



## The Alliance of Rural Communities of Trinidad and Tobago (ARC): “Where the periphery becomes the centre!”

ARC



This case study aims to enhance knowledge about innovations and best practices currently being utilised by civil society organisations (CSOs) and their partners in the Caribbean that can be applied to support conservation, restoration and sustainable use of coastal and marine resources in marine protected areas (MPAs) and marine managed areas (MMAs). It has been developed under the regional project ‘Powering Innovations in Civil Society and Enterprises for Sustainability in the Caribbean’ (PISCES) which is being funded by the European Union EuropeAid programme and implemented over a three-year period (2017 to 2020). PISCES is taking place in ten countries: Antigua and Barbuda; The Bahamas; Dominica; Grenada; Haiti; Jamaica; Saint Kitts and Nevis; Saint Lucia; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; and Trinidad and Tobago.

### Introduction to ARC

The Alliance of Rural Communities of Trinidad & Tobago (ARC), is a non-profit organisation founded in 2014 and made up of residents of rural and semi-rural communities and their urban allies. ARC is made up of a core advisory team of individuals and affiliated rural community companies (that were formed with ARC’s support) as well as our supportive customer base.

Using a holistic strategy ARC supports rural communities throughout the Caribbean to play an expanded role in their national affairs and to move towards solid financial inclusion in regional economics. We have developed a now tried and tested approach to ensure wealth distribution and environmentally sustainable income generation in financially excluded rural Caribbean communities.

For the first five years ARC’s main strategic focus was on the cacao sector to further human development and restoration of the natural



Figure 1: ARC members. CREDIT: ARC

environment through the higher returns available through chocolate making. This work included teaching rural cacao communities to make artisanal chocolate, incubating community-owned chocolate companies and moving towards full utilisation of the companion crops and resources on cacao estates. ARC mainly earns income through the marketing and distribution of the community products, produce and tours. It is responsible for training and business development, product distribution, accounting/marketing/data collection, research, product development, sourcing new markets, creation of systems, reports and more.



Figure 2: Sample of ARC chocolate bars made by different community groups. CREDIT: ARC

ARC has 40 active rural community members working in the various community companies and trained in all aspects of cocoa processing and chocolate making and a central coordinating team of eight.

Since 2014, ARC has worked with seven communities in Trinidad and Tobago, two in Saint Lucia and one in Guyana and has established six community-owned chocolate companies that earn income from: 1) sales of chocolates, 2) cocoa tourism, 3) sales of chemical free produce, and 4) sales of processed and catered items.

Over the years we have managed to establish a complex, sustainable hive network of farmers (mainly using chemical free practices), community liaisons, loyal customer base, a mixed wholesale/retail chain, a heterogeneous product line, and a thorough replicable system of self-management and self-organisation.

## The evolution of ARC

The beginnings of ARC can be partially traced to several initiatives birthed by the current directors - a chocolate making initiative of Soular (a company making sun dried fruit and cocoa nibs) by Gillian Goddard and Lasse Brodnicke and an Organic Produce Box distribution scheme run by Kelly and Carl Fitzjames.

In 2014 two of the partners of Soular (Gillian Goddard and Lasse Brodnicke) - began making chocolate. Soon after producing and selling their first bars they reached out to Carl and Kelly Fitzjames of Brasso Seco village to pull together a group of five young adults to whom they could teach chocolate making. The initiative continued to expand and within three years there were five cocoa communities in Trinidad and Tobago which had learned to make chocolate from their local cocoa harvest - Brasso Seco, Biche and Cushe, Grande Riviere, Lo Pinot and Louis D'Or. Simultaneously an organic produce box delivery system run by Carl and Kelly was incorporated into the ARC activities. Due to the successes seen in T&T, ARC was contacted by groups in both Saint Lucia and Guyana to facilitate similar developments.

By 2016 ARC had registered as a non-profit organisation and had organised - either through soft loans from Xtatik (a well-known music band from Trinidad and Tobago), a Corporate Social Responsibility grant from Unicomer Ltd (a large retail company), or a grant from the Ministry of Agriculture - to outfit several rural communities in Trinidad and Tobago with chocolate making equipment and to have four community teams register as independent for profit companies with the directors all hailing from the relevant village.

Fast forward to 2020 and there are now several active components of the ARC network poised to move into scale up mode.

