



The Sea is Our Highway

A crop, an industry, an innovation, a generation's ambition

How a scheduled, zero-fossil-fuel packet service, RoPAC, can help cure the Caribbean's physical and financial fragmentation and deliver 25 by 2025+5.

Open Letter To: The Government of Barbados and Head of Government, The Hon. Mia Amor Mottley, S.C., M.P., Prime Minister of Barbados; Lead Head of Government for the CARICOM Single Market and Economy; Chair, UN Secretary-General's SDG Advocates

From: Ian Dash, Director, S.V. Ruth Limited, Caribbean Sail Cargo Initiative, Centre for Agricultural Research and Innovation, The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill

Unsolicited strategic note

Prime Minister,

In this sixtieth year of Barbados' Independence, and across a region whose nations came to nationhood through the same hopeful decades of the 1960s and 70s, one shared promise remains unkept: self-reliance. From the beginning, that promise meant feeding ourselves and diversifying beyond the sugar and banana of the colonial estate. Sixty years on, the Caribbean still imports the majority of what it eats.

CARICOM committed to a regional sea transport system at Grand Anse in 1989. It was never built. This note argues that it is the missing organ, and that it can be built now: a scheduled, intraregional packet service, RoPAC, regionally built, owned and crewed, powered by wind and sun.

1. The diagnosis: a sixty-year-old condition

The Caribbean is not short of land, sea, or willing growers. It suffers from a chronic condition: **fragmentation**. Its organs are healthy enough alone, but they do not function as one body. Colonial history wired each limb to a distant head, and the nervous system was never rewired after Independence.

The condition shows up as two failures of connectivity.

Physical connectivity: the sea is our highway, but the region's circulation has no traffic. A farmer in Dominica or Saint Lucia will not plant for a market she cannot reach. A young sea captain will not sail a route without cargo. No treasury can subsidise a freight run forever to break that stand-off. Food grown in one part of the body cannot reach the part that is hungry, because the vessels do not exist, or do not run on a schedule anyone can plan around.

Financial connectivity: the blood is thin and costly. Supplying food products into the islands largely depends on foreign owned vessels, imported diesel, lubricating oil, machinery, spares and specialist mechanics, adding foreign-exchange costs at every turn. Regional savings are not pooled into regional ships. Concessional climate finance does not reliably reach small hulls. Each voyage drains scarce foreign exchange out of the body instead of circulating it within.

The result is anaemia: a region on fertile land and rich seas that buys most of its food abroad, and absorbs every global price shock.

2. The aetiology: why it never healed

The dependence was defended from above, by a planter-merchant class that profited from sugar and from the agencies importing the packaged food the cane field did not grow. It was devalued from below, by the inherited stigma of working the land. And it was locked in by the structure of the plantation and colonial economy itself.

These interlocking constraints explain why incremental policy never opened the door. Agriculture policy alone has treated the symptoms for six decades. The cure needs **one instrument that repairs the circulation and the bloodstream together**.

3. The treatment: a pulse, not only a vessel

The scheduled intraregional packet service is the heartbeat of the cure. A packet sails on a published timetable whether or not the hold is full. Irregular tramp shipping is an erratic pulse that no farmer or buyer can plan around. The Caribbean once had the principle in its packet schooners: published schedules and direct island-to-island links. RoPAC restores it, without the fuel dependency that made regional services costly and diminished.

The schedule does four things at once.

1. **It creates the market.** A grower plants against a sailing day. A hotel, supermarket or school orders against a known frequency. Reliability turns hulls into a market.
2. **It fits perishables.** Weekly small lots from the Barbados hub to each island mean less spoilage and less need for large cold stores. Produce moves at the pace people eat, not in bulk accumulations that rot waiting for a ship.
3. **It makes the hull bankable.** A published timetable gives lenders predictable cargo and revenue, which supports ship finance and keeps foreign exchange in the region.
4. **It suits zero-fossil vessels.** Short, fixed, repeated routes give wind-and-solar ships a predictable energy profile. Wind and sun do not spike in price: decarbonisation is what finally makes a fixed timetable affordable.

