

ECLAC/CEDA Workshop on Caribbean  
Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises and Trade Liberalization:  
Challenges of Clusters and Network Initiatives  
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**REPORT OF THE WORKSHOP ON  
CARIBBEAN SMALL- AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES  
AND TRADE LIBERALIZATION:  
*CHALLENGES OF CLUSTERS AND NETWORK INITIATIVES***

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**Introduction**

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean and secretariat of the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC) in collaboration with the Caribbean Export Development Agency (CEDA) convened a workshop on Caribbean Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) and Trade Liberalization: Challenges of Clusters and Network Initiatives in Barbados on 19 June 2006.

The purpose of the meeting was to sensitize Business Support Organizations (BSOs) and other stakeholders about the importance of cluster and network initiatives for the development of Caribbean small and medium-size firms in the context of trade liberalisation.

The meeting was attended by representatives of BSOs from 10 Caribbean countries. The list of participants is attached as Annex 1.

**Agenda item 1: Welcome and opening remarks**

Mr. Rudolf Buitelaar, Deputy Director, ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean, welcomed participants. In his introductory statement he outlined the main objective of the meeting: to share and discuss experiences of cluster and network initiatives in the region aimed at strengthening the contribution of small and medium enterprises to Caribbean development. He stated that the meeting was very timely, given the momentum of trade liberalization and integration in the Caribbean. Only a few days earlier, six additional countries had formally adhered to the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME) and the new Caribbean Business Council was launched as the voice of the Caribbean private sector regarding regional trade policies. Network and cluster initiatives were seen as potentially important, witnessed by the fact that a few weeks earlier in the very room of the Savannah Hotel, a book on “Production Integration in the Caribbean” was presented in the context of the “Caribbean Connect” meeting where an unprecedented gathering of leaders from governments, regional organizations and the private sector had exhibited a common strategic vision on regional integration.

Mr. Buitelaar noted that in this flurry of initiatives, the position and the prospects of small local firms was receiving less attention that it deserved. The purpose of the present meeting was to start redressing this imbalance. He made the point that international experience had shown that small enterprises, which played key roles in economic development, depended heavily on supporting structures in their immediate environment. Myriads of networking and collaborative initiatives in developed and developing countries were undertaken precisely to improve the quality of the business environment. He added that it seemed that the Caribbean integration process was lagging behind in its efforts to improve the business environment for

small and medium enterprises and that joint action by and for these enterprises was lacking.

In closing, he praised the collaboration between ECLAC and CEDA to make the workshop a reality and expressed his gratitude to the Government of Italy for its contribution to this event. This was the first of a set of activities of a pilot project to identify the challenges and obstacles for small and medium enterprise development in the region and the establishment of an agenda for research and technical assistance on the subject.

Ms. Veona Maloney, Manager, Core Services, CEDA, delivered the opening remarks on behalf of her organization. She outlined the challenges of SMEs in terms of limited or lack of financial and human resources. The global imperative to be competitive, underscored by the trade liberalization trend, had placed SMEs in a vulnerable position. She highlighted the need for innovation and creativity in strengthening the competitiveness of the sector. She noted that challenges need not be insurmountable if firms articulated collective responses to achieve competitiveness in this new global environment.

According to Ms. Maloney, the main incentives for firms to actively participate in cluster formation were: to gain access to new technology; to capture synergies; to spread risks; to facilitate research and development efforts with suppliers and users; to speed up the learning process; to lower transaction costs and to overcome entry barriers to markets. She was of the view that given these advantages, business support organizations must facilitate such networking and perhaps act as a catalyst or broker.

She identified the fostering of business groups as one of the primary activities of the Caribbean Trade and Private Sector Development (CTPSD) Programme managed by Caribbean Export with funding from the European Union (EU). She explained that the programme proposed to build on identified strengths and synergies of regional industries, including clusters, and develop collaboration among producers and various agencies in the area of product development and market access. In light of this, she referred to the Regional Herbal Cluster, which recently held its installation and start up meeting in Saint Lucia in April. This herbal cluster was the first cross-border cluster initiative established in the region. She also referred to the 9<sup>th</sup> EDF Grant Fund which provides a maximum of 35,000 Euros or up to 65 per cent of the budgeted costs of approved projects submitted by groups of three or more local small enterprises.