- ARC is a non-profit organisation which is responsible for continued training and support and expansion of the current community groups and new projects.
- Alongside there is a for-profit company - ARC Enterprises - that is responsible for the online delivery service which provides marketing and distribution of community and other locally made products and produce.
- There is an environmental NGO - ARC Conservation (a separately registered non-profit).
- There is a community tourism arm - ARC Destinations (a for-profit arm of ARC Enterprises).
- The four registered community chocolate companies in Trinidad and Tobago, two groups in Saint Lucia and one group in Guyana are all independently owned and operated but closely associated with ARC.



Figure 3: ARC triple bottom-line structure. CREDIT: ARC

We have stuck to our MVP (Minimum Viable Product) concept from the beginning and have remained both lean enough, and agile enough, to pivot rapidly to different/additional services and products when necessary. Until the beginning of 2019, we were primarily generating revenue through chocolate sales and cocoa tourism with a small amount through other agro-processed products and our minimal waste, near plastic-free shop. Since COVID-19, 75 percent of the revenue shifted to our online shop and so we increased the shop team and the team of drivers - including the rural owners of vehicles. The online shop sells items from the various communities including local organic produce, cocoa and chocolate, convenience items (peeled and frozen provisions, freshly juiced citrus, cut up callaloo packs, etc.) and catered items (cassava chocolate brownies, pepper sauce, bammies, etc.) as well as other locally processed items (jams, soaps, yogurts, wines, etc.) and imported dry goods (legumes, nuts, seeds, rice, etc.) that we purchase in bulk. Everything is packaged without single use plastics (brown bags, glass bottles, wrapped in banana leaves, etc.).

## ARC delivering triple bottom-line benefits

### Economic benefits of by ARC

Because ARC is a triple bottom line enterprise - i.e. delivering benefits for People, Planet and Profit - the economic aspects have been central from day one. Marginalised communities need vibrant economies

within their borders which allow them to work close to home. The activities of ARC create direct financial benefits for over 400 rural residents.

ARC’s revenue has doubled every year and reached TT\$1M (about US\$150,000). Figures 4 and 5 show the growth in revenue generated through ARC Enterprises. The early years mainly show money derived from chocolate production and tourism. By the third year, chocolate community tourism was a significant source of the revenue generated while, side by side, wholesale income from the sale of cocoa and chocolate products is increasing. Two of the arms of ARC - the produce deliveries and the catering arm - continued to operate at lower levels until 2020.