Then the body begins to heal itself. The ship makes the market credible. The market makes the planting worthwhile. The planting displaces imports. The harvest fills the ships, and a domestic shipbuilding industry thrives as each season strengthens the next. One instrument, turning four locks at once, with Barbados as its heart.

4. The sea is our highway: the circulation

The sea is the region's blood circulation, and RoPAC runs it like a maritime railway timetable: same route, same day, every week. Six vessels sail six complementary loops, with Barbados as the interchange hub, staggered schedules, daylight port calls and overnight passages.

Route	Path	Distance (nm)	Calls
AZ1 Mainland-Hub-Northern Link	Guyana - Barbados - Dominica - Barbados - Guyana	1,010	4
AZ2 Southern Windward Loop	Trinidad - Grenada - SVG - Saint Lucia - Barbados - Trinidad	525	5
AZ3 Leeward Connection	Barbados - Dominica - Antigua - Dominica - Barbados	560	4
AZ4 Windward Islands Shuttle	Barbados - Saint Lucia - SVG - Grenada - SVG - Saint Lucia - Barbados	470	6
AZ5 Southern Mainland Loop	Guyana - Trinidad - Grenada - SVG - Guyana	900	4
AZ6 Direct Breadbasket Shuttle	Guyana - Trinidad - Guyana	306	2

Distances are approximate port-to-port estimates, not for navigation. Source: RoPAC.ai.

5. The vessel: Alpha Zulu

Alpha Zulu is a break-bulk packet vessel that sells measured cargo space by the cubic metre and pallet position. It is designed from first principles for small island states, with absolute zero fossil fuel on board.

- **Cold chain built in.** Eight independently insulated compartments, each configurable as frozen (-18 °C), chilled (0-4 °C), cool (10-15 °C) or ambient, refrigerated from the vessel's own renewable energy, farm gate to point of sale.
- **Wind and sun.** A mechanised, load-sensing rig, solar decks, retractable electric propulsion, and a hydrogen upgrade path without redesign.
- **Roll-in loading.** A stern ramp takes pallets, containers and vehicles straight in, so it can work where a terminal does not stand.
- **Built here.** Port Trident Shipyard, Barbados, with majority local value-added content; intended flag Barbados.
- **Ready for a hurricane.** Shallow draft and beach landing let the same hull serve as a disaster-relief asset when the quays are out.

Particulars are preliminary, subject to design development and classification review.

6. Sovereignty in trade: carrying goods in our own bottoms

Historically, maritime powers treated production, commerce and their merchant fleets as connected national interests. England's seventeenth-century Navigation Acts restricted much colonial trade to English or colonial shipping and sought to keep commercial gains in English hands.[1] Carrying trade in their own ships generated income, employment, maritime skills and strategic capacity.

That history speaks directly to the Caribbean, whose colonial trade served metropolitan interests. For independent Caribbean economies, agriculture and manufacturing should develop alongside the ships that connect them to markets. Our **own bottoms** means ships owned or effectively controlled by Caribbean interests and committed to regional service.

Secure access to markets. Dependence on outside carriers leaves producers exposed to route, capacity and scheduling decisions made elsewhere. Regional ownership, backed by enforceable service commitments, can secure essential links whose value to our economies exceeds their immediate attraction to a distant operator.

Give production the confidence to grow. Farmers can plant and harvest against a sailing day; processors and manufacturers can accept orders against a credible delivery date. Reliable carriage helps turn separate island markets into a larger market, supporting investment, employment and production at a more efficient scale.

Retain more of the value of trade. The Region can earn from both the product and its carriage. Caribbean ownership, crews and suppliers can retain more freight income, wages and profits locally. The net foreign-exchange benefit must allow for imported vessels, equipment, finance, insurance and energy. Wind and solar propulsion can reduce the recurring fuel-import burden.

