

A STRATEGIC NOTE

The Ship That Plants a Crop

How decarbonising Caribbean shipping can deliver 25 by 2025+5 where CARICOM food security and its decarbonised fleet compound

For the personal attention of

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

A leading international voice for Small Island Developing States and climate-vulnerable nations

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, is it worth asking why one shared promise remains unkept: greater self-reliance. From the beginning, that promise meant feeding ourselves, and diversifying beyond the sugar and banana of the colonial estate. Yet a farmer in Dominica or Saint Lucia will still not plant for a market she cannot reach. A young sea captain will not sail a route without cargo. And no national treasury can subsidise a fast ferry freight forever to break that stand-off. For the whole of those sixty years this is why the Caribbean still imports the majority of what it eats: not for want of land or willing growers, but for want of a reliable maritime link between what we can grow and where it is eaten.

This is not, for me, an abstract policy question. As a child in the 1960s I sat at the feet of my grandfather, the Hon. J. Sydney Dash, O.B.E., a Combermere old boy whose early agricultural training was under the pioneering Barbados cane breeder John Redman Bovell. In 1909, as a Barbados Scholar, he went on to Macdonald College of McGill University, graduating with first-class honours in agriculture and specialising in plant pathology, before returning to Barbados in 1914 as Assistant Superintendent of Agriculture under Bovell. He subsequently organised and directed an agricultural experiment station in Guadeloupe, became a founding Professor of Agriculture at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad, and served for many years as Director of Agriculture of British Guiana, including through the war years, for which service he was appointed O.B.E. in 1946. In retirement he returned to public service in Barbados, leading the Department of Agriculture under Premier Hugh Gordon Cummins and later the Barbados Development Board under Errol Barrow. Yet notwithstanding that long and complex career in agricultural science, research, education and public administration across the Caribbean and Canada, what he chose to impress upon his young grandson more than sixty years ago was that the most difficult challenge of his career had been crop diversification: moving Barbados beyond dependence on the sugar estate towards growing more of what its people ate - what today we would call food security. More than sixty years later, that same challenge remains. It is the one I submit to you now - but this time with a means of addressing the missing part of the equation: reliable, affordable inter-island transport between the farmer and the market.

This note proposes that the missing link has a name you already champion: decarbonisation. It should not be treated as a cost to be borne, but a lever powerful enough to move a problem that agriculture policy alone has never shifted.

That problem was never a mere oversight. 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; devalued from below, by the inherited stigma of working the land; and locked in by the structure of the plantation economy itself. Independence did not remove the transport lock: moving food between islands came to depend on imported diesel, lubricating oil, machinery, spares and specialist mechanics, adding foreign-exchange costs at every turn. These interlocking constraints are why incremental policy never opened the door. It must take a lever.

The idea, in a breeze

Build a fossil-fuel-free fleet in two tiers, owned and crewed by Caribbean nationals. Existing liners, then one or two zero-fossil-fuel deep-sea vessels, run a steady trunk loop, carrying the surplus of the Region's breadbasket (Guyana above all) to a hub at Bridgetown. From there, high-frequency RoPAC feeders fan out to and between every island (including Dominica, Saint Lucia and St Vincent) making frequent small inter-island deliveries timed to the pace people eat. The wind is the fuel, supplied at the point of use. Pair that fleet with a guaranteed market for farmers, and the growers of Dominica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent, and Guyana will welcome an assured, reliably-scheduled outlet for what they grow and raise. The chain then turns, and keeps turning: the ship makes the market credible; the market makes the planting worthwhile; the planting displaces the imports; and the harvest, in turn, fills the ships, and the domestic shipbuilding industry thrives with each season strengthening the next. One instrument, turning four locks at once, and Barbados is its hub.

Why this 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 very causes of the shortfall: rising transport and logistics costs, climate shocks, and trade-rule uncertainty. And 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; the demand is declared. What both still lack is the mechanism. This is that mechanism, and it stands where your three great platforms meet: your lead responsibility for 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 and leading international voice for Small Island Developing States. Transport is nearly a seventh of global emissions; here, decarbonising it also feeds people. Few interventions serve gender equality, climate, food security, foreign exchange, and youth employment in a single stroke.

The lever, plainly

Let me frame this the right way up. Decarbonisation is usually booked as the cost and food security as a hoped-for benefit. Reverse it. Food security is the cost the Region is already willing to bear – the one objective no one will refuse to fund. Decarbonisation, a Caribbean-owned merchant marine, and gender equality in shipping are not its price but its dividends: joint products of a single investment, none of them achievable without the others. Spend on feeding our people, and you build the green fleet, the regional industry, and the jobs in the same act.