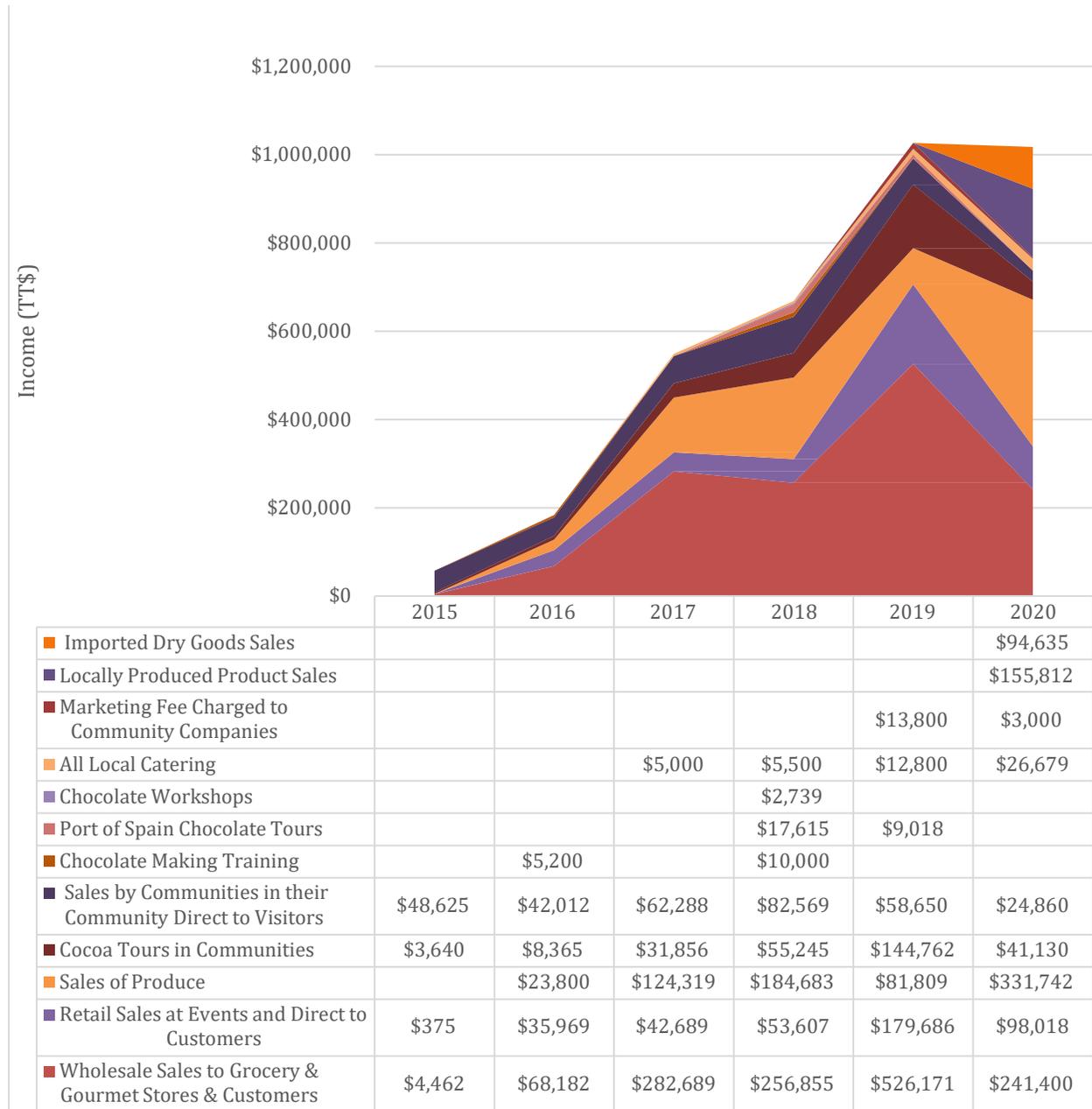


Figure 4: ARC revenue 2015-2020 (TT\$) showing growth in total income.

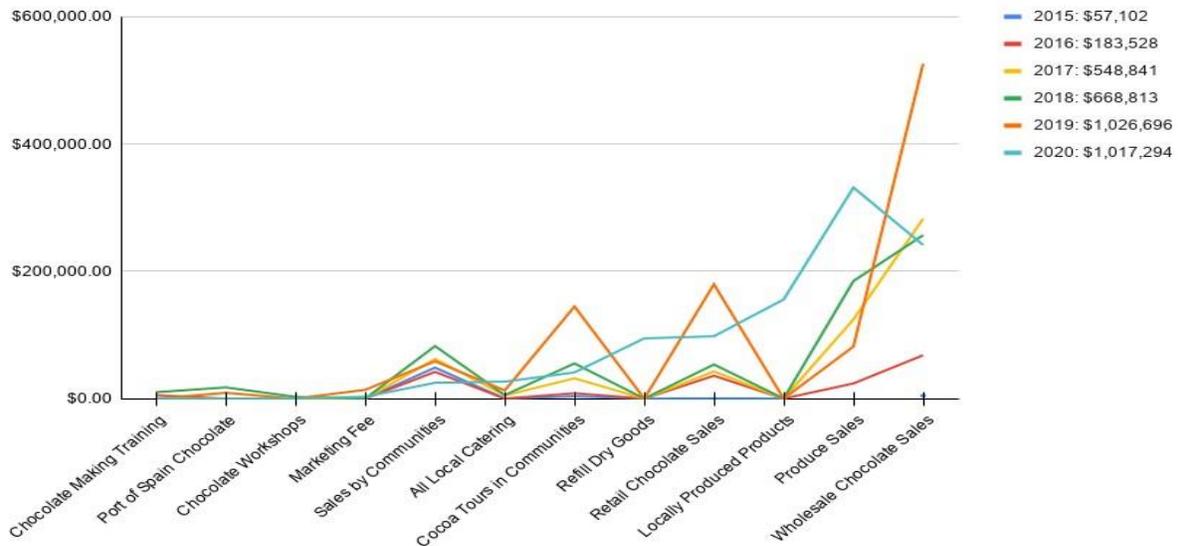


Figure 5: ARC revenue 2015-2020 (TT\$) showing changes in contribution of different revenue streams.

The realities of the global COVID-19 pandemic created a dramatic shift in ARC's revenue generation but because we had already developed various functioning arms, we were able to quickly pivot and adjust. Although none of us could have predicted the specifics of what 2020 had in store, ARC's focus has always been in product diversification. Starting with chocolate production in rural communities was an ideal entry point since it was a new and exciting value added product but also because cocoa estates are food forests so chocolate was always just the tip of the iceberg for what else could be supported and developed. Unlike so many businesses, because of our ability to shift focus we were able to stay even with revenue generation and we also were able to greatly expand employment opportunities both within the communities and the central ARC team. Additionally, the expansion of our online delivery service and customer base meant we were also able to reach out and support other small local entrepreneurs who are doing environmentally regenerative products to include their items in our online shopping platform. Our final accomplishment for 2020 was the opening of a physical space in St. Augustine, Trinidad called ARC Marketplace which will serve as an essential community building space and the Caribbean's first Zero-Waste model shop. Despite challenges from COVID-19, revenue in 2020 maintained 2019 numbers.

