

Virtual agricultural clearing house programme to facilitate local food procurement in Saint Lucia



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Quick facts



Type of procurement:
local fruits and vegetables



Year of inception: **2016**



Type of business: **Non-profit membership organization responsible for facilitating tourism sector development and management in St. Lucia.**



Organisation name:
Saint Lucia Hotel and Tourism Association Inc. (SLHTA)



Number of staff: **14**



Country/region: **Saint Lucia, West Indies Caribbean**

Background information

Saint Lucia is a tropical island tourism destination of 616 square kilometre, home to approximately 173,000 people in the Caribbean also known as the West Indies. The tourism sector in Saint Lucia has been a main contributor to the growth and development of the economy. The direct contribution of travel & tourism to the GDP was 223 Million USD, or 15% of total GDP in 2017 and is forecast to rise by 5,8% in 2018.

In Saint Lucia, the majority of hotels import most food products from other countries, including fruits and vegetables. Even when a facility is buying fresh produce from local suppliers, often the product has originated from an imported source.

The challenge

With 60 to 70% of sourced products coming from imports, local agricultural produces are not effectively penetrating the marketplace within the hospitality sector in Saint Lucia. In 2014, the SLHTA (Saint Lucia Hotel & Tourism Association) took on the challenge of identifying the reasons why the local supply chain was not the first choice for tourism professionals. Meetings were organised between the Ministry of Agriculture, approx. 80 farmers (representing both individual producers and some small cooperatives) along with chefs and purchasing agents from the hospitality industry.

The exchanges revealed primarily that **there was no commonly understood information flow about what is available and from who locally. There was also poor knowledge on the variety and abundance of fruits and vegetables being produced in Saint Lucia.** There was clearly an opportunity to bridge the gap between producers and consumers of agricultural produce in Saint Lucia.

The strategy

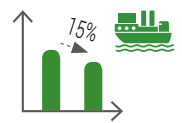
In 2016, the Saint Lucia Hotel and Tourism Association strived to create a vibrant and effective platform that would connect agricultural producers directly to a market place within the hospitality sector. After realising that both farmers and chefs all share a common communication platform via their respective cell phones, i.e. the digital WhatsApp platform, the **Virtual Agricultural Clearing House Programme** was launched – via the creation two WhatsApp groups namely *agricultural producers* and *chefs*. After being launched, the two groups of over 100 producers and 60 chefs quickly grew and now over 300 message s are exchanged daily, hence creating an active and successful platform connecting the relevant players in the fresh produce marketplace.



Impacts



- ➡ Chefs are alerted to the freshest of available products daily;
- ➡ Delivery and receipt of produce has improved: **food waste has been reduced by approx. 15%** as quick direct sales are now achievable for produce at its freshest;
- ➡ Increased sales for the farmers, many of whom have developed excellent relationships with the hotels, restaurants and food and beverage distributors whom they supply directly;
- ➡ **Diversity of locally available products has improved** as chefs and producers are collaborating to grow local produce which was traditionally imported. Supplies now being produced and traded locally within this Programme has increased, thus supporting the income of local farmers and suppliers. They include, but are not limited to: bananas, mangoes, papaya, soursop, golden apples, water-melon, oranges, limes, lemons, guava, plantain, yams, dasheen, tomatoes, breadfruits, avocados, lettuce, cucumbers, Chinese cabbage, carrots, mushrooms, honey etc.
- ➡ Since 2016, the Virtual Agricultural Clearing House Programme has continued to grow – helping to increase the reliance on local versus imported produce. **Imported produce for the hospitality sector has decreased by approximately 15%**, thus reducing the subsequent greenhouse gas emissions.
- ➡ The Virtual Agricultural Clearing House Programme has also been upgraded to connect with Tri Farm's eCrop¹, an online crop forecasting and modelling tool which provides hotels and other buyers with real-time data on what crops will be available months in advance and from which farmers they can be purchased.
- ➡ In its first year of operations, over **400 farmers have enrolled in the programme resulting in over 800,000 USD worth of produce traded.**



Lessons learned

- ✓ Buyers and end-users (hotels owners, procurers and chefs) are an integral part of a value chain. Pre-initiation meetings involving the chefs and the local suppliers to **understand the needs of both demand and supply sides were essential** to get them on board and aligned with the Programme.
- ✓ Technology can be leveraged to embrace sustainable procurement practices: there is no need to reinvent the wheel: **basic social media platforms are easily adaptable** to serve greater objectives than just being a chat exchange platform.

"The Virtual Agricultural Clearing House now allows me to get the freshest and fastest food in St. Lucia allowing me as a chef to work with ingredients at the peak of their quality"

Chef Juan Bochenski Jade Mountain Resort

¹ More information available at: <https://www.trifarm ltd.com/tri-farms-ecrop/>

For further information

- <http://www.slhta.com/slhta-to-increase-sale-of-local-produce-through-virtual-agricultural-clearing-house/>
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