

## Working to improve the market system for fresh produce in St. Lucia, PROPEL provided two farmers cooperatives with packing crates. What did this support achieve?

Arising from consultations held with Farmer's organizations and high value markets (HVM's) at the inception of the PROPEL project, it became clear that there were many good opportunities for the project to help improve the fresh produce market system in St. Lucia. One of the key initiatives which PROPEL supported to improve quality and reduce waste in post-harvest handling was to provide durable, re-usable plastic crates for transporting produce from the fields to supermarkets.



Prior to the introduction of the plastic crates, farmers and the cooperatives used cardboard boxes and bags to transport produce from the farm to the buying depots and supermarkets. During this journey, fruit and vegetables often got bruised, squashed or scarred, rendering them unmarketable or saleable at a substantially reduced price. It was estimated that farmers were losing up to 10% of their produce in post-harvest transportation and handling. The 40 lb. cardboard boxes cost \$5.00 each and were thrown away after only one use. On the other hand, a 60 lb. crate can last 5 years or more, depending on handling and storage. In addition, the use of the crates make transportation, storage and handling much easier with the holes in the crates allowing for better aeration of the produce, thus reducing the risk of rot. Additionally, beneficial environmental impacts have resulted by not using large quantities of disposable cardboard crates. The move to the use of crates was expected to benefit the farmers getting more produce that meets HVM requirements sold, translating into more money in farmers pockets.



Joe Bolger, former PROPEL Project Director (2<sup>nd</sup> from left) hands-over the crates to Black Bay and Belle Vue Cooperative representatives being observed by CFL (now Massey Stores) in the background.

**500 crates were purchased by PROPEL at a value of XCD \$28,500 and evenly distributed to Black Bay and Belle Vue Farmers Cooperatives in July, 2014.** The aim was threefold:

- a) to reduce the use of cardboard boxes which added recurrent costs and had negative environmental impacts;
- b) to improve the post-harvest handling of the fresh produce which results in a better quality fresh produce reaching the supermarket shelves and by extension consumers; and
- c) to reduce transaction time through the easy use of crates vis-a-vis bags and boxes.

**Both of the coops embraced the crate initiative and adopted relevant schemes to manage their new assets.**

Black Bay rents their crates to its member farmers at \$1/crate/use +18% margins in order to recover the replacement cost of the crates over time. Belle Vue sold 150 of the crates at a premium (20-25% margin) to their farmers, which helped them purchase a further 200 crates, which they maintain for use by their members.

**Three years later the crates are still in use and continue to generate savings to the farmers and cooperatives.** Mr. Raphael Felix, General Manager of Belle Vue Farmers' Cooperative stated,

*"The field crates received from the PROPEL Project helped tremendously in upgrading the quality of farm produce delivered to the hotels and supermarkets by the Belle Vue Farmers' Co-operative. We have received good reviews from the supermarkets concerning the improvement in the quality of produce since we have been using those crates. The Farmers are now able to harvest and put their produce directly into crates rather than bags."*



Mr. Dunstan Demile (Fresh Produce Manager for Massey Stores in St Lucia, seen here on the right) was an early proponent of the initiative and he confirmed that:

*"The crates provided to the farmer's cooperative have resulted in an improved quality of fresh produce being delivered to our stores"*



**The crate program has been deemed a success and the cooperatives continue to invest in the crates as the need arises.**

Not only have the coops been able to save EC \$274,000 by not having to purchase additional cardboard boxes, it has reduced waste and impact on the environment. The use of crates has also resulted in a reduction in spoilage during transport, now estimated at 6.5%, which has delivered revenue of EC \$290,000 from the additional high quality fresh produce reaching the supermarket shelves and hotel kitchens from farmers and the cooperatives over the past two years. EC \$5,500 has been generated by the cooperatives in revenue from the use of the crates by members during this time.



**In addition to the qualitative indicators of improvement to the fresh produce market system, the PROPEL team has determined that from the initial investment of EC \$28,500, the crate initiative has resulted in a net benefit of EC \$576,000 over the two year period to the farmers cooperatives.**

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