



## NEWS FROM THE FIELD

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#### 2016 Reflections

## REFLECTIONS ON 2016



As I sit down to write, the snow is starting to fly in Canada, and having shovelled a foot of snow this morning, I really miss the Caribbean.

Christmas is soon upon us and the New Year looms large, as an important cropping season gets underway across the Caribbean. This past year has been a significant one for PROPEL. The PROPEL team continues to adopt a market systems facilitation approach for the delivery of PROPEL and more partnerships and linkages are being developed.

Doug Graham  
Director,  
WUSC Caribbean

As I reflect on the past year, I will look back with deep pride on our work - here are some of PROPEL's highlights of 2016:

- completion of a robust program audit/ mid-term review;
- more MOUs in place with more key partners, such as the National Agricultural Research & Extension Institute (NAREI) in Guyana, and the Rural Agricultural Development Authority (RADA) and the Bodles Agricultural Research Station in Jamaica;
- growing and evolving partnerships with dynamic private sector partners;
- additional trials in a broader range of fresh produce markets;
- scaling up of production and the engagement of more players in key market systems;
- introducing volunteers working in support of the PROPEL team;
- renewing efforts to achieve greater impact in our cross cutting themes (environment, gender, governance & youth);
- demonstrable progress towards increasing the value of Caribbean fresh produce reaching high value markets - CAD \$93,687,462 and counting (as of 30th September, 2016); and
- being able to demonstrate a positive impact on producers in the Caribbean.

All of this is cause for optimism as we head towards the final two years of the PROPEL project. As we wind down the year and before you all dash off to enjoy the festivities of the season, the team and I would like to thank you for your continued support and of course to wish you a very Merry Christmas and all the best for the New Year. We look forward to connecting with you again in 2017.

Doug Graham  
Director, WUSC Caribbean

## MEET ALVA ANDERSON

### A YOUNG JAMAICAN AGRI-PRENEUR SET FOR SUCCESS



Alva Anderson  
Jamaican youth agri-preneur

Initially he was shocked at the actual physical labor involved and struggled having to sell all his crops to ‘higgler’ (middlemen) while he built enough resources and made direct connections with buyers. “Some higgler know you don’t know the game – and they take advantage of you.” Currently, Alva has a contract with a banana chip factory and his sweet potato crops are either sold to higgler at the Coronation Market, to a consolidator, or for export to the US or UK markets. Alva decided to grow sweet potatoes as a commercial crop after meeting Mr. Alvin Murray, the WUSC Caribbean Regional Agriculture Coordinator for PROPEL, at the Denbigh Agricultural Show in 2014. He was encouraged to participate in the technical programs offered through the extension services of the Rural Agricultural Development Authority (RADA) with the support of WUSC Caribbean. This led Alva to pursue sweet potatoes as one of his main crops. Through the National Sweet Potato Program, implemented by Ministry of Industry, Commerce, Agriculture and Fisheries(MICAf) with the support of PROPEL, Alva was given access to clean planting material, technical assistance, and marketing support. He also attended the RADA/PROPEL farmer field schools, where he learned best agricultural practices as related to land preparation, pest control, soil care, harvesting, and post-harvest management. Alva was also linked with a consolidator that supplies restaurants and supermarkets.

At age 31, Alva Anderson is already a successful agri-preneur. Alva grew up in a farming family in Guy’s Hill, St. Mary, Jamaica. He inherited his passion for agriculture from his father, a farmer, but Alva tells us, he was not brought up to farm. In the last 5 years however, this young entrepreneur has built a booming agri-business for himself, expanding up to 10 acres, some of which is family-owned, some leased and some rented. On this land, Alva plants banana and sweet potato crops in addition to raising cattle. As a trained accountant and small business owner, Alva uses to these skills to make his agri-business profitable.

*“I researched the industry and saw the potential – along with looking back on my dad’s life – and I made the decision to go into agriculture.”*

*“The first time I ever planted the sweet potato – the motivation was there; I made a profit. If it wasn’t for PROPEL – I may have planted sweet potato – but I wouldn’t have gotten the results. PROPEL instructed me to get a special blend – the Jamaican Beauregard triple super phosphate blend as a fertilizer for sweet potato plants. Based on the technical assistance I got, my crops came out much better than other crops in the region.”*

After experiencing substantial growth in profits and seeing the potential in commercializing his crops, Alva sought to further establish and expand his enterprise. The positive yield results motivated his decision to continue investing in the production of sweet potatoes. Indeed, Alva reports he has managed to get 100% return on investment from his production of sweet potatoes in the past 2 years. In addition to applying best practices in growing and harvesting his crops, the techniques he learned for post-harvest management through PROPEL have significantly impacted his yield.

*“The training I got from PROPEL definitely helped minimize post-harvest losses; things like information about rat infestation, worm infestation. For example – we do manual harvest – with hand forks – and we got training on how to harvest – how to place the hand forks so as not to harm the tubers.”*

He reports that he has reaped over 10,800 pounds from 1 acre of land during his first harvest, with only 265 pounds of post-

harvest loss. Since then, his post-harvest losses have dropped even further.

