, and access to capital is a very common roadblock for young agripreneurs. Agricultural enterprises are often seen as high risk and youth often do not have the collateral to put up for a loan.

Under the APP, members of CAFY attended a workshop facilitating engagement and exchange between Development Financing Institutions (DFI) and Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs). During the workshop, practical, solution-oriented deliberations occurred on the formulation of pre and post-harvest financing schemes and working capital requirements, with the goal of creating tangible, workable plans for moving forward.

Additionally, National Value Chain Facilitators (NVCFs) and Business Development Officers are working with MSMEs, including those run by youth, to create business investment profiles and apply for access to funds through the Financial Alliance for Sustainable Trade (FAST) programme that pairs MSMEs with willing financial institutions.

## **Reaching the Youngest 'Future Farmers'**

And finally, the APP has also had the fun and exciting opportunity to reach out to the youngest potential crop of new farmers while working in collaboration with Why Farm, which stands for 'We Help You-th Farm'. Why Farm is an organization that is focused on raising up 'farmpreneurs' as the 'feeders of the future', starting in primary and secondary schools.

Under the APP, students have been treated to the appearance of 'AGRIman', the agriculture superhero which is the flagship character of WhyFarm and defender and promoter of all good and sustainable farming practices.

AGRIman, which is the creation of UWI graduate Alpha Sennon, showed the students a fun and easy way to build a simple hydroponics food production system which could be used at their homes to grow a range of vegetables.

Students can also stay engaged with AGRIman through a comic book series and hashtags that promote positive messages for agriculture. The APP has further supported this initiative by sharing WhyFarm information and enhancing opportunities to widen their exposure and integrate into the formal agri-education curriculum. WhyFarm and the APP want kids to get excited about farming.

Michael Bowleg certainly doesn't see agriculture as a profession of "drudgery" or "a last choice" as is the perspective of some. He sees it as an exciting opportunity for young people to change the Caribbean. "With the Caribbean being a Region significantly made up of countries which were once colonized, the ability to be agriculturally independent can provide young people of the Caribbean the opportunity to fill agricultural production and processing roles currently occupied by foreign companies. Freedom from food related, foreign imports allows not only more funds to stay within Caribbean countries, but governments will also have the ability to inject more funds into the local agricultural sector."

In her response to a request for comment on the importance of youth in agriculture, Ms. Francis summarized the significance of youth involvement for the future of agriculture with passion.

“Youth are endowed with time, energy, a yearning for learning and a drive for answers and solutions that even in the worst of situations, often cannot be dampened. Youth also tend to be impatient, which under normal circumstances, is often seen as an undesirable quality. However, in a sensitive sector, such as agriculture, this impatience may be an asset since it has driven several young agripreneurs to start off on their own; to find ways to move faster than the current pace of the formal institutional framework and support systems; to actually start a business. These are the type of personalities, embedded in youth, that agriculture in the Caribbean needs”, she said.

The challenge, as she sees it, is “how to not fail them by adopting outdated youth engagement strategies, and designing and implementing ineffective youth empowerment programmes. And when these fail, by perpetuating the myth that youth are not interested in agriculture.”

This is a challenge, not for the youth, but for the current institutional framework and systems that themselves need to advance in terms of purpose and practices. “In the 21st century and beyond, the opportunities given to youth and the choices they make today, will make all the difference in how agriculture in the Caribbean evolves. The region needs to let them lead, now, not later.”

Malcolm Wallace of the APP PMU has been working with many youth in agriculture since the beginning of this year. He agrees whole-heartedly with Ms. Francis. “The notion that youth are not interested in agriculture or agri-related

entrepreneurial activity is an egregious fallacy”, he says. This misguided perception has been debunked by national chapters of CAFY in the early 2000’s and most recently by the CARIPRENEURS, a diverse and dynamic group of young persons in the business of agriculture. I have had the privilege of chronicling the progress and successes of these young persons since our first engagement in January 2016 under the APP. Their vision, enthusiasm, selflessness, and drive for regional agribusiness development is boundless. I am proud to have been able to mentor this group and support their individual and collective advancement. They have made their mark; carved their names and opinions into the regional agriculture development agenda and they will be a force to be reckoned with!”

See also:

TF#1:- What’s the BIG DEAL about MSMEs? (June 2016)

TF#2:- Meeting Food Safety & Consumer Expectations: What Every Agri-MSME Needs to Know (August 2016)

TF#3:- Unlocking Opportunities in Caribbean Agriculture through Knowledge, Relationships and Investments (September 2016)

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Intra-ACP Caribbean Action Implementing Partners

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