



Food and Agriculture
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OP-ED: The necessary transformation of the Caribbean agri-food system

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Will the world be able to feed 28% more people by 2050? How do we ensure that we can all eat better and healthier without mortgaging the Earth's ability to produce food for our grandchildren? These are very challenging questions especially for the Caribbean, a region that unlike others in Latin America has an over-reliance on food imports even though there is a potential to produce healthy and nutritious food.

There are at least two powerful reasons that allow us to propose that there is an imperative need to transform the agri-food systems of the CARICOM, that is, the complex network of private and public actors, activities, customs and traditions, regulations, and, physical and economic conditions that determine what each person in the Caribbean eats every day.

First, the Caribbean needs to reduce its unhealthy and risky dependence on food imports. Most of the CARICOM countries are net food importers, and at least seven countries import more than 80% of the food they consume. Worse, one third of the imported foods are energy dense, high in fat, sugar and sodium, which explains the exponential increase in ultra-processed food consumption.

This contributes to world-record rates of overweight and obesity. The incidence of adult obesity quadrupled from 6% in 1975 to 28% in 2021. Alarming, overweight and obesity in children aged 5-9 years are two to three times higher than in the rest of the world. Unhealthy imported foods are cheap for the consumer, although their cost to society is very high. In the Caribbean, the cost of a healthy diet is 3.8 times higher than that of a diet that only meets the minimum caloric requirements. The future looks dismal if people in the Caribbean do not go back to eating healthy foods, and this will require a transformation from the farm to the table of consumers.

The second very powerful driver of the necessary transformation of agri-food systems is climate change. Hurricanes and droughts are becoming more frequent and intense, affecting the already limited Caribbean agricultural production. This sector absorbs 25% of the total damage and losses caused by extreme climate events. It is simple: there is no future for Caribbean agri-food systems if they fail to adapt and become far more resilient to climate change.

These two necessary objectives cannot be achieved by each CARICOM country on its own. No single country can produce and provide healthy foods to all of its population, but more integrated Caribbean agri-food systems could surely advance greatly in that direction. Also, no country on its own will be able to ensure the resilience of its domestic agri-food system when the next category 4 hurricane strikes, but a more integrated Caribbean agri-food system could deliver the necessary food supplies while the affected countries recover their production.

Regional action is not just convenient; it is a must when it comes to building the agri-food systems of the future.

For this reason, we celebrate CARICOM's COVID-19 Agri-food Action Plan and the OECS Regional Plan of Action for Agriculture, both regional efforts for action that are imperative in addressing Caribbean challenges in the agri-food sector, especially in the context of the pandemic and its ongoing effects.

FAO is working in partnership with Caribbean countries and regional organizations like the CARICOM and the OECS, to support the transformation of agri-food systems. We have four ambitions in our work: better production, better nutrition, better environment and better lives for all. How do we get there?

First, by encouraging technological innovation and digitalization, value-adding, and intraregional trade, which, together, will drive productivity, reduce the cost of healthy foods, and create thousands of good jobs for youth. Second, making healthy diets for everyone a core objective of national and regional policy, as it is the foundation of the health of the population. This will require a multi-pronged strategy, including by mainstreaming nutrition in agricultural policies and by fostering change in the food environments with a wide range of tools, from taxing unhealthy foods, to including nutrition education in school curricula. Third, invest in climate resilient agri-food systems, for example by strengthening early warnings and response systems. Finally, underpinning all, greater intra-regional policy coordination, involving not only governments but also private sector, civil society, and scientists.

In September 2021, Heads of State and of Governments will come together in New York at the United Nations Food System Summit. The Caribbean can be present with a clear and forceful blueprint to reset its agri-food systems so that they are fit for a better future for all of its peoples.