Despite rapid expansion, Alva still faces challenges that limit the scope of how fast he can expand. He has limited access to credit from input providers and financial institutions and lamented,

*"We are small farmers – so the access to suppliers is not the same as with larger farmers. If we had a better relationship with them, we could do more – but we have to operate within the confines of the agreements."*

While his relationship with his input providers has progressed over the years, allowing him today to obtain inputs on credit, there is only so much he can obtain at a given time.

Other challenges include access to information about prices, in what is still largely an informal sector. Alva accesses current crop prices through MICAF's webpage, however sometimes the regional context may affect these prices. Alva also relies on his neighbors by asking around how much they are selling their crops for, and he also gets farm-gate prices from his RADA extension officer. Mostly, however, Alva tells us that the key to his success is always putting pen to paper, calculating how much he should be selling his crops for in view of his cost of production. The combination of these strategies has resulted in a successful enterprise that continues to grow.

Alva is driven to legitimize his agri-business and standardize his practices. He tells us he keeps detailed records of all financial transactions and activities that take place in his fields. As a trained accountant, he feels everything should be recorded from a business end. In addition, he feels that streamlining his practices further will significantly enhance his productivity and contribute to even larger returns.

*"I'm not satisfied – I would like my farm business to be more structured. I want it to be a registered business – where I can actually look at my business paper-wise – and see well, this is what it looks like – and see that it is profitable. It would help should I approach a bank or a supplier – they would want some sort of paperwork."*



Alva (far right) attending a PROPEL youth in agriculture focus group in September 2016

Passionate about the agriculture sector, Alva recommends that youth wanting to get into the agriculture field approach it as a business,

*"Do thorough research on the agriculture field – then you will know if you have the capability to be successful. You need some background, and the willingness to learn and put in the work to succeed."*

Alva tells us that he plans to become a distributor within the next five years:

*"I want to have an established business between producers, agro-processors, buyers, HVMs – and eventually the export market."*

However, he believes more effort needs to be aimed at getting Jamaicans to buy local, instead of imported fresh produce. He also says a renewed effort needs to be made to legitimize agriculture, to encourage young people to join the sector. He suggests professional market training for farmers and farmer hopefuls – especially youth, who are desperate for the business development skills necessary to ensure their success in the changing economy of agriculture.

**Today, Alva's fresh produce business is thriving. A champion for youth in agriculture, Alva has produced greater yields every year he has been in business. With his plans for expansion, soon enough Alva will not only produce even more healthy, sustainable food for the HVMs, but also provide more employment and infrastructure for his community and his peers.**

## PROPEL IN TRIALS TO MITIGATE ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

**P**roducers in the Caribbean region face increasing environmental challenges that threaten their farming outputs. Traditional and unsustainable agricultural practices, over-exploitation of natural resources and inappropriate use of agro-chemical inputs have resulted in soil degradation, water scarcity, and the depletion of natural resources. Erratic patterns of climate variability and recurrent natural disasters are exacerbating the negative environmental impacts leading to new sets of challenges in food production and marketing for producers in the region. PROPEL over the past year has intensified its efforts to support producers to use environmentally sustainable farming practices that are resilient to the adverse impacts of climate change and natural disasters and that are based on integrated plant health management.

In collaboration with Health 2000 Agro (H2K) and with institutions such as the Rural Agricultural Development association (RADA) in Jamaica and the National Agricultural research and Development Institute (NAREI) in Guyana, PROPEL sought to ensure:

- Sustainable agriculture is practiced generally and that soil management, in particular, is improved so that the productive capacity of farms is maintained; and
- Extension and capacity building interventions support practices that sustain

the productivity of the agro-ecosystem.

PROPEL has supported over 200 farmers in Jamaica and Guyana to use certified organic inputs on a trial basis, so that they can observe the advantages and disadvantages of these inputs. While still early in the trials, anecdotal evidence suggests that producers are generally pleased and impressed with the results observed so far.

For example, in Guyana, 2 week old tomatoes in the trial plot were uniformly 6" high while in the control plot, 2 week old plants (without the organic inputs), were an average 4" high and not uniform in their growth. At 5 weeks, the tomatoes in the trial plot were relatively uniform in height, with average plant height of 16". There was an average of 4-5 flowers per cluster and on each plant branching was more profuse. Leaves were all dark green, signalling



Tomato plant in the trial in Guyana – Notice how sturdy and green it is

good chlorophyll production and relatively stiff textured. The stems were sturdy and green in colour. No incidence of pest or diseases was observed.



Tomato plant in the control plot appears less robust and less healthy

In the control plot, on the other hand, insect control was required, plants were not uniform in height, leaves were somewhat pale green in colour and softer in texture and the stems were less vigorous. There was also evidence of less branching occurring on plants as compared to the trial plot, where an average of 10 branches per plant was seen. There was non-uniform flowering throughout the control plot and smaller clusters of flowers were seen (3-4 for some plants).

As reported, these are early days but the project team and the farmers involved in the trials are very excited with the indicative results so far. We will report again on the trials in the next newsletter after completion of the scientific trials.



Funded by the  
Government  
of Canada

Canada

The Promotion of Regional Opportunities for Produce through Enterprises and Linkages (PROPEL) project is implemented by World University Service of Canada (WUSC) with funding support of donors and from the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada (GAC).