



REPORT

Forum of OECS Youth and Women in Agriculture with OECS Ministers of Agriculture

Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture

Young Americas Business Trust

Organization of Eastern Caribbean States

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Forum of OECS Youth and Women in Agriculture

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Executive Summary

In May 2025, the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), in collaboration with the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), organized the Forum of OECS Youth and Women in Agriculture IICA Headquarters in Costa Rica. This initiative aimed to empower youth and women in agriculture by exposing them to innovative practices within the agricultural industry and promoting cross-border collaboration. This event brought together youth, women, and officials from across the OECS Member States, including Antigua and Barbuda, Montserrat, Dominica, Anguilla, British Virgin Islands, Grenada, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Saint Kitts and Nevis. Additionally, members of the Young Americans Business Trust (YABT) were invited to engage with delegates, participating in discussions aimed at identifying key challenges for youth in agriculture and the development of actionable policy recommendations to enhance opportunities within the sector.

Introduction

The youth in the Caribbean agricultural sector hold a strong demographic significance within the Caribbean region. Characterized by a predominantly youthful population, the Caribbean has approximately 11 million individuals between the ages of 15 and 29 residing in the area (ECLAC, 2022). Yet, despite comprising nearly half of the population, youth in the OECS region ages 15-24 (an estimated 103,000) are disproportionately impacted by unemployment with only 34% of the youth population being employed in the labour force and 26% being unemployed before the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021). This is particularly concerning when compared to the 85% employment rate of adults ages 25-64 in the region (UNICEF, 2021). This demographic composition highlights the substantial presence of youth in the region and underscores the imperative for targeted policies and programs aimed at harnessing their potential to drive agricultural development. The lack of support and employment opportunities in the OECS region is a critical issue that requires immediate action.

Youth in the Eastern Caribbean region are central to the agriculture sector, acting as catalysts for agricultural transformation and innovation. Young people play a pivotal role in enhancing productivity, promoting sustainability, and strengthening food security. However, youth engagement in agriculture is often hindered by a range of complex, context-specific socio-economic barriers, including disparities related to ethnicity, geographic isolation, and unequal access to education, land, and financial resources (ECLAC, 2022). The unique geographic features of the Eastern Caribbean region exposes nations to multidimensional threats such as climate change, that further impact the stability of the region (IICA, 2023).

Young women in the agricultural sector face particular challenges. They often must balance the demands of unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities alongside agricultural labor, which limits their access to resources, training, and economic opportunities within the sector. This, in turn, can have detrimental effects on their long-term well-being and economic mobility (UWI, 2020).

Addressing these challenges necessitates the implementation of integrated strategies that include targeted education and training programs, improved access to productive resources, and the development of inclusive, youth-focused policies. Such measures are crucial in empowering young people to fully participate in and benefit from the agricultural sector's growth and innovation.

Through the organization of OECS, and IICA's support, the forum and study tour acted as a strategic engagement initiative to further the topic of food security as one of the main concerns outlined in the VII Young Americas Forum of the X Summit of the Americas. The Study Tour and Forum, held in May 2025, sought to address the challenges faced by youth and women in



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agriculture by creating a platform for meaningful engagement with successful agricultural enterprises.

Participants from across the OECS member states — including Antigua and Barbuda, Montserrat, Dominica, Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, Grenada, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Saint Kitts and Nevis—shared practices, gained insights into innovative approaches, and collaboratively developed strategies to strengthen their involvement in the agricultural sector through experiential learning, knowledge exchange, and peer interaction. Members of the Young Americans Business Trust were also invited to attend the event to provide insight and aid in the development of recommendations.

By fostering dialogue and promoting collaboration, initiatives of this nature play a critical role in building the technical capacity, confidence, and networks of youth and women, thereby enhancing their ability to actively participate in and contribute to the sustainable development of the agricultural sector.



Key Challenges as Identified by the Youth

During the forum portion of the OECS Youth and Women in Agriculture program, participants across the OECS member states engaged in discussions on identifying persistent barriers to youth and women's participation in the agricultural sector. Throughout the session, delegates shared country-specific concerns while recognizing regional challenges limiting youth and women's ability to participate in agribusiness. However, through collaborative efforts, the participants proposed targeted solutions to address these challenges.

The key challenges identified by the youth and their proposed solutions are as follows:

I. Limited Access to Financing and Capital

One of the most persistent barriers to youth participation in the agricultural sector is the lack of access to affordable financing options. Youth delegates from Montserrat, Anguilla, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines emphasized the importance of accessible and affordable financing options tailored to the unique circumstances of young agricultural entrepreneurs, highlighting the absence of suitable financial products within the OECS region as one of the most significant challenges to youth in agriculture today. Due to the lack of institutional financial support, many youths rely on personal savings or are compelled to take high-interest loans, inhibiting business development and growth within the Caribbean.

