CONTRIBUTION 1.3

Strengthening Sanitary and Phytosanitary Capacity of the Fisheries Sectors within CARIFORUM Countries for Improved Market Access under the Economic Partnership Agreement

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Abstract

The fisheries sector is important for CARIFORUM States as it provides employment and contributes to food and nutrition security and export earnings. Over the years, several countries have successfully traded in European and other international markets and accrued economic benefits therefrom. However, some countries are unable to access these markets as they are incapable of satisfying the sanitary and phytosanitary status required by trading partners. To assist countries to capitalise on the market opportunities available under the Economic Partnership Agreement, investments have been made through the European Development Fund in the area of SPS compliance. Specifically, over the past ten years under the 10th and 11th European Development Fund (EDF), significant investments were made to address the constraints impacting the Region's capacity to comply with international SPS standards. Namely, strengthening the regulatory framework through the development of model legislation, strengthening mechanisms to improve coordination among stakeholders involved in national and regional SPS controls of fisheries products, training of stakeholders to meet food safety standards, and improving laboratory capacity to monitor the quality of fish and fisheries products entering regional and international markets. These investments are discussed in relation to their contribution to harmonizing fisheries SPS systems and improving access into international markets.

KEYWORDS: Economic Partnership Agreement, SPS Investments, Fisheries Capacity Building

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1. INTRODUCTION

The fisheries sector is important for CARIFORUM countries (Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Commonwealth of Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago), as it provides employment and contributes to food and nutrition security and export earnings. Specifically for CARICOM Member States, employment in the fisheries sector since 2008 is at an average of about 5% of the labour force of the region. The averages for 2019/2020 are that aquaculture employs approximately 4,400 persons; there are approximately 110 thousand marine fishers; and approximately 326 thousand other workers. The estimated average production from the marine capture fisheries of CRFM Member States for 2019 to 2020 was approximately 132,877 tonnes (landings/meat weight), 147,870 tonnes (live weight). Annual average production for the period 2011 to 2020 (the last 10-year period) was 161,417 tonnes (live weight)/144,880 tonnes (landings/meat weight) (CRFM 2023).

Fisheries products represent one of the highest value single group of commodities exported from CRFM countries, with export values in 2019 and 2020 total domestic exports (including exports of fish for food, bait and live ornamental fish for breeding or rearing) being approximately 61,648 tonnes annually (67,824 tonnes in 2019 and 55,472 tonnes in 2020). Fish exported for food accounted for 99.9% of the total. The total value of the domestic exports from all Member States combined was US$292.5 million in 2019 and US$234.81 million in 2020 (CRFM 2023).

2. ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT - LIMITATIONS OF ACCESSING BENEFITS

In 2008, CARIFORUM countries signed the CARIFORUM European Union (EU) Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) which provides trade and marketing opportunities for companies in the Caribbean Region. Beneficiaries include Caribbean businesses, Caribbean governments, public sector, private sector, civil society, importers, exporters.

Generally, trading of high-risk products such as fish and fish products within the EU relies on the ‘green lists’ of authorised countries, exporters, processors, and producers. This approach places the responsibility on competent authorities of exporting countries to restrict trade to products that have been authorised by the national competent authorities (IICA 2017a). As such, exports into the EU can be severely limited by the capacity of national government agencies to deliver on those oversight responsibilities. Therefore, EU controls consider the equivalence to EU regulations of the nationally nominated CA and its control systems.

Over the years, countries have not optimised the trading benefits of the EPA owing in part to their inability to comply with Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) requirements of the EU; including quarantine and biosecurity measures which are applied to protect human, animal or plant life or health from risks arising from the introduction, establishment and spread of pests and diseases and from risks arising from additives, toxins and contaminants in food and feed. Only seven of the fifteen CARIFORUM countries are currently authorised to export to the EU market, based on the ability of countries to certify the sanitary status of national system; that is, having controls at least equivalent.

