



IICA-COLEAD Caribbean Agrifood Business Series

Session n°19: Transforming Agrifood Systems: Opportunities for entrepreneurs in the Caribbean and Latin America

Thursday 23 October 2025 – 14:00-16:00 UTC / 10:00-12:00 AST

[Online \(Zoom\)](#)

Live interpretation in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese

1. Context

The agrifood sector in Latin America and the Caribbean is undergoing profound changes, driven by global trends, climate pressures, and evolving consumer demands. Rising food prices, energy and fertilizer costs, and supply chain disruptions, including those exacerbated by the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, are making access to nutritious and affordable food increasingly difficult. Across the region, disparities in production, nutrition, and market access shape food systems, with women, children, smallholder farmers, and urban poor populations being the most affected¹. At the same time, dependence on imported food leaves many Caribbean and Latin American countries vulnerable to external shocks, from natural disasters to economic volatility, creating both risks and opportunities for local agrifood entrepreneurs.

The sector is being reshaped by technology, climate, and changing markets. Climate change, through shifting rainfall, rising temperatures, and extreme events like floods, droughts, and hurricanes, is threatening productivity, food quality, and supply chain stability. Digital tools such as IoT sensors, drones, AI, automation, and blockchain are helping farmers and agribusinesses produce more efficiently, reduce losses, and build resilient, traceable supply chains. Consumers are increasingly demanding safe, nutritious, and sustainably produced foods, valuing transparency, ethical practices, and environmental responsibility.

The Caribbean and Latin American agrifood systems are very different: small, import-dependent, highly climate-vulnerable, and increasingly linked to tourism and resilience strategies in the Caribbean and large, export-driven, resource-abundant, and central to global food markets agrifood system in Latin America. However with regards to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), there appear to be a number of similarities.

In both regions, agrifood SMEs are mostly family-owned, small-scale enterprises and often informal. They struggle with credit constraints due to high collateral requirements, lack of tailored financial products, and limited investment-readiness². For the SMEs, access to working capital, insurance, and long-term investment remains a bottleneck. Agrifood SMEs often also face difficulty linking to larger markets, processors, and exporters. Further, SMEs have greater vulnerability to external shocks and climate events. SMEs in both regions often lack technical knowledge, business skills, and digital tools

¹ Caribbean Policy Development Centre. 2023. [Transforming agri-food systems in the Caribbean: Helping Small and Medium Scale \(SMS\) Food Producers to Eradicate Hunger and Malnutrition](#).

² World Bank Group. 2020. [Future Foodscapes: Reimagining Agriculture in Latin America and the Caribbean](#).

to upgrade production, improve efficiency, and access new markets. Finally, SMEs often operate in environments where policies, incentives, and support services are not tailored to their needs.

Despite constraints, SMEs in both regions are drivers of innovation in niche markets (organic products, agroecology, agro-tourism, processed foods). With respect to women and youth entrepreneurs operating these SMEs, they are especially dynamic, developing new products and services around food, gastronomy, and sustainability, and they play a critical role in employment and rural livelihoods³.

Addressing these challenges requires a major transformation of the region's food systems. Solutions must focus on boosting production by small and medium-scale farmers and SMEs, improving the nutritional quality of foods, and strengthening supply chains so that safe, affordable food is accessible by all.

The FAO's Strategic Framework 2022–2031 and other regional initiatives emphasize building efficient, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable food systems⁴. Guided by the four “betters” (better production, better nutrition, better environment, and better life), these frameworks encourage investment in small and medium-scale farming, technology adoption, sustainable practices, and improved supply chains⁵. This transformation presents both challenges and opportunities for Caribbean and Latin American agrifood entrepreneurs. By innovating, leveraging technology, and offering organic, specialty, or value-added products, businesses can reduce import dependency, strengthen local value chains, capture higher-margin markets, and enhance regional food security while responding to evolving consumer preferences.

2. Key agrifood changes

Climate change

Latin America and the Caribbean have long been recognized for their agricultural potential, thanks to diverse climates, fertile soils, rich natural resources, and a strong agricultural heritage. However, climate change now threatens this advantage.

Rising temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns, and more frequent extreme weather events, such as floods, droughts, and cyclones, are already disrupting agriculture⁶. Even small temperature increases (+0.5 °C) can have major impacts, affecting all four pillars of food security: availability, access, utilization, and stability. Floods have doubled, storm events increased by nearly 40%, and some areas are facing prolonged droughts. Events like El Niño also amplify these shifts, making agriculture highly unpredictable. These disruptions reduce productivity, raise food prices, and cut incomes, directly threatening regional food security and nutrition. Small and family farmers play a critical role in this system. They account for 81% of agricultural holdings in the region, produce 27–67% of total food, and provide 57–77% of agricultural employment. Yet they are highly vulnerable: 41% of rural households live in poverty, 19.5% in extreme poverty, and most depend on agriculture or natural-resource-based livelihoods. Women are particularly affected, facing higher poverty rates, heavier workloads, and unequal access to resources, which worsen the impacts of climate extremes on livelihoods and food security⁷.