II. Insecure Land and Resource Access and Inadequate Agricultural Infrastructure

Secure access to land and resources remains a critical factor in enabling agricultural productivity. Participants from Grenada and Antigua and Barbuda reported that legal, cultural, and bureaucratic constraints continue to impede youth access to land. Additionally, delegates from San Cristobal and Nieves expressed concern over the lack of quality feed for livestock. These factors, combined with the lack of infrastructure, including irrigation, processing facilities, and transportation networks, further discourages youth participation in the agricultural sector.

III. Insufficient Post-Training Support and Mentorship Mechanisms

Despite numerous training programs and capacity-building opportunities for young people interested in agriculture, youth delegates from Antigua and Barbuda and the British Virgin Islands underscored the absence of continuity programs to support the application of acquired knowledge. Without a support infrastructure aimed at providing mentorship for youth and women in business plan development and technical assistance, training interventions fail to sustain the industry and its employees.



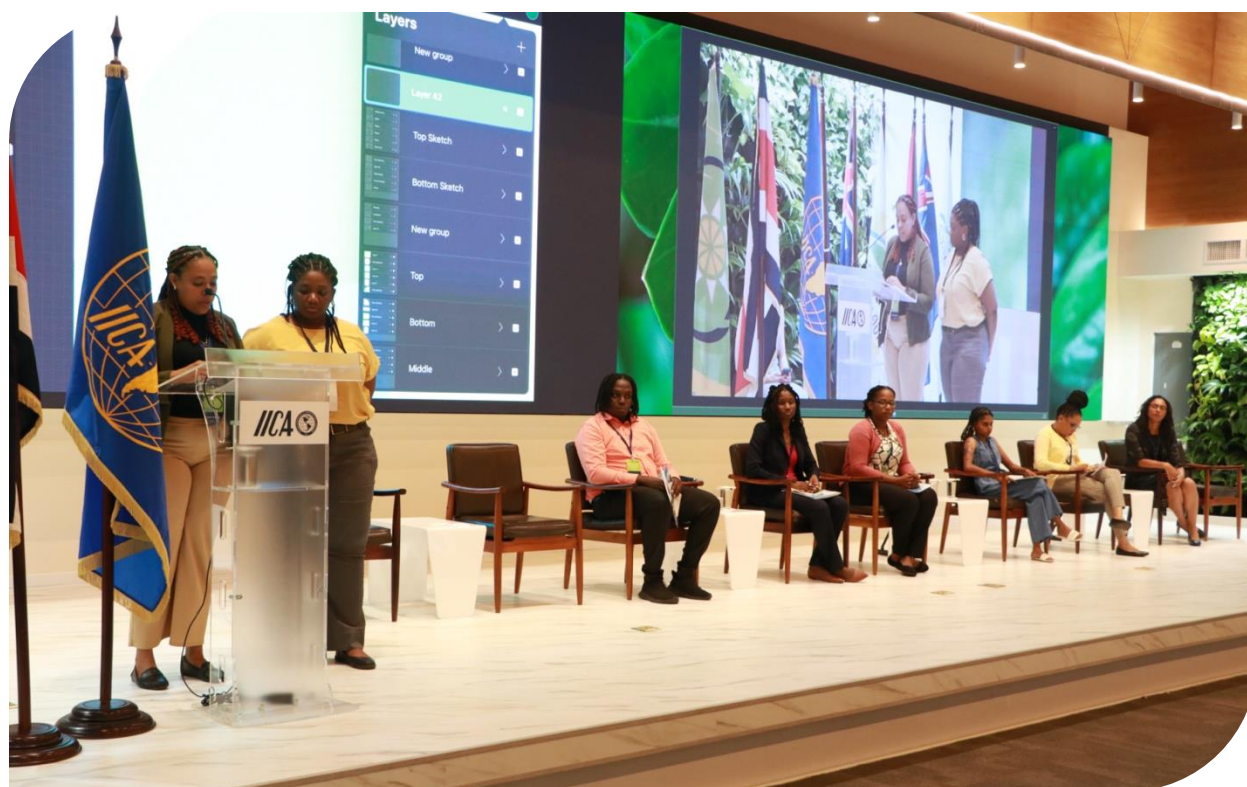
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IV. Gaps in Technology Adoption and Innovation Ecosystems

Despite growing interest in agritech and digital solutions, many young people lack access to the tools, infrastructure, and institutional support necessary to innovate in agriculture. Delegates from the British Virgin Islands and Saint Lucia expressed a strong interest in the integration of technology to improve productivity, market access, and closer agriculture to young people. However, the significant gaps in digital literacy, connectivity, and technical training pose challenges to the integration of new technologies and growth of the agricultural sector in the region.

