Today, 2nd September, 2020, is celebrated as World Coconut Day, recognized as such by the International Coconut Community (ICC), formerly known as the Asian and Pacific Coconut Community (APCC), and its members. The Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI), as an Accredited Organization to the ICC, shares in this celebration and its theme “Invest in Coconut to Save the World”. This theme highlights the roles of Coconut and its products in economic, health, social, cultural and environmental sectors. Similar to the Asian and Pacific Coconut Community, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and by extension, CARIFORUM, acknowledge Coconuts as part of their traditional and cultural ethos, such that it has been integrated into the very definition of Caribbean. Indeed, it has been an intrinsic part of the livelihoods of the peoples, with its importance highlighted in aesthetics, environmental protection and supporting rural livelihoods. Its economic importance is demonstrated in the rural livelihoods it has supported and the new markets which are available, being an input for the creation of food, household, spa and tourism products.

The Coconut industry has high agricultural potential, market appeal and economic attractiveness, making it a priority commodity for development. It is a crop which is grown across the Region on over 100,000 hectares, with annual production upwards of 850,000 tonnes. Coconut oil and coconut water are the highlight products derived from the commodity, followed by desiccated coconut and other niche items. Indeed this is consistent with global market trends where there has been a surge in demand for coconut value added products such as cold pressed virgin coconut oil, coconut flour, coconut sugar, desiccated coconut and coconut water in particular.

There are some key drivers which have been responsible for what has been termed the revitalization of the coconut industry. From a health and nutrition perspective, coconuts are regarded as a functional food. There are additional medical claims that it may be beneficial in the treatment of obesity, abnormal amount of lipids in the blood, elevated Low-Density Lipoprotein (LDL), insulin resistance and hypertension. Coconut water, regarded as a natural sport drinks due to its isotonic properties, is a rich source of amino acids, calcium, potassium, protein, fatty acid, electrolytes and magnesium. Coconut is also known to aid in the relief of particular infections (bacterial, viral, fungal or parasitic), due to its high anti-parasitic property. Additionally, coconut registers low on the glycaemic index, making it appealing to diabetics who are in need of items which are slow sugar releasing. Health benefits also pertain to the cosmetic industry which has been incorporating to a larger extent, the use of coconut as an ingredient into their beauty and cleansing products. Waste material traditional derived from the coconut such as
the husk and shell, they have become the catalyst for downstream industries in the tourism and agro processing sectors.

Though the regional coconut industry has a positive outlook, it remains challenged by aged plantations, a host of pest and disease threats, lack of availability of planting material, a limited range of value added products and other structural issues. These challenges are not insurmountable and indeed, various strategies have been tabled with respect to their management and remedy. It is understood that a collaborative management method is needed. A participatory approach has been advocated for by the International Trade Centre (ITC). This Alliances for Action approach involves the participation of all stakeholders along the coconut value chain and also coopts support institutions and bodies (Finance, Research, Regulatory, etc.)-together we can make a difference.

Advancement of the Regional Coconut industry is also framed in the context of a variable investment climate, climate change, technology advancement, environment and youth and gender considerations, all with a view towards engendering sustainability within the industry. As a Region, efforts must be aligned in terms of transforming the regional industry as follows:

- Instituting an aggressive programme towards increasing the availability of coconut planting material so as to increase coconut production across the Region.
- Instituting an aggressive programme towards managing and mitigating pest and disease issues.
- Building competitiveness through an increased range of coconut value added product offerings.

CARDI’s commitment to support the efforts of the various stakeholders within the coconut industry remains firm and as the agricultural research and development institute for CARICOM, it remains true to its motto of transforming lives through agricultural research and development. Recognizing that it can’t deliver on its mandate in isolation, CARDI along with the ITC and its Alliances for Action partners wishes all a successful and enjoyable World Coconut Day 2020.