



"PUTTING PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE OF  
CARIBBEAN SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT"

**POLICY BRIEF**

# **TRANSFORMING AGRI-FOOD SYSTEMS IN THE CARIBBEAN**

Helping Small and Medium  
Scale (SMS) Food Producers  
to Eradicate Hunger and  
Malnutrition

**Caribbean Policy Development Centre**

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“ *In a world of plenty,  
no one should go hungry or  
suffer the cruelty of malnutrition.* ”

Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, speaking at release of State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report, July 12th 2023.



# WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

## The world is at a pivotal moment.

At the midpoint to 2030, the extremely ambitious United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 to end hunger and malnutrition is in peril. This pressing human health issue revolves around the food we produce, process, distribute, sell and consume. Although the number of hungry people has stabilized from the highs during the COVID-19 pandemic, other forces such as the war in Ukraine, soaring prices of food, fertilizers and energy, and the climate crisis are pushing many persons around the world further away from accessing safe and nutritious food at affordable prices.

The U.N. flagship 2023 State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World Report delivered a sobering reminder:

**“Over 700 million people face hunger worldwide and a staggering 3 billion people cannot afford a nutritious diet. Globally, 2.4 billion people, or almost 30% of the world population, did not have regular access to food. More astonishingly, almost a million people are living in famine conditions with starvation and death a daily reality.”**

In the Caribbean, the UN Food Security and Nutrition report warns that hunger is still on the rise. The prevalence of undernourishment, which shows the dietary levels required to maintain a normal and active life, increased from 14.7% of the region's population in 2021 to 16.3% in 2022. Among the most vulnerable groups to undernourishment are women, children, small farmers in rural communities and the urban poor. The traditional agri-food systems in the Caribbean have not been delivering affordable, nutritious foods

in sufficient quantities to consumers. With climate change projected to further disrupt Caribbean agri-food systems through rising temperatures, droughts, flooding, and tropical storms and hurricanes, little progress is expected on eradicating hunger and malnutrition in the Caribbean within the next decade, unless deliberate and urgent actions are taken. Additionally, several CARICOM Member States depend heavily upon the export of primary agricultural commodities thereby tying the sector to the volatility of macroeconomic performance.

This transformation of the Caribbean's agri-food systems calls for radical changes in the way food is produced, processed and consumed. Achieving more positive outcomes in addressing malnutrition and hunger in the Caribbean will require that enough food is produced, particularly from small and medium scale (SMS) food producers, that the food is nutritious, and that supply chains work efficiently to deliver accessible and affordable food to everyone, everywhere.

This Policy Brief recommends several policy actions in the food and nutrition security and food sovereignty space to enhance the livelihoods of SMS food

producers in CARICOM. It is based on a 2023 study “A Sustainable Food Systems and Policy Framework for Small and Medium Scale Food Producers in Selected CARIFORUM Countries” commissioned by the Caribbean Policy Development Centre (CPDC).

The study analysed the food and nutrition security situation over the period 2010-2020 in a sample of five Caribbean countries - Barbados, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica and St. Vincent and the Grenadines – as well as undertook a survey of SMS food producers in these countries.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

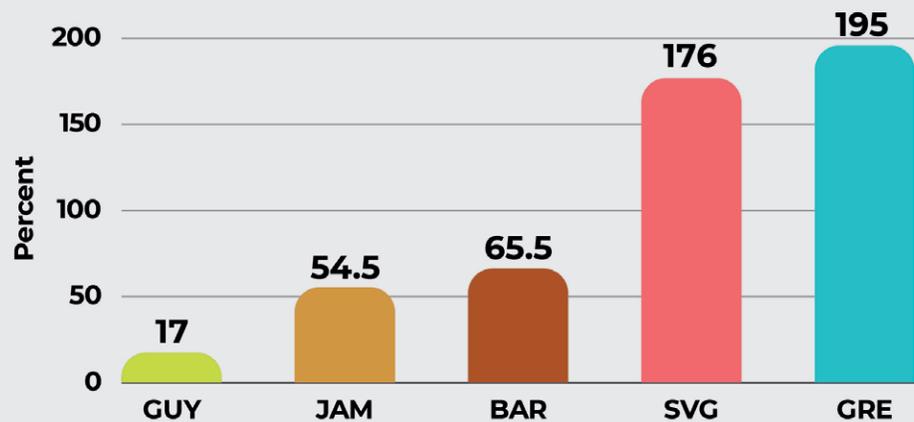
An analysis of the food and nutrition security conditions in CARICOM reveals key challenges facing the Caribbean’s agri-food systems. These are as follows:

