



Session n°22:

Exploring international and intra-regional market opportunities for Caribbean agrifood MSMEs

Tuesday 22 September 2026

HIGHLIGHTS

About IICA-COLEAD Caribbean Agrifood Business Series

In June 2021, the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) and COLEAD launched the Caribbean Agrifood Business Series to showcase the innovations and successes of Caribbean farmer-led businesses and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This series is part of the IICA-COLEAD collaboration aimed at developing a more sustainable and resilient agriculture sector in the Caribbean region.

The session n°22 explored the international and intra-regional market opportunities for Caribbean agrifood MSMEs. The event featured 3 accomplished entrepreneurs, from Dominica, Grenada and Suriname. The discussion also showcased experts in market requirements and trade. The session drew 424 registrants from across continents.

Programme, biodata, presentations and recordings of the session are available on [Agrinnovators](#).

Key points discussed

- **CARICOM represents an important market opportunity for Caribbean agrifood MSMEs.** Regional markets can provide a practical pathway for businesses to build experience, establish buyer relationships and strengthen their capacity before expanding into more demanding international markets. CARICOM also offers tariff-free access and strong geographic and cultural proximity, making it a natural first export market.
- **There is significant potential for import substitution.** The Caribbean remains heavily dependent on food imports, creating opportunities for local and regional businesses to supply products that are currently sourced from outside the region.
- **A range of agrifood products offer opportunities for regional trade,** including prepared foods, blends and concentrates, prepared fruits and vegetables, juices and beverages, sauces and condiments, spices and botanicals, and cocoa and chocolate products.
- **Market selection needs to be based on real demand.** Businesses should assess who the buyers are, what they are looking for, the competitive landscape, pricing, regulations, logistics and the most appropriate route to market before investing in market entry.
- **Export readiness starts well before the first shipment.** Product quality and consistency need to be supported by appropriate food safety systems, certification, traceability, packaging, labelling, production capacity and the ability to reliably meet buyer requirements.
- **Logistics can significantly affect competitiveness.** High shipping costs, limited transport connections, cold-chain requirements, shipment sizes and delivery schedules can make intra-regional trade challenging, particularly for fresh and time-sensitive products.
- **Testing a market before scaling can help businesses manage risk.** Trade events, buyer engagement and trial shipments can provide valuable insight into customer preferences, regulatory requirements and practical market-access challenges.
- **The ability to convert an opportunity into an order is a key challenge.** Businesses may identify a buyer but still face constraints related to working capital, certification, packaging, production capacity or freight costs. Addressing these interconnected constraints is essential to turning market

opportunities into sustainable business.

- **Collaboration and shared capacity can help MSMEs overcome individual constraints.** Partnerships, cooperatives, clusters, joint ventures and shared-use facilities can provide access to production, technical and compliance capabilities that may otherwise be difficult for smaller businesses to develop independently.
- **Caribbean identity and authenticity can create competitive advantages.** Cultural heritage, distinctive ingredients and Caribbean products can be particularly relevant to diaspora, tourism, specialty food, health and wellness, and premium markets.
- **Stronger support throughout the export journey is important.** Business Support Organisations can help businesses identify and validate opportunities, strengthen export readiness, connect with credible buyers and follow through from initial interest to actual orders and repeat business.

Key insights from panellists

John Robin, Managing Director, Benjo Seamoss



John Robin reflected on how Caribbean products can carry cultural identity beyond the region, with authenticity and a sense of belonging becoming part of the value of the product itself.

“When you think of a cultural ambassador, the things that come to mind are authenticity, promoting belonging, strong recognition, and building communities.”

Madhevi Gopal, Co-Director, Gopex



Madhevi Gopal shared Gopex’s experience of testing the Caribbean market and stressed that successful exporting starts well before entering a new market from understanding the market and its requirements to maintaining consistent quality from the farm onwards.

“Before entering a new market, we need to understand the market, the rules, and the customers. Export starts on the farm. Good farming, checking the crops, keeping records, and making sure the quality stays the same.”

Roderick St. Clair, General Manager, Grenada Co-operative Nutmeg Association



Roderick St. Clair explained how GCNA has diversified into value-added nutmeg products and stressed that building markets requires being present on the ground, through market visits and trade shows, and listening to customers to keep improving products

“You need to have physical contact, you need to be on the ground. Going online alone is not going to cut it.”

Ruel Sandiford Edwards, Managing Partner, Soleil Consulting



Ruel Sandiford-Edwards set the scene with an analysis of CARICOM agrifood trade, showing that the largest deficits lie in processed foods, where MSMEs can compete. He proposed six moves: treat CARICOM as the first export market, focus on priority markets, prioritise standards, build shared capacity, fix bankability and scale up step by step.

“Even within our own market, there is an opportunity for us to supply a lot more of what we eat.”

Julia Deane, Business Development Officer, Export Barbados



Julia Deane focused on the challenge that comes after a market opportunity has been identified: helping a business overcome the practical barriers that stand between finding a buyer and securing an actual order.

“Telling a business there’s a buyer in market X doesn’t solve anything.”

She described this challenge as the “market conversion gap”: the point where businesses may have a viable product and a potential buyer, but still lack the capacity, certification, financing or logistics needed to complete the transaction.

Koen Vanderhaegen, Market Insights, COLEAD



Koen brought a market intelligence perspective and showed how trade data can help identify, compare, verify and test opportunities, and how regional markets can serve as a platform to professionalise before facing more demanding markets such as the European Union.

“The biggest market is not always the right market. The right market is the one that matches with your business today while helping you build the capabilities you will need for tomorrow.”

Resources

1. Reports, articles and studies

Commonwealth Secretariat. (2024). National agricultural data infrastructure: Caribbean (Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda Policy Brief).

Caribbean Business & Travel. (2024). Caribbean Food Security Report and Investment Opportunities. In S. A. Baptiste (Ed.), G. Bindley-Taylor (Assoc. Ed.), R. Seeram, K. De Abreu, M. Buckmire, D. Gonsalves, M. Stevens, Z. Spencer, & S. Mok (Contributors). Carigold Signature.

IICA-COLEAD. Caribbean Agrifood Business Session n°9: innovative youth-led businesses and Caribbean Agrifood Business Session n°8: successes from women-led businesses

IICA-COLEAD. Caribbean Agrifood Business Session n°5: Agriculture Trade: Opportunities for SMEs in Export Markets

CARICOM Private Sector Organization. (n.d.). Twenty-Five (25%) by 2025 initiative.
<https://thecpso.org/twenty-five-25-by-2025-initiative>

Sandiford, R (June 2026). *CARICOM Market Opportunity Assessment*. Presentation at IICA Delegation in Jamaica Workshop titled Exporting to the Caribbean

OECD/IDB (2024), Caribbean Development Dynamics: Regional Integration and International Partnerships.

2. Webinars

COLEAD-IICA Caribbean Agrifood Business Series: https://agrinovators.org/session_region/caribbean-iica-colead/

3. Trainings

Caribbean Export : <https://carib-export.com/resources/training/>

COLEAD e-learning platform: <https://training.colead.link/>

IICA training: <https://seed.iica.int/>

Interamerican Development Bank (IDB): <https://cursos.iadb.org/en>

ITC SME Trade Academy: <https://learning.intracen.org/>

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