Building climate-resilient food supply chains is therefore essential. Resilient supply chains stabilize food flows from producers to consumers, even during extreme events, and help protect incomes and livelihoods. They create reliable markets for small-scale farmers, support SMEs, stabilize prices, and promote sustainable agricultural practices. For entrepreneurs, investing in resilient production systems

³ IICA-COLEAD. [Caribbean Agrifood Business Session n°9: innovative youth-led businesses](#) and [Caribbean Agrifood Business Session n°8: successes from women-led businesses](#)

⁴ FAO. 2021. [Strategic Framework 2022-2031](#).

⁵ FAO. 2024. [Four priorities for Latin America and the Caribbean](#).

⁶ FAO. 2024. [Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition](#).

⁷ Aguilar Revelo, L. 2021. [Gender equality in the face of climate change: what can mechanisms do for the advancement of women in Latin America and the Caribbean?](#)

and supply chains is not only good business, but also critical for regional food security and economic stability.

Technology and digitalisation

The agricultural sector in Latin America and the Caribbean is undergoing a technological transformation. Digital tools, automation, and sustainable practices are helping farmers increase efficiency, boost productivity, and reduce environmental impact responsibility⁸. Sensors, drones, IoT devices, artificial intelligence, and data analytics enable real-time crop monitoring, optimize production, and improve water management. Robots and autonomous machinery enhance efficiency, while blockchain and biotechnology promote traceability, reduce pesticide use, and enable nutrient-enriched crops.

Technological advances address critical challenges across the value chain. Agriculture accounts for 74% of regional water use, with 50–70% lost to inefficiencies, but precision irrigation using soil sensors, weather data, and automated controls ensures water is applied only where and when crops need it⁹. Satellite imagery, drones, and sensor networks allow early detection of pests, diseases, and nutrient deficiencies, protecting yields and reducing economic losses. For high-value exports like flowers, fruits, and organic produce, cold-chain monitoring maintains quality by tracking temperature, humidity, and location, minimizing spoilage and value loss.

Digitalization is also transforming market access. The sector is shifting from traditional B2B models toward B2C platforms, leveraging e-commerce and digital payments to connect producers directly with consumers. Online marketplaces expand opportunities for smallholders and MSMEs, enable real-time transactions, and facilitate data-driven decision-making. These innovations improve supply chain management, pricing transparency, and responsiveness to consumer demand, boosting competitiveness and sustainability.

Despite these advances, challenges remain. Many companies lack digital talent, a culture of technology adoption, or comprehensive transformation strategies. Smallholders often face limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure, and low digital literacy. Overcoming these barriers is essential; digital technologies are a key driver of efficiency, competitiveness, economic growth, and food security, benefiting both large agribusinesses and small-scale producers.

Market and consumer shifts

Global agrifood trade has seen growing participation from low- and middle-income economies, driven by expanding networks and regional trade agreements. In the Central American Integration System (SICA) subregion, nearly half of exports are agrifood products, led by Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras, with an overall trade surplus, except for staples like wheat, corn, and rice. In contrast, Caribbean Community (CARICOM) countries, dominated by Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana, remain highly import-dependent, with over 60% of food imported and some states relying on imports for more than 80% of their supply¹⁰. With a growing population, reducing import dependency and increasing local production is essential. Heavy reliance on imports exposes the region to global supply chain disruptions, natural disasters, pandemics, and economic volatility, driving up food prices and undermining food security.

Consumer preferences are also shifting. They are more aware of how food is produced and its environmental impact, and they increasingly demand sustainable and ethical farming and livestock practices. Consumers want transparency about who produces their food, how it is made, and how it is

⁸ IDB. 2024. [Digital transformation and agribusiness: trends and opportunities in Latin America and the Caribbean](#).

⁹ Hologram. 2025. [From 50% water savings to 25% yield increases: Latin America's AgTech revolution by the numbers](#).