Strengthen bargaining power. A credible regional carrier gives shippers another option and can improve competition on price and service. Vessel size, utilisation, port charges and competent management remain decisive: local ownership must translate into competitive delivered costs.

Protect food security and emergency access. Scheduled vessels with appropriate cold-chain capacity can connect food surpluses with demand and support relief movements after disasters. UNCTAD identifies small island developing states as especially vulnerable to shipping disruption and rising transport costs.[2]

Build an industry around the trade. Operating and maintaining the fleet can sustain seafaring, engineering, repair and training. Building vessels in the Caribbean adds a further industrial opportunity. Ship ownership and shipbuilding should each be assessed for the value, skills and productive capacity they retain in the Region.

For CARICOM, a coordinated regional fleet offers the opportunity to pool cargo and investment across several economies. Private Caribbean ownership can serve this purpose; government ownership is not essential. The objective is sufficient regional control over essential carriage, alongside the international services that connect us to wider markets.

A national flag alone does not establish local ownership or commitment to regional routes.[3] Equally, ownership and a published timetable alone do not make a vessel bankable. Credible demand, freight commitments, operating discipline and reliable service must support the investment.

Alpha Zulu RoPAC is therefore proposed as productive infrastructure: scheduled Caribbean-controlled shipping through which our farms and factories can serve a connected regional market. Its success must be measured by reliability, affordable delivered costs, income retained locally and the additional trade it enables.

Background to this section

[1] UK Parliament, [The Navigation Laws: Parliament and the American Colonies before 1765](#).

[2] UNCTAD, [Review of Maritime Transport 2024](#): SIDS, disruption and transport costs.

[3] UNCTAD, [Development and Globalization: Facts and Figures 2021](#): fleet ownership and registration.

7. The financial prescription: a healthy bloodstream

Because the condition is as much financial as physical, the cure must be too.

- **Keep foreign exchange at home.** Wind and sun are not imported, bunkered, or paid for in scarce foreign exchange, and carry no exposure to the next oil-price shock. The cleaner ship is also the cheaper ship to run.
- **Make the hull bankable.** A weekly timetable and reserved carriage give lenders a predictable revenue base. Zero direct emissions meets the EU Taxonomy's test for climate-mitigating maritime transport.
- **Keep ownership regional.** Outside capital enters as debt, grants, or a citizen and diaspora bond, never as controlling equity.
- **Tap climate finance.** The European Commission has proposed reserving 900,000 EU ETS allowances a year until 2035 for maritime decarbonisation in qualifying small island states, about €67.5 million a year at an illustrative €75. The proposal is not final, and eligibility is subject to its rules.
- **Fund the fleet from the trade it carries.** A modest cabotage levy, on the Nigerian model, can finance vessel acquisition.

The prize is large because the need is: Caribbean transport costs run about three times the world average, and intra-CARICOM exports reached US\$2.18 billion in 2024.

8. The legal prescription

The standard: the Community's fresh produce, carried between Member States, moves only on vessels with no fossil-fuel combustion on board, built, owned, operated and crewed by CARICOM nationals and residents. Otherwise, only fossil-fuelled vessels under 500 gross tonnes are phased out. The deep-sea container lines are untouched.

Trade-law advice from the Shridath Ramphal Centre (2022) is encouraging: the qualifying condition is zero-emission status, open to every CARICOM national, and food security as a strategic carve-out further shields it. Precedent abounds: the United States' Jones Act, Canada's Coasting Trade Act (whose waiver where no national vessel exists mirrors our phasing), Nigeria's Cabotage Act (whose two percent levy funds vessel finance), and the European Union's Regulation 3577/92, reserving intra-EU cabotage to Community shipowners. CARICOM would propose nothing the European Union has not done for itself since 1992.