- **More food is accessible but diets are poor, resulting in an increasing prevalence of obesity and chronic, non-communicable diseases (NCDs).** The supply of food calories in CARICOM exceeds the recommended daily dietary allowance of the population. However, the region is experiencing a nutrition transition, reflected in a shift in diets away from indigenous staples to diets that are more processed, with excessive amounts of imported refined, caloric-dense carbohydrates, high in fats, sugars and sodium. In the five countries analysed, all have more than enough food energy, fats/oils and sugars/sweeteners to meet their Recommended Population Food Goals<sup>1</sup> (RPFGs), but the availability of fats/oils and sugars/sweeteners is significantly in excess of RPFGs. These unhealthy food choices and diets drive the increasing prevalence of obesity and its comorbidities such as chronic, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) which are currently the main public health problem in the Caribbean.
- **Poverty, unemployment and income inequality constrain access to food.** A combination of high poverty, rising unemployment and highly unequal distribution of incomes together with more than two decades of slow economic growth, constrain households’ access to food and contribute to their vulnerability to food and nutrition insecurity in the Caribbean. Exogenous factors (such as the COVID-19 pandemic, shocks to the world economy and natural disasters also adversely impact regional food and nutrition security.
- **Unsustainable regional food import bill.** Currently, the food import bill for the CARICOM region is more than US\$5 billion and quite substantial when viewed in the context of the small sizes of the regional economies and limited foreign exchange earnings capacities. Food imports, as opposed to national food production, are by far the largest source of food availability in the Caribbean, with fresh fruits,

<sup>1</sup> The Recommended Population Food Goals established by the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (2006) are as follows: Food energy (2250 Kcal/capita/day); Protein (70 g/capita/day); Fats/Oils (56.8 g/capita/day); Sugars/Sweetened (125 Kcal/capita/day).

vegetables, meat, and other agriculture-related products that can be produced in the region making up significant proportions of imported foods. For example, Guyana is a net food-exporter, but still imports about 40% of its food, compared to Barbados and Grenada with food-import-dependency ratios in excess of 80%, and Jamaica and St. Vincent/Grenadines in excess of 60%. Table 1 shows the food import ratios for these five countries.

Table 1:  
Food imports in  
Total Merchandise  
Exports (Average  
over 2010-2021)



- Finally, the indicators of stability present some sobering observations to which policy makers must pay attention. First, there is rapid transmission of international food price increases to Caribbean countries whenever there is a shock to the world economy. This, together with the high food-import ratios, reinforce the need to incentivize SMS food producers, especially through a managed food import policy and targeted productivity-enhancing support. Third, with the exception of Guyana, the high public debt-to-GDP ratios in the other countries are unsustainable and can negatively affect economic growth and poverty reduction. Finally, Caribbean countries are prone to natural disasters and must seek to build resilience against these exogenous shocks.