She expressed her delight to partner with ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean in this workshop and thanked the EU for funding of the workshop. Finally she expressed the hope that the discussions and deliberations would feed into the BSO Strategic Planning session planned for the two following days and that they would also be incorporated into CEDA national and regional export competitiveness strategies.

## Agenda item 2: Problem-setting: The view of regional organizations

### Presentation by ECLAC

In presenting the motivation for the theme of the workshop, the representative of ECLAC argued that regional integration, trade liberalization and market deregulation were well underway but that SMEs were mostly passive in this process and that except for some donor-driven projects, support policies were only of a national remit. He further argued that clustering and networking were usually part of the process of adaptation to market liberalization, but that in the Caribbean this did not seem to be happening.

Accordingly, the purpose of the workshop was fourfold, namely to:

- (a) Clarify the cluster concept;
- (b) Challenge the idea that competition was bad for SMEs and should be avoided;
- (c) Introduce notions of organization and governance as solutions to collective action problems; and
- (d) Set the stage for a discussion on a regional strategy to enable SMEs to prosper in a broader and more open market.

In his presentation, he compared the cluster concept to that of supply chain management and networks. Clusters referred to geographical concentrations of stakeholders involved in related activities, *who may, but need not specialize nor cooperate*. They were by nature open and non-selective and therefore generated public goods through interactive learning. Networks were repetitive, preferential and cooperative interactions between selected actors *who may, but need not be in close proximity*. They tended to be closed systems that produced club goods. Chains were vertical sequences of marketing, sourcing, production and distribution activities usually organized by a lead firm to maximize private gains from inter-firm collaboration and coordination. Clusters might comprehend several networks and supply chains; on their part, networks and chains might span across several clusters.

The essence of high-performance clusters was that they provided a stimulating learning environment for companies, through a mix of competition and collaboration. Competition, in this view, was critical to the learning process, especially in small companies, and should therefore be stimulated.

Collaboration and coordination, however, did entail costs and risks for companies which engaged in these activities. Well-known risks of collaboration referred to the free-rider problem, among other generically called collective action problems. Organization and cluster governance were necessary to address those risks.

He presented the view that amidst the mounting global pressure in the business environment, local solutions could be provided by private sector through stakeholder

coordination and collaboration. Key ingredients necessary would be visionary leadership and networking in specific institutional and cognitive context.

He further dealt with the evolution of clusters and identified two issues for a research and action agenda. These issues were:

- (a) Making the market more transparent for SMEs: combat information asymmetries; and
- (b) Tuning up the voice of SMEs through regional networking of existing sector-specific industry associations.

### **Presentation by CEDA**

The representative of CEDA focused on the opportunities and challenges for clusters in Cariforum. The challenges were the following:

- (a) Small size of local and regional markets;
- (b) Small size of firms (low economies of scale);
- (c) Heavy dependence on few sectors;
- (d) Loss of preferential access to markets;
- (e) Globalization, larger efficient competitors; and
- (f) Low level of innovation

In dealing with the benefits of clusters for SMEs, he mentioned joint production to handle large orders; economies of scale through joint purchase of inputs; facilitates training; market intelligence; logistics and technology innovation and specialized division of labor to foster cumulative improvements in productive capabilities and innovation. He added that there were also a number of constraints typical to Cariforum that should not be overlooked. Among the constraints identified were the following: the large geographical spread of Cariforum, absence of discussion forums and network opportunities leading to lack of communication, skepticism towards joint endeavors and knowledge fragmentation.

CEDA has undertaken the following action in support of cluster initiatives:

- (a) Attaining ISO9000 and HACCP, marketing;
- (b) Publication of a craft catalogue;
- (c) Grants to groups of companies; and

- (d) Organization of business forums and network opportunities.

In closing, he highlighted the main components of the 9<sup>th</sup> EDF Trade and Development competitiveness Program.

### **Agenda item 3: SME collaboration support in Jamaica and Suriname**

#### **Presentation by Jamaica Promotions Corporation (JAMPRO)**

The representative of JAMPRO, stated that this agency was formerly an economic development agency. Presently it was a trade and investment promotion agency operating through the Ministry of Development. She referred to the National Industrial Policy (NIP) which was put in place by the government to provide the facilitating mechanisms for prosperity based on international competitiveness. This government-led initiative failed because of lack of financial support and caused the private sector to lose confidence in the government's ability to provide solutions to its problems.