Specific limitations that impact SPS compliance include an outdated regulatory environment, fragmentation across jurisdictions responsible for the SPS regime and limited capacity of public and private sector professionals in key areas required the implementation of the SPS regime (IICA 2020). As such, these limitations must be addressed for improved compliance and increased access to European markets.

A study was conducted under the 10th EDF SPS Measures Project in which a cost benefit analysis was undertaken on SPS investments. The results showed that investments in the upgrading of SPS conditions in the 15 CARIFORUM countries provide clear positive benefits, more than the costs involved (IICA 2017a). Overall, for every US$1 spent, US$3.14 of economic benefits are derived. Sustained over a period of 10 years, an annual expenditure of approximately US$100 million/year would therefore be estimated to generate an additional value added of US$314 million a year through improved trading conditions.

It is important, however, to ensure that before investments are made towards strengthening the SPS regime there is an appreciation of the complexities of the agricultural health and food safety system because they are multidisciplinary, multidimensional and span multiple areas (animal health including fisheries, plant health, and food safety). As such, issues relating to non-compliances are diverse in nature, and wide ranging and solutions must be identified through a systematic analysis of the SPS system.

3. IMPROVING SPS COMPLIANCE POTENTIAL THROUGH INVESTMENTS TO MODERNISE SPS CONTROLS IN FISHERIES

Towards assisting countries to capitalise on the market opportunities that are to be gained under the Economic Partnership Agreement, for over ten years, investments have been made through the European Development Fund. Within the 10th and 11th European Development Fund (EDF), significant investments have been made to address the constraints impacting the Region's capacity to comply with international SPS standards (IICA 2017b and 2023). Specifically, the capacity of the public and private sectors was built to improve enforcement and implementation of international standards required for trade.

Public Sector. For the public sector (government ministries and agencies) it was important that the investments made strengthened official controls such, that they are based on scientific and technical evidence provided by competent and certified laboratories, and that the SPS system is enforced throughout the entire supply chain. Investments were therefore made to modernise the regulatory environment by updating the national legislation which for some countries were over forty years old and did not address SPS standards and issues concerning fish and seafood. Model bills and regulations were developed for use by countries to harmonise and modernise their legislation and improve their capacity to enforce measures required by their trading partners (Table 1). In addition, towards improved coordination among stakeholders involved in national and regional SPS controls of fisheries products, a framework was developed to assist countries to improve the effective management and operations of SPS systems. Altogether, these provide greater efficiencies for the trade of goods.

Capacities were also strengthened to manage the SPS system through training of Senior fisheries and SPS technical and management experts in fisheries SPS measures. Laboratory testing services, which are often inadequate and pose challenges to CARIFORUM countries for achieving the certification of products to meet international market standards, were strengthened through training of technical professionals in product testing and fisheries inspection and control operations. The laboratories were also upgraded, through training, technical assistance and provision of equipment, to improve their capacity to monitor the quality of fish and fisheries products entering regional and international markets.

Private sector. Within the context of the SPS regime, the responsibility of private sector (food industry, private sector producers, processors, traders, and exporters), is to adhere to standards and guidelines that ensure the production of high-quality safe products. Specifically, they are required to ensure that production steps are well managed, that national regulations are met and that, in the case of exporters, that there is compliance of SPS standards set by their destination markets. One limitation to increasing the trade of fish and fishery products is the limited capacity of fisherfolk to respond to international health and sanitary requirements. Hence through a series of interventions, the knowledge and skills of private sector actors were enhanced to meet food safety standards through the development of capacity building tools, the conduct of training and the provision of technical guidance in the area of Good Fish and Fishery Product Hygiene Practices.

4. IMPROVING ACCESS AND TRADE IN EUROPEAN AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL MARKETS

These investments made through the European Development Fund have contributed towards harmonising regional systems with international standards, guidelines and protocols and building the foundation for improved enforcement of SPS controls and implementation of international standards. These improvements to post-harvest handling, processing, quality control and marketing of fish and other seafood products, will allow countries to find their place in the global fish trade market by expanding regional and international trade of fish and fisheries products.