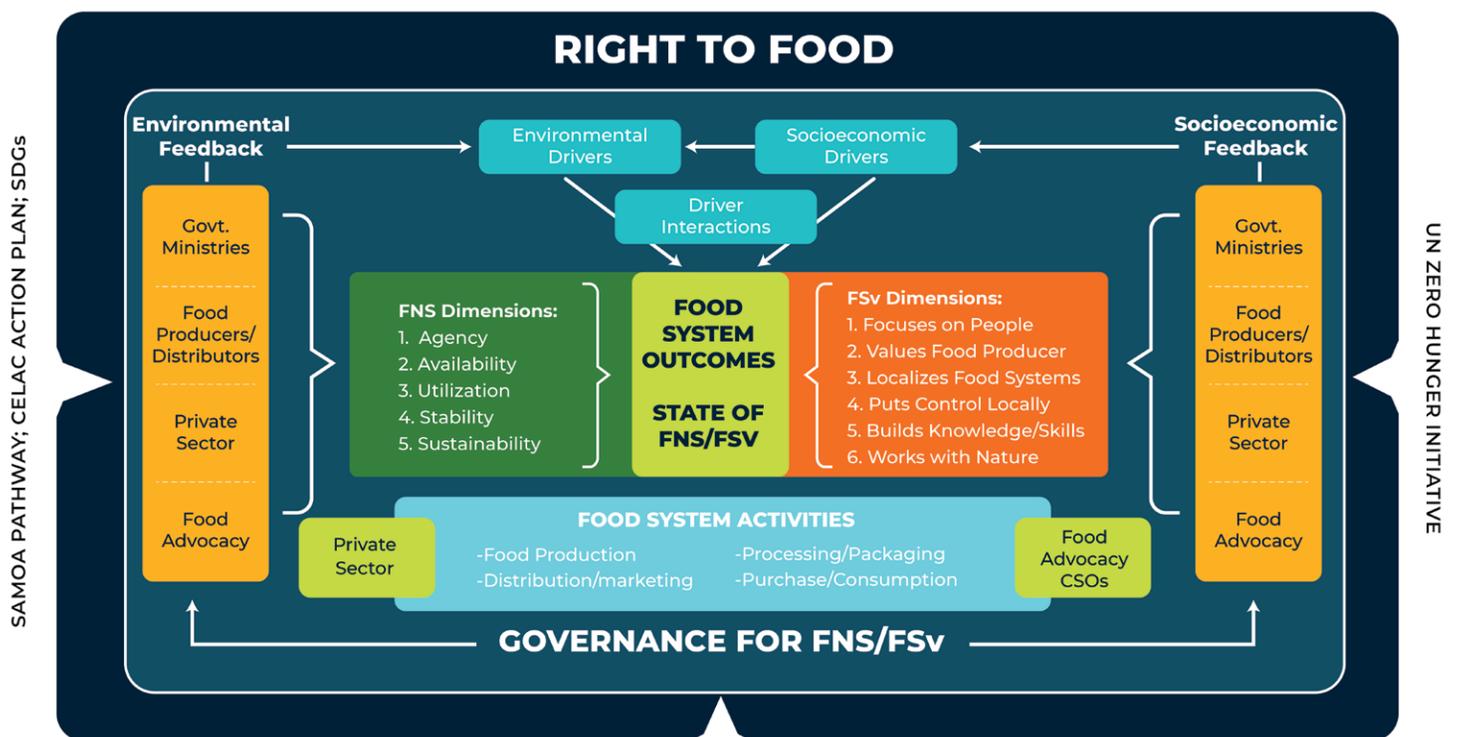
# WHAT SHOULD POLICYMAKERS DO?

To achieve regional food security while balancing nutrition, health and enhanced economic, social and environmental outcomes, it is imperative for Caribbean policymakers to implement “game changing” solutions, especially for SMS food producers. These proposed innovative solutions are as follows:

## 1. PROMOTE THE RIGHT TO FOOD AT REGIONAL, NATIONAL, COUNTRY AND COMMUNITY LEVELS

The Right to Food (RTF) is a key guiding principle in both the food nutrition security and food sovereignty approaches. **Figure 1** depicts the “*Rights-Based Integrated Food System Framework*”. Framing food systems within this framework places power in the hands of those most affected and expands the range of policy actions to address underlying structural inequities that drive food insecurity.