The convergence of these challenges necessitates a multi-sectoral and youth-inclusive response that prioritizes equity, innovation, and sustainability at the core of agricultural development.



Solutions by Youth

Building on the insights and experiences shared by youth delegates during the forum, the following policy recommendations reflect the structural and systemic changes needed to strengthen the participation of youth and women in agriculture across the Eastern Caribbean. These proposals are aligned with regional development priorities, including the OECS FAST Strategy and global frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

I. Develop Integrated and Comprehensive Youth Agricultural Policies

Delegates emphasized the need for a coherent policy framework that addresses youth and women's engagement in agriculture as a long-term development priority rather than as a series of disconnected initiatives.

Member States are encouraged to develop national youth and women in agriculture strategies that align with broader agricultural, climate, and economic development plans. These policies should be participatory and evidence-based, incorporating youth input through formal consultation mechanisms. Additionally, they should integrate provisions for access to land, financial inclusion, education and training, climate resilience, and rural infrastructure in a coordinated and rights-based manner.



II. Develop Youth-Centered Agricultural Finance Systems

Access to affordable finance remains a central constraint for youth in agriculture, particularly in the absence of collateral or credit histories.

Governments should respond by establishing dedicated agricultural financing instruments for young entrepreneurs, including low-interest loans, credit guarantees, microfinance

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schemes, and matching grants. Development banks or specialized youth agricultural funds can serve as vehicles for these instruments, provided they are accessible and designed with simplified application processes. Financial literacy and business planning should be incorporated into these systems to ensure long-term viability and sustainability.

III. Institutionalize Mentorship and Post-Training Support

Many Forum participants noted that while training programs exist, they often lack meaningful follow-up and practical linkage to entrepreneurial support.

To address this, Member States should develop structured mentorship programs that connect early-stage youth agripreneurs with experienced farmers, agribusiness professionals, and technical advisors. Establishing national or sub-regional incubators and innovation hubs can further support youth through business development services, market access, and seed funding. These initiatives should be embedded in agricultural training and extension systems to create a seamless transition from learning to enterprise development.

IV. Invest in Agricultural Innovation and Technologies

The integration of innovation and technology into agricultural practices is pivotal for enhancing productivity, sustainability, and youth engagement in the OECS. Delegates underscored that leveraging modern technologies can transform traditional farming into a dynamic and attractive sector for young people. Governments should prioritize investment in research and development to adapt global innovations to the local context, fostering collaborations between agricultural research institutions, universities, and technology incubators.

Furthermore, integrating technology training into agricultural education curricula will equip youth with the necessary skills to operate and innovate within the sector. By creating enabling environments for technology adoption, OECS Member States can improve efficiency, reduce labor intensity, and enhance climate resilience, making agriculture a more viable and appealing livelihood option for the younger generation.

V. Invest in Agricultural Infrastructure

Robust agricultural infrastructure is foundational to the development of a productive and resilient agricultural sector. Participants highlighted the need for strategic investments in infrastructural elements essential for enhancing productivity and enabling youth-led agribusinesses to add value and compete in domestic and export markets.

Investment in infrastructure should be guided by an inclusive approach that prioritizes access for youth and women's cooperatives and enterprises. Governments are

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encouraged to develop public-private partnerships to mobilize capital and technical expertise for infrastructure projects, ensuring sustainability and efficiency. Additionally, infrastructure development must incorporate climate-resilient designs to mitigate the impacts of extreme weather events that disproportionately affect rural agricultural communities. Enhancing infrastructure will contribute to rural economic diversification, improved food security, and increased attractiveness of agriculture as a career path for youth.



VI. Enhance the Public Perception of Agriculture

The prevailing image of agriculture as low-income and labor-intensive discourages youth from viewing the sector as a viable career. To shift these perceptions, Member States should implement national media and education campaigns highlighting agriculture as a modern, entrepreneurial, and impactful field. This could include integrating agricultural science and agri-entrepreneurship into school curricula, as well as creating platforms to celebrate the achievements of youth and women in agriculture through awards, documentaries, and national recognition programs. Public narratives must evolve to reflect the full potential of agriculture in the 21st century.