The strained relation with the government also presented an opportunity for SMEs to collaborate. A later initiative by JAMPRO, the National Export Strategy, sought to use a model similar to the Industry Advisory Councils (IACs) under the NIP and the agency facilitated the formation of several clusters in industries related to fashion, herbal products, services and meat and poultry. It also led to cross-sector strategies in areas of trade facilitation, finance and security.

As an example of this approach under the Export Strategy, she presented the sector development plan for the beef industry which was designed to increase the exports of beef from Jamaica to the United States of America by 40 per cent annually, following policy changes and institutional support for the industry. The Ministry of Agriculture would, according to this plan, provide the necessary support to have the production plants inspected and approved by USDA inspectors to further enhance overseas sales.

She mentioned other initiatives that used the cluster approach, such as the Private Sector Development Programme and the Jamaican Linkages Programme, which bridged investment and export by linking local suppliers to resulting opportunities from major investment and other projects.

In summary the lessons learned from these experiences were that there was need for:

- (a) Collaboration with support institutions;
- (b) A full view towards cluster development to include: policy, promotion and development;
- (c) An objective, transparent selection process required for clusters and firms; and
- (d) Trust and support.

### **Presentation by the Strategy Advisory Unit, Jamaica Exporters' Association and the Competitiveness Company**

The representative of the Competitiveness Company which is the Strategic Advisory Unit of the Jamaican Exporters Association noted the imperatives for change in Jamaica and described them as follows:

- (a) High debt to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ratio;
- (b) Large fiscal deficit;
- (c) Low economic growth; and
- (d) Low employment creation

In referring to the National Industrial Policy (1996-1997) she said that its purpose was: "to provide a framework, facilitating mechanisms, general support for growth and prosperity based on international competitiveness". The targeted industries were: tourism, agribusiness, mining and non metallic minerals, entertainment and culture, light manufacturing, information technology, garments, shipping and berthing. The outcomes of the National Industrial Policy were:

- (a) Growth averaged less than one per cent (targeted growth = six per cent);
- (b) Lack of monitoring mechanisms and systematic dialogue; and
- (c) Lackluster private sector growth.

Certain key observations were made as a result of implementing "The Partnership for Progress" Program (2003-2005). The lack of trust and absence of process to create consensus was at the heart of the other challenges which were:

- (a) The low levels of job creation;
- (b) Failure to improve economic growth; and
- (c) The inability to deal with issues like crime.

In dealing with the roles of the private sector and the government pertaining to the challenges above, she mentioned that both parties should take responsibility for the factors that they influenced, such as provision of a stable macroeconomic environment (government) and defining distribution channels (private sector).

She then introduced the topic of competitiveness and the Jamaican Competitiveness Project (JCCP) and outlined its purpose which was to promote a national competitiveness vision and mindset as well as to strengthen the public-private sector dialogue.

The work of the JCCP led to official cluster selection criteria. Key findings coming out of this project were the following:

- (a) The private sector was confident in its skills and abilities but held a decidedly negative view of government;
- (b) Trust was lacking - particularly between government and the private sector;
- (c) Cooperation was viewed as important and necessary;
- (d) The business environment in Jamaica was considered to be extremely challenging;
- (e) Attitudes towards new ideas, learning, trust and competition were a challenge facing the country as a whole; and
- (f) There was a sense of urgency that swift action should be taken to address the challenges facing Jamaica.

Subsequently, a 10-step approach or process for change was developed, the essence of it being the clarification of organizational goals and their implementation.

The achievements of the Jamaican Cluster Competitiveness Project were threefold:

- (a) More than 300 firms participated in the programme;
- (b) While most firms were SMEs, larger firms also participated actively in cluster activities; and
- (c) Collectively, these firms represented approximately 15 per cent of national GDP.

Some of the achievements are listed below:

- (a) Joint purchasing programme in Sauces and Spices Cluster resulted in projected annual savings of over US\$500,000 for cluster members;
- (b) Tourism Cluster's joint-marketing programme attracted an additional US \$600,000 in funding through the United Kingdom Department for International Development Business Linkage Challenge Fund (BLCF);
- (c) Collaboration had led to overcoming a significant market failure – inability of small properties and attractions to get public liability insurance in United States dollars; and
- (d) Entertainment Cluster came together to form, *Jamaica Signature Beats*, a non-profit entity that was acting as the cluster's joint marketing agent.