Figure 1:  
Rights-Based Integrated Food System Framework



GLOBAL, HEMISPHERIC & REGIONAL MANDATES AND COMMITMENTS

All CARICOM member countries have ratified several international treaties and conventions, all of which affirm the duty, obligation, and responsibility of governments to, *inter alia*, protect the RTF for everyone. This means that:

- a. **Caribbean citizens can lobby their governments to ensure they have access to food, especially during crises;**
- b. **Food is a human right, not just a tradable commodity, and can be used as an instrument in negotiations with international organizations (e.g., World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank) on trade and fiscal issues; and**
- c. **The RTF can be an entry point for proponents of food sovereignty (e.g. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), to lobby on behalf of SMS food producers.**

## **2. PROMOTE GOOD GOVERNANCE FOR FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY**

As depicted in **Figure 1**, governance for food and nutrition security has a profound influence on a country's food system. At the political level, good governance is the efficient delivery of food and nutrition security as a basic public good that the citizenry can reasonably expect from a democratic state. At this level, good governance embraces, *inter alia*, the human rights-based PANTHER principles, which guarantee the Right to Food through **P**articipation, **A**ccountability, **N**on-discrimination, **T**ransparency, **H**uman dignity, **E**mpowerment, and the **R**ule-of-law. Food security governance and the Right to Food are sine qua non, i.e. one cannot exist without the other.

## **3. FORMULATE/SUPPORT A POLICY TO STRATEGICALLY MANAGE FOOD IMPORTS IN LINE WITH INCREASING DOMESTIC PRODUCTION CAPACITY**

In early 2022, leaders of CARICOM countries announced a regional food import replacement program “**Vision 25% by 2025**” to reduce food imports progressively and selectively by 25% by 2025. The commodities which are being targeted for increased production and to be sourced regionally are as follows:

- **Poultry**
- **Corn and Soy**
- **Niche Vegetables: Broccoli, Cauliflower, Carrots, Onions, Red Cabbage, Lettuce, Tomato**
- **Fruits: Honey Dew, Cantaloupe, Soursop, Pineapples, Dragon Fruit, Strawberries, Avocado, Mangoes, Coconut and Citrus**
- **Roots and Tubers: Cassava, Sweet Potato, Table Potato and Dasheen**
- **Herbs and Spices: Ginger, Turmeric, Thyme, Chive and Marjoram**
- **Livestock: Beef, Sheep, Fish and Goat**

The **Vision 25% by 2025** program is compelling, commendable and timely. It has the potential to save valuable foreign exchange, create domestic market opportunities for local SMS food producers, and increase the availability of healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables and indigenous staples that are rich in fiber and complex carbohydrates, in contrast to imported foods that are calorie-dense, high in fats, oils, sugars, sweeteners and sodium.

**Caribbean countries can reduce their food import bills through the following policy actions:**

- Provide training, access to markets, modern farming techniques and technologies, and financial assistance such as loans or grants to SMS food producers.
- Support the development of agribusinesses and value-added industries such as food processing, packaging, and storage.
- Improve rural infrastructure to facilitate the movement of agricultural goods from rural areas to urban markets.
- Encourage the adoption of sustainable farming practices, which can reduce input costs, improve soil fertility, conserve water resources, and minimize the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers.
- Foster regional cooperation on initiatives such as joint purchasing, bulk procurement, and regional trade agreements to leverage economies of scale and reduce the cost of imported food items.
- Encourage the establishment of local farmers' markets, cooperatives, and direct sales channels. These initiatives can connect farmers directly with consumers, eliminate intermediaries, and provide fair prices for both producers and consumers.