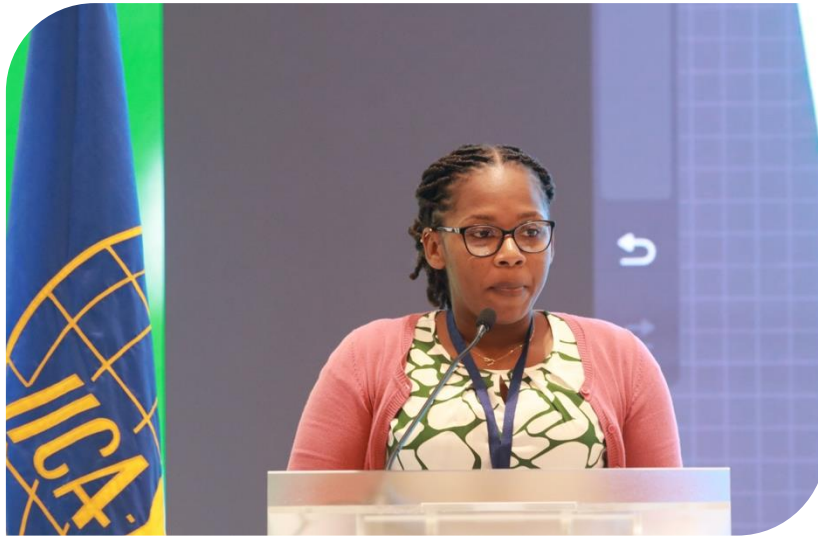
VII. Strengthen Youth and Women's Representation in Policy and Governance

The inclusion of youth and women in decision-making processes is essential for creating responsive and effective agricultural policies. Governments should institutionalize mechanisms such as youth advisory councils within agricultural ministries and ensure that youth and women are represented in national and regional agrarian planning bodies. This representation must be meaningful and consistent, supported by leadership development initiatives and cross-country exchanges to build regional networks of youth advocates. A more inclusive governance model will ensure that agricultural policies reflect the priorities and aspirations of all stakeholders.

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Collectively, these policy recommendations provide a strategic framework for empowering youth and women in the Eastern Caribbean agricultural sector. Their successful implementation requires not only political will and resource allocation but also sustained collaboration between governments, regional institutions, civil society, and the private sector. By adopting a holistic and inclusive approach, OECS Member States can position youth and women as central actors in the region's agricultural transformation, driving innovation, strengthening food security, and contributing to resilient and equitable rural development.



Conclusions

The Forum of OECS Youth and Women in Agriculture has provided a critical platform for addressing the challenges and opportunities facing youth and women in the agricultural sector across the Eastern Caribbean. The discussions, findings, and policy recommendations emerging from this forum offer a robust foundation for advancing youth engagement in agriculture, a sector that is central to the region's economic and food security priorities.

Youth are increasingly recognized as key agents of transformation within agriculture and rural development. However, their potential remains constrained by a range of structural barriers, including limited access to resources such as land, finance, and training. As highlighted in the forum, these challenges are exacerbated by broader socio-economic and environmental factors, including climate change, migration patterns, and limited infrastructure. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that combines policy innovation, institutional reform, and grassroots empowerment.

The policy recommendations generated during the forum, ranging from establishing agricultural development banks to promoting youth cooperatives, underscore the need for integrated, long-term strategies to provide youth and women with the tools, resources, and networks necessary for success in agriculture. Additionally, as raised by the OECSs head of the economic development unit, challenges such as climate resilience and labor shortages linked to rural-to-urban migration limit the impact of youth in agriculture and must be addressed.

The emphasis on the importance of knowledge transfer, technological innovation, and climate change aligns with global development agendas, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those focused on food security (SDG 2), decent work (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and climate action (SDG 13).

This report underscores the importance of designing policies that recognize the unique challenges faced by youth in agriculture and embrace their potential as leaders, innovators, and agents of change. By fostering greater inclusion in decision-making processes and providing targeted support in areas such as access to capital, markets, and technology, governments and regional organizations can create an enabling environment for youth and women to contribute meaningfully to the transformation of the agricultural sector.

Furthermore, the success of these policies will depend not only on political will but also on the active participation of key stakeholders, including financial institutions, educational bodies, and civil society organizations. Promoting regional collaboration and knowledge-sharing will be crucial in addressing the systemic nature of the challenges faced by youth and women in agriculture. Through continued cooperation between OECS Member States, IICA, and other regional and international actors, there is a significant opportunity to scale up successful initiatives and ensure



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that the agricultural sector remains a viable and sustainable livelihood option for future generations.

In conclusion, the engagement of youth and women in agriculture is not merely a policy challenge but a strategic imperative for the sustainable development of the Caribbean. Addressing the identified barriers and leveraging the recommendations put forward by the forum has the potential to unlock new opportunities for economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social equity. Continued investment in the next generation of agricultural leaders will be essential in realizing these aspirations, ultimately contributing to the resilience and long-term prosperity of the OECS and the wider Caribbean region.



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