

THE CHALLENGE: PROMOTING AGRICULTURE IN THE CARIBBEAN

Bruce Lauckner, TAA Coordinator, Caribbean

As most people know, the economies of the Caribbean countries were built on supplying tropical crops to the “mother” countries in Europe. Sugar, cocoa, coffee and bananas were among the crops grown in the Caribbean, mostly for consumption elsewhere. Nowadays these commodities are often grown elsewhere, where the land conditions are more favourable and costs of production much lower. The advantages of high quality of some Caribbean products are still important, but the returns are not enough to sustain the economies of the region.

In the last 50 years tourism has easily surpassed agriculture as the Caribbean product enjoyed by Europeans and North Americans. This has brought increased wealth but also some festering problems. Most of the food used by the tourist industries is imported and imported food accounts for much of the food eaten by Caribbean residents. The Caribbean small farmer has not been able to supply the food needs of the local population, let alone the tourists. This is because the farmers are mostly small scale on marginal lands and imported food supplies are more regular and often considerably cheaper.

This problem is being tackled by moving the perception of farming as an industry for poor peasants to one which needs to engage modern practices and active minds. A number of initiatives are being promoted by two regional agricultural institutes operating in the Caribbean, CARDI and IICA.

CARDI (Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute) is, as the name implies, an R&D institution which serves 12 member countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). IICA (Inter American Institute for Co-operation in Agriculture) headquartered in Costa Rica has offices in North, Central and South America as well as the Caribbean. IICA's

mandate is to provide technical cooperation, innovation and specialised knowledge and thus it compliments CARDI by assisting in moving the R&D outputs into the farming community.

The initiatives being promoted by CARDI and IICA are targeted at the general public through the use of the media and school students. The first initiative is annual Caribbean Media Awards. Before CARDI and IICA began to court the media, coverage of agriculture was sporadic. It was common to read and hear stories about “former sleepy agricultural communities” which now were retail or tourist business boom areas. These articles were driven by the advertising dollars offered by the businesses. Now it is still common to have sections of the newspapers and radio shows devoted to retail outlets in a certain area, but no longer is it emphasised how these have replaced farming as an activity.



Wesley Gibbins, General Secretary, Caribbean Media Association addresses the CTA-CARDI Media Workshop

Another initiative targeting the media is Media Science Workshop at the Annual Caribbean Week of Agriculture (CWA). The CWA rotates around the CARICOM countries and brings together policy makers, scientists, farmers and other stakeholders in an intense week of activities. The Media Science Workshop is funded largely by the CTA (Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation), the Netherlands based ACP/EU institution. The CWA Media Science Workshop is co-hosted by CTA, CARDI and the Caribbean Media Association. At the workshop the problems of making agriculture ‘sexy’ enough for media

attention are discussed. These media-targeted initiatives have ensured that agricultural news, well presented, has a place in local media and no longer do reporters claim that “*agriculture does not sell us to our subscribers*”.



Guyana Minister of Agriculture Leslie Ramsammy and CTA's Thierry Doudet at the opening of the media workshop



Julius Gittens of Barbados anxious to make a point at the Media Workshop

A further initiative is to offer a prize to the best agriculture student in the regional CXC (Caribbean Examinations Council) examinations. CXC replaced GCE 'O' levels in the CARICOM countries, but the agriculture examination hardly has the prestige of

Mathematics, English, Science or foreign languages. Now that a prize is given to the best student across the whole Caribbean there is some recognition of the importance of students selecting this option.



Ataliah Baker receives her award for best CXC in Agriculture from the President of Guyana

There has been an increase in political and public attention for agriculture as a result of these initiatives. Much remains to be done; especially as the print media declines and local television and radio media houses compete against cable and satellite programmes. As in the rest of the world, the internet, social media and mobile phones have considerable penetration and are replacing traditional sources of delivering information. Also the resources available cannot deliver awards to school students in all territories and a single award may only attract public attention in a given year in the winner's country.

An important message being sent out is that modern agriculture is being driven by modern technologies. The CXC examination curriculum is beginning to reflect this. We must learn how to effectively use modern communication methods. The younger generations are comfortable with new technologies and how to use them; perhaps we have as much to learn from them as they have to learn from us.