¹⁰ FAO. 2024. [Opportunities and challenges for agrifood trade between Central American Integration System and Caribbean Community countries](#).

distributed, seeking safety, health, and trust in what they eat. In the Caribbean, this awareness also extends to the high economic and environmental costs of food imports and the link between diet quality and chronic diseases, which is reshaping their food preferences and demands¹¹. Consumers are increasingly seeking organic, chemical-free products, encouraging farmers to adopt certified organic methods and inspiring new agri-entrepreneurs to develop innovative sustainable solutions.

Instead of focusing solely on raw commodity exports, SMEs are moving into branded, processed, or specialty foods, such as premium coffee, cacao, juices and jams, nutraceuticals or tropical superfoods like açai, chia, and moringa. By offering distinctive, high-quality foods that highlight the Caribbean's unique flavours, businesses can reduce import dependency, create jobs, improve economic resilience, and enhance regional food security.

3. Opportunities for entrepreneurs

In the wake of these new agrifood changes in the Caribbean and Latin America, entrepreneurs in the sector are well positioned to tap into several emerging opportunities.

Entrepreneurs can play a vital role in strengthening food security as global trade faces increasing disruptions. With frequent shocks, ranging from pandemics to conflicts that restrict exports, businesses that guarantee steady **local production and reliable distribution** are increasingly valuable. By building resilient supply chains, they can secure long-term contracts with governments, retailers, and the tourism industry, positioning themselves as essential partners in reducing dependency on imports.

Climate-smart practices represent major growth areas. Entrepreneurs who adopt drought- and salt-tolerant crop varieties, sustainable land management, greenhouse farming, or regenerative techniques can not only protect productivity but also attract impact investment and certifications that unlock premium markets. Consumers are willing to pay more for organic or sustainably grown food, creating a competitive advantage for producers who align with these practices.

Agro-processing, packaging, and cold-chain logistics open another path for value creation. Up to 30% of fresh produce is lost after harvesting due to spoilage and poor handling¹². By investing in cold storage, improved packaging, and small-scale processing (juices, dried fruits, sauces), entrepreneurs can reduce waste, extend shelf life, and capture more value within the region. These ventures also make exports more competitive, creating opportunities in high-value niches such as organic snacks or local specialty foods.

Intraregional trade offers significant potential for entrepreneurs. Strengthening Caribbean–Latin American value chain linkages can expand market access and reduce vulnerability to external shocks. Agribusiness fairs, B2B matchmaking, and regional platforms are beginning to connect SMEs from both regions, with initiatives such as IICA's *Caribbean Virtual Agri – Food Trade Mission* helping businesses showcase products, share knowledge, and secure partnerships. Latin American investors are also increasingly exploring opportunities in Caribbean agribusiness and food retail sectors, creating space for joint ventures, technology transfer, and co-branding, as seen during the 11th edition of IICA's *Virtual Business Roundtable of Agrifood Chains*¹³. By tapping into these exchanges, entrepreneurs can diversify markets, scale production, and integrate into wider regional supply chains, laying the groundwork for more resilient and competitive agrifood systems.

¹¹ Thevenin, R. 2024. [Cómo los consumidores están impulsando el avance hacia procesos de agricultura sostenible](#).

¹² Cortbaoui, P. E., & Ngadi, M. O. 2016. Characterization of Postharvest Practices and Losses of Fresh Produce along the Caribbean Supply Chain: Guyana and St. Kitts-Nevis. *Journal of Postharvest Technology*, 4(1), 16-25.

¹³ IICA. 2025. [More than 540 Latin American and Caribbean companies negotiated USD 20 million in tentative business deals at a virtual agrifood trade event](#).

Tourism recovery creates strong demand for fresh, local, and authentic foods. Hotels and resorts increasingly seek to source fruits, seafood, spices, and minimally processed goods directly from local suppliers. Entrepreneurs who can guarantee reliability, safety, and branding around “farm-to-table” or locally grown products not only gain premium prices but also benefit from tourism’s global showcase effect, helping their products reach international recognition¹⁴.

Digital platforms and e-commerce lower barriers to market access and reshape how farmers connect with consumers¹⁵. Entrepreneurs who create apps and delivery services can shorten supply chains, ensure farmers receive fairer profits, and provide consumers with transparency about food origins. Digital payments, traceability tools, and blockchain also improve trust and open new opportunities in regional and global trade. In fact, this year’s guiding principle of the *Caribbean Digital Week* is the strengthening of digital innovation ecosystems in the Americas¹⁶.

4. Challenges and support needed

For entrepreneurs to fully capitalize on these opportunities, they must overcome a set of persistent obstacles. Addressing these challenges will require targeted support from governments, regional institutions, and development partners to create an enabling environment for agrifood innovation and growth.