## **2. TAKE A MORE PROACTIVE APPROACH TO FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY AND SOVEREIGNTY AND REALISING THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA 2030**

All CARICOM countries are signatories to the UN SDGs, and have, by varying degrees, integrated them into national development objectives and priorities. While all the SDGs are important, SDG 1 (End poverty), and SDG 2 (End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture), are closely related to food and nutrition security and sovereignty. However, the progress made by the five selected Caribbean countries on these two SDGs are at best modest. For SDG 1, Guyana is on track, Barbados and Jamaica are stagnating, and data were unavailable for St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada. For SDG 2, Grenada and Jamaica are stagnating, while the other three countries are moderately improving. In effect, much more must be done by these countries to achieve these two SDGs within the remaining eight-year window before their expiration in 2030.

## **3. SUPPORT A SUSTAINABLE INCREASE IN AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AND PRODUCTIVITY WITH INCREASED ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOODS**

With the exception of Guyana and a few crops in Jamaica, food production in the five sample Caribbean countries has stagnated around a base-level equilibrium over the past decade. In these

countries the rural population over the 2010-2021 period ranges widely from 45% (Jamaica), to 73% (Guyana). From the survey conducted among SMS food producers, an overwhelming majority (91%) would like to expand their farming operations. However, several constraints prevent them from doing so **(see Table 1)**. This information can support a wide range of evidence-based policy actions to support small-scale farmers, such as training, access to credit, and technical assistance to enhance their skills, promote sustainable farming practices, and enable them to adopt modern technologies. These policy actions can increase agricultural production, improve productivity, and enhance access to healthy foods, contributing to food security and the overall well-being of the population in the Caribbean.

#### 4. BRING FOOD PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS TOGETHER

Several marketing needs and challenges were identified among SMS food producers **(see Table 1)**. Policy actions to address these issues would bring food producers and consumers closer together, and help foster transparency, trust, and mutually beneficial relationships.

**Some policy actions to facilitate this connection include:**

- Promote direct sales channels, such as farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, farm stands, or on-farm retail. These platforms allow consumers to meet farmers, learn about their practices, and purchase fresh, locally produced food directly from the source.
- Encourage restaurants and food establishments to prioritize local sourcing and establish relationships with nearby farmers. Restaurants can prominently feature information about the farms supplying their ingredients, creating a connection between producers and consumers.
- Utilize online platforms, websites, and social media channels to showcase local farms, their products, and farming practices. This digital presence helps bridge the gap between producers and consumers, particularly for those unable to participate in physical interactions.
- Create appropriate linkages, such as farmers' buyers' groups and farmers' market to empower food producers so that middlemen do not take most of the profits.



**Table 2:  
Summary of Evidence/Data to Inform Policy Framework for Small  
and Medium Scale (SMS) Food Producers in the Caribbean**