9. Why it reaches you, and why now

Under your chairmanship in Bridgetown in February 2025, CARICOM Heads extended 25 by 2025 to 2030, "25 by 2025+5", naming the causes of the shortfall: rising transport and logistics costs, climate shocks, and trade-rule uncertainty. At the close of the Fifty-First Meeting in Saint Lucia this July, speaking as lead Head for the Single Market, you named the task yourself: "We are singularly focused on being able to reduce the cost of intra-island cargo." The Heads have since reached for borrowed tonnage as a stopgap, and asked the private sector for a permanent regional ferry system within the year.

The target is set and the demand is declared. What both still lack is the mechanism, and it stands where your three platforms meet: the CARICOM Single Market and Economy, whose free movement of goods this fleet would finally carry; the Bridgetown Initiative's case for climate finance; and your seat as Chair of the UN SDG Advocates.

Reverse the usual accounting. Food security is the cost the Region is already willing to bear. Decarbonisation, a Caribbean-owned merchant marine, and gender equality in shipping are not its price but its dividends. Spend on feeding our people, and you build the green fleet, the industry, and the jobs in the same act.

10. More than a crop

The ship that plants a crop is four things, compounding.

- **A crop.** Assured, scheduled access to market makes diversification worth the risk for the first time in sixty years.
- **An industry.** Reserved cargo gives yards an order book. A Caribbean-flagged green merchant marine means shipbuilding, repair, and operations at home.
- **An innovation.** Zero-emission, wind-primary hulls proven in the Caribbean become a model for small island states across the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific and Indian Oceans.
- **A generation's ambition.** A study commissioned by the CDB found at least 80% of crews on the region's inter-island vessels lack formal training. Alpha Zulu creates the demand for the pipeline, with young people, and women from the first day, in the yards and on the decks.

11. The dose

Bring in Guyana and Suriname, the Region's true breadbasket, alongside the produce surplus of Dominica, Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent, and the food already exists. What has been missing is the organised, reliably scheduled means to carry it across the water.

- **To 2030:** a quarter cut in Eastern Caribbean (Barbados-OECS) food imports, with production already committed.
- **To 2035:** a forty to fifty percent reduction, as yields rise to meet the guaranteed market.
- **Planning estimates, not forecasts:** 25-35% cargo growth within three years of weekly packet service, and about 28,000 tonnes of CO₂ avoided a year on the six loops.

The first Alpha Zulu ships are planned to sail in 2029. A phased trajectory, not a leap of faith.

12. A decade of preparation, and the first signs of recovery

This vision has a Barbadian lineage a decade long. Schooner Ruth, the zero-fossil-fuel pilot of the Caribbean Sail Cargo Initiative, was nurtured by Professor Leonard O'Garro of the UWI Centre for Food Security, now the Centre for Agricultural Research and Innovation under Dr Michele Singh. Launched off Browne's Beach in 2014 by Sir Hilary Beckles, who declared it "serving a moral purpose," the project drew from the late Professor Pedro Welch, in 2016, the observation that we were "leading the pack."

The patient is responding.

- On 30 June 2026, the Barbados Maritime Transport Administration formally recognised Alpha Zulu RoPAC as a climate-mitigation solution and a Sustainable Economic Development (Shipping) Initiative under the 2024 maritime statutes.
- On 7 June 2026, the CARICOM Secretariat acknowledged Alpha Zulu by email as "an innovative contribution to regional connectivity, food security, climate resilience, and sustainable maritime transport."
- In November 2025, MTCC Caribbean at the University of Trinidad and Tobago selected the proposal as a pilot demonstration under the IMO-EU Global MTCC Network, Phase II.

13. The invitation

True self-reliance is never wholly finished, not in a world as interconnected as ours. But the ship that plants a crop is not a metaphor. It is a fleet we can build, owned by our own, feeding our own. It puts traffic back on the sea, the region's highway and its blood circulation, enriches the bloodstream, and gives a generation an industry to inherit.

Sixty years on, it would be a fitting way to honour the anniversary: to carry forward, with renewed purpose, the work that Independence began.

Respectfully submitted,

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