However, accruing the benefits will only be attained by countries that fully utilise the tools, knowledge and skills gained to organise and maintain their official controls, thus facilitating agri-food export business operators to apply compliant systems and ensuring that only compliant products are exported. Sustaining these investments requires:

- Strengthened policy environment through the adoption and implementation of a robust modern, integration policy.
- Increased utilisation of the tools to upgrade legislative framework. The current level of utilisation of the tools across countries is low. Efforts are being made to ensure their use in national systems through greater awareness programmes.
- Enhanced collaboration, cooperation, and coordination among entities responsible for the SPS regime though the use of the framework which guides countries to improve national efficiencies within the SPS system.

- Increased monitoring of the performance of the national AHFS system to determine bottlenecks impacting trade. Assessments of countries that would like to actively trade fish and fish products within EU market to determine the progress towards obtaining certification by EU authorities.
- Promotion of food safety culture in the region (public awareness). Institutionalize food safety demands.
- Increased awareness of new trends as it relates to SPS requirement in EU markets so that countries can be more proactive in meeting trade requirements.
- Improved awareness of the demands of consumers globally, as SPS systems continually evolve, requiring sustained investments to meet the changing requirements. CARIFORUM countries must establish finance mechanisms to support investments in particular within the private sector and utilise robust tools that will allow the prioritisation of SPS investments based on risks (public health, economic, environmental and social factors).

From the investments through the European Development Fund, CARIFORUM countries have an improved framework on which to strengthen SPS controls and facilitate the implementation of standards aligned with international market requirements. However, there is the need for countries to make the systematic changes to the SPS system that are required to gain market access and fully capitalise on the benefits of the EPA.

Table 1. SPS Investments under the 10th and 11th EDF SPS Measures Projects

	ACHIEVEMENTS	SPECIFIC OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES
Enforcement of SPS Controls	Strengthened the regulatory framework through the development of model legislation (bills and regulations).	○ Draft Model Aquatic Animal Health Bil ○ Draft Model Aquatic Food Safety Regulations.
	Strengthened mechanisms to improve coordination among stakeholders involved in national and regional SPS controls of fisheries products.	○ Green Paper for a Caribbean Regional Fisheries SPS Framework developed to towards Strengthening National and Regional SPS Monitoring Programmes. ○ Plan developed for the implementation of the appropriate mechanism(s) for improved regional coordination of SPS and AHFS management and/or monitoring of the fisheries and aquaculture sector. ○ Decision support tool developed to assist countries in identifying priorities. ○ M&E tool developed to measure the impact of the intervention.

Enforcement of SPS Controls	Trained public sector stakeholders to meet food safety standards.	○ Senior fisheries and SPS technical and management experts from thirteen (13) countries trained in fisheries SPS measures.
	Improved laboratory capacity to monitor the quality of fish and fisheries products entering regional and international markets.	○ Assessment *of national and regional environmental monitoring programmes* was conducted and a proposal on strengthening national and regional SPS monitoring programmes was developed. ○ Regional Laboratory Training in Product Testing and Fisheries Inspection and Control Operations - Thirty (30) technical professionals were trained. ○ Based on the assessment two laboratories upgraded through training, technical assistance and equipment to improve testing capacity.
Implementation of SPS measures	Trained private sector to implement food safety international standards.	○ International protocols and guidelines developed in CARIFORUM Protocols on Good Fish and Fishery Product Hygiene Practices: *Chemical Use, Equipment Use and Maintenance, Packaging, Personnel Hygiene, Pest Control, Product Transport, Water and Ice Quality, Worker Welfare and Safety Protocol, Fish Hygiene Licensing and Inspection Regulations.* ○ Guidelines were implemented in Ocean Delight (Suriname) and Tibu Impex (Guyana). More than 100 persons were trained, > 5 trainers trained. HACCP plans developed for operations. ○ Fisheries Food Safety Hub was developed to increase accessibility to fisheries food safety compliance materials. The Hub serves as the central access point for the food safety resources for the Caribbean.

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