Evidence from Situational Analysis and findings from SMS Farmers' Survey	Policy areas related to Food & Nutrition Security & Food Sovereignty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 91% had the desire to expand.</li> <li>• 90% need assistance with small equipment</li> <li>• 72% lacked essential tools.</li> <li>• 60% lacked access to loans/credit.</li> <li>• 37% have problems finding markets.</li> <li>• 28% had insufficient processing options / facilities.</li> <li>• 28% had problems with praedial larceny.</li> <li>• National food production hovering a base-year level</li> <li>• Nutrition-related diseases main public health problem in the region</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainable increase in agricultural production and productivity with increased access to healthy foods</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 71% need to network with buyers.</li> <li>• 76% found a glut in the market.</li> <li>• 53% need market Link services or platforms</li> <li>• 36% lacked market access.</li> <li>• 36% reported that lack of markets is an obstacle to expansion.</li> <li>• 35% complained about the low prices for their produce.</li> <li>• 31% noted the lack of relevant market information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bringing food producers and consumers together</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 47% are continuing a family tradition.</li> <li>• 29% have off farm employment to support family.</li> <li>• Farmers reported that they benefitted very little from extension services, subsidized inputs, training, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food producers are valued, and their livelihoods sustained</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 69% are members of farmers' organizations, but only 18% are satisfied with these organizations.</li> <li>• 86% considered specific vegetable /animal producers' organizations useful.</li> <li>• 84% are willing to join a farming cluster.</li> <li>• 73% would be committed to a new farming cluster.</li> <li>• Only 45% contribute to decisions about their farming enterprise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater empowerment of SMS food producers, via control over resources and farm inputs</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 97% are willing to attend training workshops.</li> <li>• More than 80% want management &amp; business training.</li> <li>• 88% need training on resilience against shocks.</li> <li>• 48-63% want training in technical skills.</li> <li>• 75% need practical "how to" skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity building in wealth creation, group dynamics and enterprise and risk management</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 69% use irrigation technology and equipment.</li> <li>• 41% use crop diversification. 24% practice soil conservation.</li> <li>• 28% said there is not enough technical assistance available for climate risk management.</li> <li>• Region prone to storms, hurricanes and effects of climate change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resilience of food systems against increased climate extremes to preserve environmental and ecological regeneration</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Between 79-90% of SMS food producers felt that their living standards can be improve though actions such as a small grant (89%), guidance/advice and assistance with additional income-generating activities (84%), training to manage and sustain farm operations (79%).</li> <li>• Poverty, low income compromise FNS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance the living standard and overall welfare of SMS food producers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsustainable food import bills</li> <li>• Food imports account for major source of national food availability</li> <li>• Domestic food production accounts for only 20-40 of national food availability</li> <li>• 90% SMS food producers will like to expand food production but face several constraints</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategically manage food imports in line with increasing domestic production capacity</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More than 50% of region's population live in rural areas</li> <li>• Poverty is higher in rural areas</li> <li>• SMS food producers face litany of constraints to expanding farm enterprises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build sustainable livelihoods in rural economies</li> </ul>

## 5. PLACE A PREMIUM ON THE VALUE OF SMS FOOD PRODUCERS TO SUSTAIN THEIR LIVELIHOODS

The food sovereignty approach places a premium on policy actions that value SMS food producers and sustain their livelihoods.

### Policy actions to achieve this outcome include:

- Promote market systems that enable small-scale farmers to access markets and negotiate fair contracts with buyers. This involves addressing power imbalances and reducing the influence of intermediaries.
- Enhance access to essential resources for farmers, including land, water, seeds, and inputs. Improve access to credit and financial services specifically tailored to the needs of food producers, particularly small-scale farmers. This enables them to invest in their operations, adopt sustainable practices, and overcome financial barriers.
- Invest in training, capacity building, and technical assistance programs for food producers. This equips them with the tools needed to improve productivity, quality, and market competitiveness.
- Promote the formation and strengthening of farmer organizations, cooperatives, and associations, including in areas such as governance, leadership development, market linkages, and cooperative management.

## 6. SUPPORT GREATER EMPOWERMENT OF SMS FOOD PRODUCERS

Only 45% of SMS food producers contribute to policy decisions about their farming enterprise, and while 69% are members of farmers' organizations, only 18% are satisfied with these organizations. Supporting the greater empowerment of SMS food producers involves implementing various strategies to enhance their capacity, access to resources, market opportunities, and participation in decision-making processes.

### Some key policy actions include:

- Support the formation and strengthening of farmer organizations, cooperatives, and associations, by assisting in the organizational development, governance, leadership training, and market-oriented business management.
- Promote community-level participation for public policy decision-making to reflect their needs and interests.
- Defend farmers' right to have input into formulating national policies that affect SMS farmers' livelihoods.
- Prioritize the needs and rights of small and medium-scale food producers, by creating an enabling environment that incentivizes sustainable agriculture, access to resources, fair markets, and participatory decision-making.
- Strengthen extension services, and farmer support systems.

## **7. BUILD CAPACITY IN SMS WEALTH CREATION, GROUP DYNAMICS, AND ENTERPRISE AND RISK MANAGEMENT**

Significant proportions of SMS food producers were willing to attend training in wealth creation, resilience against shocks, managing their enterprises, etc. Policy actions on each of these training needs can empower small and medium-scale farmers to make informed decisions, improve their financial well-being, build sustainable enterprises, manage risks effectively, enhance collaboration, and access support services.

