Agribusiness development for small island states moves forward at the first Caribbean and Pacific Agri-Food Forum

A major event aimed at developing a business approach for the agri-food sector in Caribbean and other small island states (SIDS) in African Caribbean and Pacific regions (ACP) opens today in Bridgetown, Barbados. The Caribbean and Pacific Agri-Food Forum is being organised from November 2 to 6 by the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA), together with the Barbados Agricultural Society (BAS) and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), with the support of the Intra-ACP Agricultural Policy Programme. The Forum is expected to attract more than 250 agribusiness private sector players, decision-makers, policy-makers, financial institutions, chefs, development partners and other actors.

The five-day forum is being held against a backdrop of challenging times for agriculture in the Caribbean, where an estimated 500,000 small-scale farmers have been hit by the removal of secure markets to export traditional commodities such as bananas, sugar and rice to the European Union under preferential conditions. Other problems include natural resource degradation and limited financing, leading to a significant fall in agriculture’s contribution to the region’s Gross Domestic Product in recent years. The young, in particular, are shunning agriculture as a future career and the average age of farmers is alarmingly high at 55, according to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

Cross-learning and knowledge sharing will be a strong theme during the Forum, examining real solutions and innovations that can help to spur agribusiness development, especially for small-scale producers, in both the Caribbean and Pacific. Both regions share a number of common features in their productive and trading systems, priority value chains and service sectors, as well as similar challenges for agriculture and rural development, including food security and nutrition status, vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change. Representatives from small island states in the Indian Ocean will also be attending the week’s sessions.

"Our main purpose for coming together today is to explore new ways of transforming the agri-food sector in the Caribbean and Pacific regions so that it meets the nations’ quest for food security, healthy diets, job creation and economic growth," said CTA Director Michael Hailu.
"We will be seeking win-win solutions for farmers and agribusinesses alike so that they can both benefit by working together. For far too long, we have been talking about problems and challenges of agriculture and rural life. At this Forum, we want to change the tide of pessimism to a vision of optimism and focus our energies on seeking innovative solutions and smart partnerships that will transform the agriculture, food and nutrition landscape across the Caribbean and Pacific."

The event opens with a rich three-day programme of hands-on workshops and a range of meetings, covering areas that include building a successful agribusiness company, inclusive value chain development, ICTs for fisheries, policy advocacy for Caribbean and Pacific farmers’ leaders, access to finance, strengthening the link between agriculture and nutrition and successful initiatives to counter climate change. Participants are being invited to attend training sessions in social media and Web 2.0 tools and a team of young ACP social media reporters will be covering exchanges throughout the Forum.

James Paul, Chief Executive Officer for the Barbados Agricultural Society (BAS), said the event came at a time of dramatic decline in Caribbean productive sectors, especially agriculture. “In today’s world, every effort has to be made to teach our children that food comes through the effort of farmers around the world rather than through a supermarket’s backdoor,” he said. “These are things we have to contemplate as more and more people live in urban environments and have no understanding of, or concern of the plight of farmers. However, Small Island Developing States such as ours are unique in that we are too small to isolate activities from each other.”

Jethro Greene, Chief Coordinator of the Caribbean Farmers Network (CaFAN), said the Forum would build on initiatives already being pursued by CTA and CaFAN to promote a value chain approach in an effort to drive the agri-food sector and produce benefits for small-scale producers and other rural players in small island developing states.

“One of the key initiatives that we have launched in CaFAN is the building of inclusive participatory value chains, supported by CTA. And what we are doing as an organisation representing 16 countries is to create an enabling environment for collaboration and cooperation, so that the full force of the intellectual capacity behind agriculture can be put together, so that we can upscale agriculture, involving youth and women, and retrain farmers, taking into consideration that times are changing. We want our region to be united. And our Pacific brothers will also bring their knowledge to this Forum.”

A key attraction during the week of activities will be the 2nd Caribbean Agribusiness Forum – Strengthening the agri-food sector and expanding markets, to be held on November 5 and 6, which will explore the main drivers of agribusiness development and highlight success stories. Ena Harvey, agitourism specialist and Barbados representative for the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), said there was an urgent need for small island developing states to explore business-oriented solutions as a way of developing the agri-food sector.

“We need to look at the specific drivers along the value chain, that make or break linkages. What is it that farmers have to do to access the manufacturing or the tourism sector? Who are the players and what are the key factors that drive successful linkages?” she said. “The Caribbean region imports an annual US$5 billion in food. We need to have stronger linkages between our agricultural and agro-processing sector and our tourism industry.”
The role of chefs in linking agriculture and tourism will be examined during a special session on November 7, offering an opportunity to review progress in developing the Chefs for Development Platform, launched at the 1st Pacific Agribusiness Forum in July 2015. Throughout the week, there will be strong focus on business networking and building relationships to take ideas further.

Linked to the Forum will be two Learning Journeys, staged to give participants practical insight into specific agri-food sectors and value chains. The first of these, with the theme: food processing, branding and standards, related to nutrition, is being held in Trinidad and Tobago from November 2 to 4, in parallel to the Barbados events.

In the week following the Caribbean and Pacific Agri-Food Forum – from November 9-13 - a group of Caribbean and Pacific participants will take part in a 5-day Learning Journey in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Jamaica. The topic for this journey will be: profitable and sustainable value chains in the Caribbean, with a focus on roots and tubers.

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