In the area of institutionalization she noted that initially it was difficult to engage the public and private sector in a common cause. Towards the end of the cluster process the communication barriers between the two sectors were broken down.

She said that the value of intellectual property created in the process of cluster development should be recognised early and registered as a public good in the common interest in order to prevent free rider problems. She noted that in Jamaica the cluster emerged even stronger after it faced a free rider problem. The key to it surviving this problem was the trust built among the members.

In closing, she noted that the blend of social capital, capital performance and education which was evident in the successful cluster initiatives in the fashion, tourism and textile industries and others had propelled the Jamaican Exporters Association to establish the Competitiveness Company with the main agenda of putting ideas to action through this company.

### **Presentation by Vereniging Surinaams Bedrijfsleven**

The Director of the Suriname Trade and Industry Association stated that as early as 2001 Suriname had formed business networks in the areas of furniture, textile, information technology, tourism and agro industry. He also mentioned the Caribbean Employers' Confederation (CEC) which executed a project on the formation of regional business networks. The objective was to enhance the competitiveness of Caribbean enterprises through networking.

He described clusters as: (a) the building blocks of a productive, innovative economy; (b) a smart strategy for regional development agencies to include in their portfolio; and (c) the driving forces of international trade.

The success of a high performance cluster was in large part due to people forming quality relationships and networking to achieve results. He said: "the clustering process requires people-to-people contact, consensus on key issues, collaboration at multiple levels, and cooperation towards common goals".

For success of business networks he gave the following key ingredients: selecting the right partners, integrity and mutual trust among partners, making teamwork a priority, compliance with the rules and guidelines, results-oriented approach, exchange of information, constructive communication and coordination between cluster-partners

He dealt with the involvement of the Suriname Trade and Industry Association in the establishment of a regional herbal cluster with companies operating out of Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Lucia, Dominica and Grenada. He also reported on the progress of a regional agro cluster in which the Suriname Trade and Industry Association played an important role.

**Agenda item 4: Discussion on the research and technical assistance agenda  
for SME collaboration in the Caribbean**

The representative of the Arthur Lok Jack School of Business, Trinidad and Tobago, stated that clustering had to be seen as a developmental strategy in which firms and industries were part of a larger system. He further stated that such inter-firm cooperation had proven to be a useful tool for facing the pressures of increasing global competition and in enhancing technological capabilities and innovativeness, which were essential factors for the development and growth of sustainable SMEs. He made the point that firms tended to collaborate when faced with similar problems or constraints. Accordingly, collaboration among firms must be based on two principles:

(a) Principle 1 - The development of highly skilled human capital with special interest in technological development. Development of such skills, particularly technological skills were critical to enhancing the international competitiveness of a country; and

(b) The second principle of the development strategy became necessary because of inherent structural features of such economies and their shortage of technical and managerial skills. This principle had two interrelated aspects: the promotion of cooperation; and strategic collaboration among enterprises. However, small economies did not lend themselves, within their territories to a high degree of formal cooperative activity. To overcome this situation, the private sector should establish institutions and mechanisms that facilitated cooperation and collaboration among enterprises. The flow of information from this process would also facilitate the development of technological capabilities.

He stated that modern production processes had increasingly relied on knowledge-based activities. He also added that there was a growing realization that innovation was a key to economic growth and that a salient feature of the new mode of knowledge creation was that more and more of the innovation process took place through networking and collaboration rather than through markets.

There should be the understanding that collaborative relationships were based on a number of key social and psychological features:

- (a) Reciprocal exchange relationship among partners;
- (b) Trust in the integrity of the partner;
- (c) Understanding of the need for openness and willingness to learn;
- (d) A personal disposition that was inclusive not exclusive; and
- (e) Shared customary conventions or rules of the game.

He suggested the following research themes and questions:

- (a) Examination of the interaction among competition, cooperation, and innovation and the role of the inter and intra-organizational change in innovation; and
- (b) Assessment of policy development and better understanding of the impact of government efforts to stimulate innovation in the context of need-oriented policies, for example those relating to human resources development.

Among others, the research agenda based on the above themes must address the following specific questions:

- (a) What was the quality of entrepreneurship in the enterprises, with specific reference to ability; competencies and motivational factors?
- (b) How did SMEs cooperate/collaborate together and what were the outcomes of such collaborative efforts?
- (c) What relationship/s, if any, existed between large and small enterprises?
- (d) What were the critical factors for the 'success' of SMEs operating within the highly competitive environments?