## **8. BUILD RESILIENCE OF FOOD SYSTEMS AGAINST INCREASED CLIMATE EXTREMES TO PRESERVE ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECOLOGICAL REGENERATION.**

SMS food producers indicated that they are favorably disposed to, and practice climate-smart management practices, but they also reported the lack of technical assistance available to them in this area. Building resilience of food systems against increased climate extremes is crucial for preserving environmental and ecological regeneration and supporting small and medium-scale farmers. This requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving farmers, governments, research institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector to create an enabling environment and support the necessary investments and collaborations.

### **Some policy actions in this area include:**

- Provide capacity-building initiatives to enhance the skills and knowledge of SMS food producers in sustainable farming practices, modern techniques, post-harvest management, and value-added processing.
- Provide technical assistance and advisory services to support farmers in adopting efficient and sustainable farming methods.
- Improve SMS food producers' access to climate information, weather forecasts, and early warning systems. Timely information empowers farmers to take proactive measures in response to climate extremes, reducing potential losses and improving adaptation strategies.
- Implement and, where necessary, strengthen the social protection environment for climate finance through parametric insurance to small scale food producers. This should include bundled products such as micro insurance products coupled with savings accounts.

## **11. ENHANCE THE LIVING STANDARD AND OVERALL WELFARE OF SMS FOOD PRODUCERS.**

Between 79%-90% of SMS food producers felt their living standards can be improved through actions such as a small grant (89%), guidance/advice and assistance with additional income-generating activities (84%), training to manage and sustain farm operations (79%).

### **Some policy actions along these lines include:**

- Provide funding for well-designed and implemented small grants, especially targeted at small scale food producers.

- Provide training in basic entrepreneurship and business approaches to enhance income and wealth creation among SMS food producers.
- Provide periodic training in how to manage and sustain a profitable farming enterprise.

## 12. BUILD SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

In excess of 50% of CARICOM countries' population live in rural communities. Building sustainable livelihoods in these rural economies requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses various dimensions of development.

### Some policy actions include:

- Promote entrepreneurship and the development of small-scale enterprises in sectors such as agro-processing, eco-tourism, renewable energy, crafts, and services. This reduces dependence on a single sector, creates employment opportunities, and enhances income generation.
- Promote value-added processing of agricultural products and facilitate access to markets.
- Facilitate access to finance and business support services for rural entrepreneurs and small-scale enterprises, such as microfinance programs, financial literacy training, and incubation centers to assist entrepreneurs in developing viable business models.
- Invest in rural infrastructure development to support economic activities and improve digital connectivity.
- Utilize unemployed and immigrant workforce as supplementary labour in the agricultural sector. This can be done by creating synergies across government ministries to determine the labour market needs of the sector while creating employment opportunities.

“*In excess of 50% of CARICOM countries' population live in rural communities. Building sustainable livelihoods in these rural economies requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses various dimensions of development.*”



## WHAT'S NEXT?

Agriculture remains a major pillar of CARICOM Member States economies and has strong potential to build economic resilience and drive more inclusive socio-economic development of the region. Food and nutrition security in the Caribbean is a priority which needs immediate, viable and locally crafted solutions. The role of SMS food producers in the Caribbean must be elevated and they must become the main producers of food in order to adequately address regional food and nutrition security. The food sovereignty approach has not gained traction in CARICOM countries. However, there are ongoing efforts by grassroots organizations, farmers' networks, and regional initiatives to promote local food production, agroecology, and sustainable farming practices, which align well with the objectives of the food sovereignty approach.

To sustain these efforts and advance the food security agenda will require strong leadership from civil society including farmers associations, cooperatives, NGOs, private sector and governments.

To learn more and explore the study in its entirety, please visit [www.CPDC.org](http://www.CPDC.org)





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