Women and youth remain central to agricultural labour in Latin America and the Caribbean, yet they face persistent barriers such as limited land ownership, restricted access to credit, and few training or decision-making opportunities. While entrepreneurs can help create inclusive solutions, real progress requires stronger public policies, gender-responsive financing, and dedicated capacity-building programs¹⁷.

Expanding market reach through regional cooperation is essential, but entrepreneurs alone cannot overcome high transport costs, fragmented logistics, and non-harmonized standards. Governments and regional bodies must reduce trade barriers, improve infrastructure, and boost competitiveness so agrifood businesses can benefit from economies of scale, bulk purchasing, and cross-border branding. Persistent challenges, such as poor logistics connectivity, limited transport options, infrastructure gaps, low productivity, and weak quality control systems, require coordinated action, including harmonization of sanitary and phytosanitary standards and investment in ports and maritime routes¹⁸.

Access to finance is a main barrier for entrepreneurs. Although impact investors and development banks are increasingly interested in sustainable agrifood systems, entrepreneurs still struggle with limited collateral, high interest rates, and complex application procedures¹⁹. SMEs often lack the financial literacy or networks to secure grants or concessional loans. To unlock growth, governments and international partners must expand blended finance mechanisms, reduce barriers to entry, and provide technical assistance, so entrepreneurs can innovate, scale, and compete.

¹⁴ Caribbean Agribusiness. 2020. [Linkages between Tourism and Agriculture](#).

¹⁵ IICA-COLEAD. [Caribbean Agrifood Business Session n°18: e-commerce and digital marketing for agrifood products](#)

¹⁶ IICA. [Digital Week 2025](#).

¹⁷ Caribbean Agribusiness. [Women in Agriculture](#).

¹⁸ Santamaría, V. 2024. [Opportunities and Challenges for Agrifood Trade Between Central American Integration System and Caribbean Community Countries](#).

¹⁹ CGIAR. 2025. [Financing the transition. Takeaways from the II EU-LAC Agri-Food Dialogue on strategies and instruments to promote sustainable livestock](#).

5. The way forward

The agrifood sector in Latin America and the Caribbean is entering a decisive period of transformation. The combined pressures of climate change, global market volatility, and shifting consumer preferences are exposing the vulnerabilities of current food systems while also creating space for innovation and renewal. Rising food prices, heavy import dependency, and climate-driven disruptions threaten the security of millions, particularly women, children, smallholder farmers, and the urban poor. At the same time, the growing demand for safe, sustainable, and transparent food offers new avenues for growth, entrepreneurship, and regional self-reliance.

Entrepreneurs stand at the centre of this transition. By harnessing technology, adopting climate-smart approaches, and building inclusive business models, they can lead the development of more resilient supply chains and reduce the region's dependence on external markets.

Yet, the full potential of entrepreneurship in the sector will only be realized if enabling conditions are strengthened. Governments, regional bodies, and development partners must work together to remove structural barriers, expand access to finance, investing in digital and physical infrastructure, harmonizing standards, and ensuring gender- and youth-inclusive policies.

By aligning entrepreneurial dynamism with supportive policies, sustainable practices, and inclusive strategies, Latin America and the Caribbean can move from vulnerability to leadership in building food systems that are efficient, sustainable, and just. The path ahead is clear: fostering collaboration across sectors, investing in resilience and technology, and placing people and the planet at the centre of food system transformation.

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Moderation: Allister Reynold Glean, Representative in Barbados, IICA

14:05-14:10 Introduction

- Jeremy Knops, General Delegate, COLEAD

14:10-15:10 Panel 1: Opportunities for entrepreneurs in transforming agrifood systems

- David Crum-Ewing, Operations Executive, Grace Kennedy, Jamaica
- Maryan Setrodikoro, Director, Eden Herbs and Spices, Suriname
- Larry Holder, Public Relations Executive, Novo Foods, Trinidad and Tobago
- Maria Luisa Luque Sánchez, Co-Founder, Nuup, Mexico

Moderation: Nina Desanlis-Perrin, Project Officer, COLEAD

15:10-15:30 Panel 2: Insights from experts

- Juan Carlos Estrada, Commercial Support Technician, Secretary of Economic Integration of Central America (SIECA)
- Melissa Brown, Senior Agriculture Economist, World Bank
- Phelese Brown, Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist, Jamaica Social Investment Fund (JSIF)

15:30-15:50 Q&A session

15:50-16:00 Conclusion and way forward



This event was organised by the Fit For Market Plus programme, implemented by COLEAD within the framework of Development cooperation between the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS), and the European Union (EU).

This publication has been produced with the financial support of the EU and the OACPS. Its contents are the sole responsibility of COLEAD and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the EU or the OACPS.