### Environmental benefits by ARC

At ARC we've centered several environmental principles in our product approach.

1. We focus on crops from perennial plants and not annuals.
2. We buy and sell almost exclusively organic produce.
3. We encourage polyculture planting in our communities.
4. We support young people to feel empowered and rewarded by getting intimate with their ecosystem.
5. We support local producers who are doing regenerative products using local inputs and no single use plastics.

These principles lead to forest protection, animal habitat protection and river/watershed protection. It can best be summed up by a series of marketing pictures/posts we did (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: ARC marketing posts on environmental benefits of their products. CREDIT: ARC

## Social benefits by ARC

In the past years, as the cocoa sector experienced a slight surge in rehabilitation, the ARC founders knew there must be focus on the farmers and their communities receiving the equity that has always eluded them. The consistent trend is for those who already have access to financial and educational resources to enter into entrepreneurial roles and expand the sector and their financial incomes with little to no benefit or thought paid those who are producing their necessary raw products. Although we were seeing a long overdue but all too slight shift in financial compensation for well-produced cacao beans, farmers and farming communities were still not benefiting enough to truly provide the incentives necessary to engage in this laborious trade.

Through our experience, we have seen dramatic shifts in motivation, excitement, investment and involvement created when chocolate companies are started, owned and run in rural, cacao producing communities by their residents - with training, assistance and equipment provided by ARC. There is literally no comparison between the results our vertical development, holistic model creates versus when farmers are merely given a better price for their beans.

Because of the systemic lack of recognition and resources provided to these rural communities over generations, there is a persistent sense of being downtrodden, forgotten, unworthy, etc. By coming into these communities and providing technical training and equipment for an industry that is so new to the Caribbean and that is so exciting and glamorous, there are immediate shifts in community members' feelings of worthiness and capabilities. By providing a model that has been tested and where many of the kinks have been worked out, there is an immediate sense of accomplishment and mastery. And by already having high level branding in place and markets (local shops) that are willing to take the products, there is an immediate source of income and understanding of success. All of this combined with regular emotional and social skills development results in true and total successful impact.

The continued expansion of ARC has meant an increase in community employment where many young mothers can balance the need for income with the flexible work hours and ability to bring children to the work site where both academic and emotional support can be accessed. The community companies and our coordinating team are over 80 percent female and over 50 percent under the age of 30.



*Figure 7: Young mothers are key beneficiaries of ARC as they can work close to home and fulfill childcare responsibilities at the same time. CREDIT: ARC*

## Looking ahead for ARC

One of the most difficult tasks of a community organisation is that of succession and continuity. Sometimes it's acceptable to do work to improve the situation for several years and then come to an end. The work speaks for itself and even without the benefit of a structure has ongoing effects. But other times not only does it take longer for fundamental principles to be integrated into a culture, but the organisation needs to grow and achieve a more wide-ranging purpose in order for its philosophy to be enduring.

Some steps we have taken to ensure succession but also where more time is needed to be spent:

- Transferring leadership to young people - Adults are involved and trained and then they train the younger generations in the skills acquired.
- Interacting with the school system - School children are trained in chocolate making, tour guiding and conservation.
- Documenting knowledge - Thoroughly documenting procedural developments and creating detailed manuals for each aspect of production.
- Fostering partnerships - Building a network across communities and countries to ensure resilience.
- Building capacity - Cross training team members.



Figure 8: Team members from ARC displaying chocolate they produced. CREDIT: ARC



Figure 9: Young women from Grande Riviere marketing their chocolate products CREDIT: ARC

One of our main next steps will be to strengthen ARC Conservation so that the benefits to non-human communities and the relationship between the human and non-human communities is as central to the organisational activities and the team philosophy as the development of the human communities has been for the past few years. This would mean creating a team member position that focuses exclusively on conservation activities and having regular sessions to strategise on the linkages between services provided and products created and their impact on the environment. Although we already keep in mind these effects,

there needs to be a more deliberate and focused programme of activities linking the various arms of ARC to the conservation focus in a more systematic and documented way.



Figure 10: Conservation training with school kids. CREDIT: ARC



Figure 11: Tour guide training of village youth. CREDIT: ARC

## Contact information



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