CARDI strengthening agri food supply chains to cope with COVID 19 and an active hurricane season.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted agriculture value chains, threatening food security and upending livelihoods of millions of people around the globe. To contain the virus and safeguard the livelihoods of the population, regional governments have instituted a series of policy measures. The fallout from these have impacted the region’s agriculture sector leading to surpluses of produce on farmers’ hands, limited intra-regional trade and unemployment.

While food supplies in the Caribbean are presently stable, Barton Clarke, CARDI’s Executive Director says “an extended period of this crisis coupled with the ongoing drought and the predicted active 2020 hurricane season will put the region’s agri food supply chains on a precarious footing”. “The Caribbean must set about producing its own food, promoting healthy food consumption and look towards import substitution as viable solutions towards ensuring food security in these uncertain times,” Clarke said.

CARDI has developed a comprehensive plan that is structured to minimise any future disruptions to Agri-food supply chains. Short term measures are focused on providing the critical support needed to maintain the integrity of the food supply chains while medium to long term measures address long term food security from the perspectives of increased production, reduced reliance on imports and resilience.

Immediately the Institute has ramped up the production of planting material for a variety of crops including grain legumes, corn, coconut, cassava, hot pepper and sweet potato across member states. These would be made available to commercial producers and home gardeners. In Antigua and Barbuda and St Kitts and Nevis, CARDI is also supporting national drives to increase production to meet the shortfall of fresh produce.

The Caribbean agriculture sector has been dealt a severe blow by extreme weather events over the last few years. These crises coupled with the prevalence of drought conditions have thwarted the rebuilding efforts in many countries. With the hurricane season just one month away the agriculture sector must be positioned to restart production with immediacy should any of the 18 predicted hurricanes for 2020 hit the Caribbean. CARDI is leveraging its partnerships with Tissue Culture Labs in Jamaica and St Vincent and the Grenadines in particular to collect and conserve both seed and vegetative planting material for crops of priority importance to the Region. From these collections quality planting material will be supplied to farmers to restart production. This intervention will result in minimal disruptions to food supply chains.

As part of the Institute’s resilience strategy, CARDI will continue to evaluate, train and sensitisise stakeholders on modern agricultural practices. Research is showing that the use of hydroponics, vertical farming, shade houses and container systems can be more productive and offer greater resilience over traditional systems. CARDI will also continue to evaluate and identify resilient high yielding varieties for commercially important crops.

Towards promoting the use and consumption of local foods, CARDI will work with partners to train agro processors on value added product development, good manufacturing processes and health and safety. This will not only extend the shelf life of produce beyond their marketing season but will also increase the profit margins to processors and farmers.
Cassava production on the rise in Dominica

Cassava is still a marginal crop in Dominica, with the majority of the population opting for other root crops in their diets – sweet potato, dasheen and yam. But the increasing consumption of cassava bread (Bami) and a growing migrant population that consumes fresh cassava tubers are helping to popularise the crop.

Baseline information collected during Phase I of the Cassava Industry Development – Market Assessment and Technology Validation and Dissemination Project has revealed an increase in the number of cassava farmers on the island and cultivation in non-traditional areas like Calibishie. Increasing development of value added products and improvements to agro processing plants by the Government of Dominica are also fueling this increase.

Under the project 4 varieties of sweet cassava were introduced from CIAT as tissue culture material. CARDI coordinated with CLAYUCa to wean and harden the introduced planting material and build capacity in these areas among staff of the Ministry of Blue and Green Economy, Agriculture and National Food Security. A germplasm plot of the varieties has been established at the Portsmouth Agricultural Station where agronomic evaluation is ongoing. Nineteen extension officers have also been trained using the Farmer Field School (FFS) methodology to enhance their knowledge and practical skills. This improves their capacity to better advise and serve farmers.

Under Phase II of the project, 40 farmers from the Kalinago Territory, Calibishie, Castle Bruce and Wesley will be trained in cassava production using the FFS methodology to enhance their knowledge and practical skills. This improves their capacity to better advise and serve farmers.

“Cardi is responsible for stabilizing and purifying the peppers that are grown at the Institute’s field station located on the DOA’s compound in Bodden Town.

In April, CARDI began the extraction of seeds from the 2020 crop. For some of the fruits that did not meet the strict quality guidelines for seed production, CARDI donated over 10lbs of fresh berries to the Meals on Wheels charity. The berries were used to prepare meals for seniors that were locked down at home during the COVID-19 crisis.

“We were happy to make this donation to the Meals on Wheels programme and it is something CARDI will continue to do in the future, for crops such as cassava and sweet potatoes. We understand the importance of our senior citizens having access to healthy, wholesome meals, Dr Annika Minnott, CARDI Representative in Cayman Islands stated.

The seeds produced by CARDI are handed over to the Department of Agriculture for seedling production. These seedlings are sold to the public. Between 2018-2019, CARDI supplied more than 850 grams of seeds to the DOA for seedling production.