Aquarium Fish That Transformed a Community

St. Catherine, Jamaica is not the first place one would necessarily look for examples of innovative and powerful regional economic development. The area is home to approximately 518,345 people, but it is characterized by a high rate of almost 40% unemployment and many local incidents of crime and violence. These factors combined make the parish an unlikely location for great success. Nevertheless, despite the challenges faced by the community, the residents are leaping into a lucrative, non-traditional trade. A cluster of inner city youth has managed to turn an age-old hobby of raising pet fish into a significant money-making business for the community that by extension, has also positioned Jamaica to cash-in on a new export industry generating over US$300 million worldwide.

Known formally as ornamental fish farming, the youth conduct small-scale farming right from their own backyards. The product is referred to colloquially as ‘pond fish’ by most Caribbean folk with species like cichlids, guppies and swordtails in high demand. Ornamental fish farming dates back to the 1970s in Jamaica, but the sector remained informal and small-scale until the early 2000s. In 2005, and NGO organization called The Competitiveness Company (TCC) began to seek out sustainable income generating opportunities for inner-city youth. After identifying a gap in the global market for the supply of ornamental fish, TCC saw an opportunity to turn a hobby into a business and developed a value chain that organized over 130 urban and at-risk youth into a number of production units that breed and grow fish for export.

TCC’s ornamental fish cluster competed for and won a grant of US$500,000 from the Compete Caribbean Enterprise Innovation Challenge Fund in 2014. Compete Caribbean collaborated with the cluster to create a project that focusted on positioning the group for export readiness and market penetration, establishing an export facility capable of processing 450,000 fish per month was commissioned; a certified and efficient hatchery capable of producing 100 varieties of fish was also custom-built, and; the cluster secured an international order for the export of 3.6 million fish in 2017. Fulfillment of this will move the ornamental fish industry to the top 5 agricultural exports in Jamaica.

Many of the growers and breeders that make up the value chain were previously unable to access jobs due to a lack of formal qualifications. Through the training that Compete Caribbean provided to the cluster, many of these individuals are now able to create wealth through entrepreneurship and are managing fish farms in accordance with relevant industry quality assurance systems.

Compete Caribbean remains committed to supporting the Caribbean region towards greater innovation and competitiveness in the global market. Please follow our website at www.competecaribbean.org for more information on building the capacity to cluster on your island.
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Prior to Compete Caribbean’s involvement, the cluster had no common export facility. The fish were sold mostly to the local market which could only absorb 20,000 fish per month. By project closing in 2016, Compete Caribbean’s investment supported the achievement of the following results:

1. Fish mortality declined from 36% to 3% during shipping.
2. The varieties of fish product offered increased from 10 to 133 species;
3. 100% of farms became fully compliant with the required biosecurity standard;
4. The cluster gained access to the Canadian market, which is the most difficult market to enter due to the high standard of fish required;
5. The value of exports moved from $232 to $23,000 between 2015 and 2016 (55,000 fish exported);
6. A certified and efficient export facility capable of processing 450,000 fish per month was commissioned;
7. A certified and efficient hatchery capable of producing 100 varieties of fish was also custom-built, and;
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