

**Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry,
Fisheries, Rural Transformation,
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Droughts, Hurricanes, Pandemic, and Hope.
Current realities impacting Caribbean Agriculture**

It is often said that, "God will not give us more than we can bear". The agriculture sector in the Caribbean can be hopeful even amidst the avalanche of seemingly insurmountable challenges. A united approach to regional agriculture is the only way we can keep hope alive.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines is currently experiencing one of its worst droughts in over fifty (50) years. The regional forecast for the 2020 Caribbean Hurricane season is not heart-warming. These challenges are our farmers' and fishers' day to day concerns, as we live with ears glued to COVID-19 health protocols. However, giving up is not an option! Our resilience as a region can be a global successful showcase, if we combine our efforts to effectively grapple with the vagaries resulting from our challenges.

The Way Forward:

Over the past eight (8) years, I had the opportunity as a policy maker to traverse the hemispheric front line of food production. COVID-19 has brought to the fore the paramount importance of food sovereignty. Never again in our lifetime should anyone dream or even imagine to slight the critical role of food producers. I anticipate that the aggregated State budget for regional food production will increase significantly in the decade 2020 -2030 as a result of three (3) important factors. Firstly, there will be a shift in labour towards the food production sector. Secondly, capital invested in agriculture will have greater projected returns on investment than other sectors. Thirdly, technology will provide greater utility in the expansion of agriculture since a new generation of producers will enter the food production value chain. This will encourage the State to increase its support to agriculture investment.

It is critical that we restate that there is a consensus among all regional policy makers that food security is vital. This is a clear expression of a political will to creatively advance the cause of food production and productivity.

Both the OECS and CARICOM Secretariats are busy today, seeking modern modalities to address the food production sector.

For the first time, we have seen such speed to create virtual purchasing platforms for food, utilizing website

platforms, and social media to engage stakeholders within and across Member States.

The aim is that wholesalers, retailers, and consumers can use their cell phones and laptops to make orders of food which will be delivered to their door steps.

Currently, logistics and distribution platforms are being designed. This advent is a creature of the "social and physical distancing" advisories advanced by COVID-19 health protocol officials. Young people are becoming excited and businessmen who are engaged in the distribution of goods are finding interesting possibilities from the virtual marketing of Agriculture produce. It is the way to go!

CARICOM Member States are all urged to create supportive platforms for food production stakeholders through special budget allocations. This is certainly necessary, since farmers and fisher folk will be witnessing significant increases in the cost of production because of climate change and inevitable slowdowns resulting from the pandemic. Regional barriers to trade must be removed now! The unfounded belief that our 'lamb' is bad, but lamb from distant lands must be better must become a myth of the past.

The following are achievable targets for the Caribbean's Agriculture Sector that we must seek to achieve when the COVID-19 dust "clears":

1. There must be a virtual market place for food products made in CARICOM so that consumers throughout the region can access;
2. Intra-regional trade in agriculture products should be prioritized and increased;
3. Strengthening of local food production value chain will reduce national food import bills;
4. The decline in tourism employment will shift labour and capital towards food production investment, until we see a revival of the tourism sector;
5. Emergence of a modern and competitive food production platform; and
6. Establishment of a working cadre of innovative entrepreneurs across the region working to promote regional import substitution.

Effective communication among producers, traders and technicians will be critical for the success of our modern agriculture. Manmade self-centered barriers must be removed. We must collectively own this dispensation. In a truly functioning single market, food products must move freely. I have confidence that we can and will achieve success!

Hon. Saboto S. Caesar is a former Island Scholar and lawyer by profession, with a specialization in Banking and Finance Law. He is the youngest elected member of Parliament in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and currently serves as the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, Rural Transformation, Industry and Labour.