The question for the research must be derived against the background of an understanding of the theoretical issues surrounding small enterprise development and the characteristics of the Caribbean economies.

### **Conclusions and draft research agenda**

In bringing the meeting to a close, the representative of the Arthur Lok Jack School of Business invited participants to share any conclusions and suggestions they had. The representative of the Competitiveness Company suggested adopting a research agenda that would set the platform for the ensuing research. The following draft research agenda was a collaborative effort of all participants present at the meeting:

#### Process issues

The participation of the Arthur Lok Jack School of Business in the present meeting drew the attention of the participants to the possible support role of business schools in the process of cluster formation. In that regard, it was recommended that opportunities be explored to foster collaboration among firms, researchers and learning institutions, as well as to provide students with the possibility to do internships with cluster organizations.

### Content issues

(a) The meeting highlighted some of the specific Caribbean interests and issues regarding cluster formation. Firstly, it must be recognized that the region contained some very prosperous communities as well as some very underdeveloped ones. The meeting specifically drew attention to the potential for cluster development for wealth creation in underserved communities;

(b) Financial resources were always a key issue in cluster development. Research should be geared towards identifying appropriate and accessible funding facilities for cluster initiatives.

(c) Given the process of regional integration and unification of markets, it was necessary to explore the opportunities for interaction among firms at the regional level. Specifically, it was recommended to develop terms of reference for the identification of regional cluster opportunities;

(d) There was a paucity of documented case studies regarding cluster and cluster initiatives from the Caribbean. Research should be aimed at creating a collection of such case studies and extract the lessons learned from own Caribbean experiences.

(e) While cluster development was ideally a private-sector driven process, it would be useful also to focus on the role and responsibility of government stakeholders in cluster development in the Caribbean context.

(f) No research on cluster development could have the desired impact without appropriate measurement. The establishment of Cluster Performance Indicators could be a specific research objective; and

(g) Property rights, and especially intellectual property rights, were critical for the success of an effort to enhance innovation and creativity among SMEs. The assessment, valuation and ultimate protection of intellectual property of SMEs was suggested as a useful research topic for Caribbean SME clusters.

Mr. Rudolf Buitelaar, Deputy Director, ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean thanked all participants for their active participation and pronounced the meeting officially closed.

Annex I**List of participants**

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Annex II

**AGENDA**

1. Welcome and opening remarks
2. Problem-setting: The view of regional organizations
  - ECLAC
  - CEDA
  - Discussion
3. SME collaboration support in Jamaica and Suriname
  - JAMPRO
  - Jamaican Exporters Association
  - Vereniging Surinaams Bedrijfsleven
  - Discussion
4. Discussion on the research and technical assistance agenda for SME collaboration in the Caribbean
  - The University of the West Indies, Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business
5. Close of meeting

Annex III**PROGRAMME**

08:30 – 09:00	Registration
09:00 – 10:30	<p>Agenda Items 1: Welcome and opening remarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean</li> <li>• Caribbean Export Development Agency</li> </ul> <p>Agenda item 2: Problem-setting: The view of regional organizations</p> <p>Presentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mr. Rudolf Buitelaar, ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean</li> <li>• Mr. Ronald Dubrisingh, Caribbean Export Development Agency</li> <li>• Discussion</li> </ul>
10:30 – 10:45	<b>B R E A K</b>
10:45 – 12:30	<p>Agenda item 3: Country experiences SME collaboration (Jamaica and Suriname)</p> <p>Presentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ms. Arlene L. Martin, Jamaica Promotions Corporation (JAMPRO)</li> <li>• Ms. Beverley Morgan, Jamaican Exporters Association</li> <li>• Mr. Ewald Refos, Vereniging Surinaams Bedrijfsleven</li> </ul>
12:30 – 13:30	<b>L U N C H</b>
13:30 – 14:00	<p>Agenda item 4: Discussion on the research and technical assistance agenda for SME collaboration in the Caribbean</p> <p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dr. Colin McDonald and Mr. Jaishima Leladharsingh, The University of the West Indies, Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business</li> </ul>
14:00 – 15:00	Group discussion
15:00 – 15:15	<b>B R E A K</b>
15:15 – 16:30	Report of group and plenary discussions
16:30 – 16:45	Close of meeting