Ministers’ Brief

Issue 4, April 2021

Agriculture hit hard by erupting volcano

Rewarding youth in agriculture

Grenadian women’s group gives new life to wasted fruits
After months of threatening, the La Soufrière volcano explosively erupted on April 9, blanketing much of St Vincent and the Grenadines in ash and gas. More than 13,000 persons were evacuated from the Red and Orange zones. The volcano continued to episodically erupt over a two week period with the last major eruption recorded on April 22. While all productive sectors were impacted, it was the country’s agriculture sector that was particularly hard hit.

CARDI was part of a Damage and Loss Assessment Team assembled by the Honourable Saboto Caesar, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, Rural Transformation, Industry and Labour (MAFFRTIL) to develop a preliminary damage and loss assessment report. Representatives from units within the MAFFRTIL, the Inter American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) were also part of the team which was supported by the Caribbean Disaster Management Agency (CDEMA).

Approximately 27% of the 10,500 registered farmers on the island, live and work in Red and Orange zones. Preliminary estimates reveal that damages and losses range from as low as 7% in the Green Zone to 100% for a substantial number of commodities in the Red and Orange Zones. The value of total damage and loss sustained by the crops, livestock, apiculture, fisheries and forestry sectors is estimated to be more than $142 million Eastern Caribbean Dollars (XCD).

In the Red Zone, 100% of vegetable crops and 60% of the 2021 arrowroot crop was loss, disrupting the livelihoods of many farm families. Damage to leafy vegetables was reported across the country. Approximately 90% of the tree crops and 80% of root crops were reported damaged in the Red Zone. Banana and plantain plants were also physically damaged and the fruits rendered unmarketable by the heavy ashfall.

More than 4,900 heads of small ruminants, 680 cattle and 400 pigs have been impacted in the Red Zone. Livestock that was left to roam freely was without forage as their pastures were totally destroyed by the ash and dust. The MAFFRTIL and other agencies have been supplying water and feed to the animals in the Red Zone daily. Additionally, molasses was sourced to supplement the feeding of these animals.

The livelihoods of more than 800 fisher folks have been directly affected by these eruptions. There has been reported damage to vessels, equipment and even to aquaculture systems. International export of fisheries products has ceased due to the closure of the airport.

Approximately 90% of forest in the Red Zone is estimated to be damaged. Wildlife has been impacted especially the National Bird (Amazona gildinghi) which is in its nesting season.

Severe infrastructural damage was reported to feeder roads, bridges, farmers’ homes, the Tissue Culture Laboratory in Orange Hill and the starch processing facility at Owia. The CARDI field station located in Rabacca suffered significant losses - 100% of crops were loss and 80% of infrastructure damaged.

Prior to the April eruption, the Institute moved collections of germplasm for banana and plantain, sweet potato, cassava and dasheen to a safer location in the Green Zone. These can now be multiplied and supplied to farmers.

CARDI is supporting blueprints for the construction of emergency pens for evacuation, transport and temporary housing for the animals. The Institute has also been canvassing its member states for planting material to kickstart agriculture production. CARDI’s seed production facility in Belize has also committed to shipping 3,000 lbs of corn (CARDI YC-001) to be used as grain for feeding animals and 200 lbs to be used as planting material - sufficient to plant 10 acres. This can potentially yield 20,000-25,000 lbs corn grain or approximately 300,000 cobs. CARDI YC-001 is an open pollinated variety which will allow farmers to save seeds. Additionally, through its subsidiary, the Caribbean Agricultural Commercial Services Hub Limited (CACSH), CARDI is in discussion with Seminis, to procure a selection of vegetable seeds for distribution to local farmers.

St Vincent and the Grenadines’ agriculture sector contributes 7% to GDP and directly employs more than 15,000 persons. It is an important source of livelihood and a significant foreign exchange earner. CARDI is committed to supporting the short, medium and long term rebuilding efforts of the sector.
Josh-Oneil Hemans, of Guy’s Hill High School in Jamaica, was awarded the CARDI sponsored prize for the best 2019 CSEC Agricultural Science (Double Award, DA) student. The CARDI award was established in 2017, in collaboration with CXC, to honour the Region’s top achieving Agricultural Science student at the CSEC level. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Josh-Oneil only received his prize from Country Representative, Dionne Clarke-Harris earlier this year.

With the love and support from his family, school staff and church members, who continuously encouraged and motivated him, Josh-Oneil pursued twelve subjects at the CSEC level. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Josh-Oneil only received his prize from Country Representative, Dionne Clarke-Harris earlier this year.

Given the ongoing pandemic, however, he believes that attitudes towards agriculture have shifted. For example, in his community in Jamaica, he has seen an increase in backyard farms and gardens and more persons becoming health conscious and producing and consuming more locally-grown produce. At his home, with the help of his family, Josh-Oneil has successfully planted tomatoes, sweet peppers, lettuce and pakchoi. They often enjoy these as family meals and share with friends.

“Agriculture in the Caribbean is relegated mostly to subsistence farming. It should be seen as more than just planting a few crops and raising some chickens.” According to Josh-Oneil, more work must be done in the industry to attract young persons. He thinks that by diversifying agricultural programmes at tertiary institutions, young persons will gravitate towards that area of study.

CARDI congratulates Josh-Oneil Hemans for his outstanding academic performance.

The Institute will continue to champion the involvement of youth in the sector.

Grenadian women’s group gives new life to wasted fruits

In 2020, the D Kats Women’s Cooperative was formed in Union, St. Andrews, Grenada. It consists of six women who are all the head of single-parent households. The women are primarily involved in value-added product development using locally sourced fresh fruits. Prior to this activity many of the raw products used in their operations were wasted/discarded.

The government has supported the establishment of this group by providing infrastructure, inputs and training in areas such as conflict resolution and personal hygiene. The manager of the group Goslyn Blackette acknowledges that through empowerment, the women now have the means to earn a livelihood, support their families and build their community. The work of the women is also helping to tackle a big problem in agriculture that of food loss/wastage. The FAO estimates that one-third of the food produced globally is lost or goes to waste.

Under the recently concluded FAO/CARDI Solar Project, the group was the beneficiary of a solar dryer that is located on the rooftop of the community centre, from where they operate. This will be used for the drying of fruits and root crops (sweet potato and cassava) to make flour in the future. The women also received training in sweet potato flour making under the project and are very keen to put the theoretical knowledge gained into practice. The project also supplied a hammer mill which they will use for grinding.

The D Kats Women’s group plans to market their range of sweet and savoury fruit based snacks at schools, local shops and supermarkets. Very soon they hope to also get into the processing of fresh fruit juices. With a label designed for their products done in collaboration with the Bureau of Standards and a tagline line, “taste that lasts forever,” already established, the group envisions that their products will hit the market later this year as they are on a mission to promote healthier eating through the increased utilisation of local produce.

CARDI remains committed to supporting women across the agriculture value chain.
Minister Saboto Caesar visits the CARDI Field station in Rabacca, where 80% of the infrastructure was damaged and 100% of crops were lost.

Construction has begun on a seedling nursery in Barbuda. This activity is supported under the IICA crowdfunded project.

Introducing students of the Acklins High School to best practices for layer management and construction of battery cages.

CARDI donated fresh cassava to Meals on Wheels. It will be used to prepare fresh meals for seniors on the island.