This is why it deserves your hand. The duty to decarbonise shipping carries what food logistics on its own never could: a binding mandate, head-of-government backing, and access to concessional climate and blue-economy finance. That is what capitalises the fleet, and the high-frequency fleet is the physical guarantee that a farmer's crop will reach its market. The dollar that feeds our people is the same dollar that cleans our shipping and keeps our commerce in our own hands. The wind and the sea have always been our strategic infrastructure; a fossil-fuel-free fleet turns them into strategic infrastructure assets we own.

I saw the same logic at work elsewhere. Returning recently from an IMO decarbonisation-finance workshop at the World Maritime University in Malmö, I had argued, and my team accepted, that gender equality in shipping must sit at the forefront of the decarbonisation effort: let decarbonisation drive gender equality. The principle here is the same. The obligation becomes the engine. A Caribbean green fleet, built and crewed by our own, is a chance to bring women into the ship yards, and vessel operations of a new industry from its first day.

And consider the fuel. For a wind-powered vessel, the wind is the fuel: free, and supplied at the point of use. Nothing to import, bunker, or pay for in scarce foreign exchange; no exposure to the next oil-price shock. For a region that buys nearly all its fuel abroad, every voyage under sail is foreign exchange kept at home. The cleaner ship is also the cheaper ship to run.

There is nothing novel in this: economies have long thrived on their own productive base, in manufacturing and agriculture, and on carrying their own trade in their own ship bottoms, built, owned, and crewed by their own nationals.

It is not a dream. The arithmetic holds

A working model bears this out. Bring in Guyana and Suriname, the Region's true breadbasket, alongside the produce surplus of Dominica, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent, and the Region's breadbasket already grows a large share of what the Eastern Caribbean imports. The food exists; what has been missing is the organized reliably scheduled means to carry it across the water. That is what the two-tier fleet supplies.

Sized to the Community's own 25-by-2025+5 horizon, the numbers are strikingly modest. To cut Eastern Caribbean (Barbados–OECS) food imports by a quarter calls for only some two deep-sea trunk vessels and around six small feeders, and production already committed. Extend the ambition across the decade to 2035, and a forty to fifty percent reduction comes into reach with four trunk vessels

and ten high-frequency feeders, as yields rise to meet the guaranteed market. It becomes a phased trajectory, not a leap of faith.

The law is more friend than obstacle

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, the closest match in design, whose two percent levy funds vessel finance; and the European Union's Regulation 3577/92, reserving intra-EU cabotage to Community shipowners: proof that CARICOM would propose nothing the European Union has not done for itself since 1992. The mandate that assures the farmer a market assures our yards an order book: reserved cargo secures ship mortgages; zero-emission hulls and decarbonisation technologies attract concessional climate finance. The path is navigable.

A decade in the making

This vision already has a Barbadian lineage a decade long. Schooner Ruth, the zero-fossil-fuel pilot (retrofit under way) 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 proud observation that we were "leading the pack." What began on a Barbadian beach now seeks to revolutionise the economics of high-frequency inter-island maritime connectivity for Small Island Developing States across the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

And Barbados leads it

Barbados is placed to be the hub: the home of a nascent zero-emission shipbuilding and ocean-transport industry, training Barbadian and OECS young people for the shipyards and operations of a Caribbean-flagged green merchant marine, transshipping for the Eastern Caribbean and beyond. A regional instrument; a Barbadian flagship; a global exemplar of what a Small Island State can show the world.

This is no longer only an idea on paper. On 30 June 2026 (v2), the Barbados Maritime Transport Administration formally recognised the Alpha Zulu Class ZeroFF RoPAC as a climate-mitigation solution and a Sustainable Economic Development (Shipping) Initiative under our 2024 maritime statutes. On 7 June 2026, the CARICOM Secretariat acknowledged the Alpha Zulu Class by email as "an innovative contribution to regional connectivity, food security, climate resilience, and sustainable maritime transport." The first stones are laid.

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, and it is the most Caribbean answer imaginable to a Caribbean problem. 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,

Ian Dash, Director

S.V. Ruth Limited, Caribbean Sail Cargo Initiative

Centre for Agricultural Research and Innovation

Owen Arthur CARICOM Research Building, The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, St. Michael

Tel / WhatsApp: +1 246 830 8889 | email: schoonerruth@gmail.com

This note asks one thing of you. Behind it sit a costed model, a draft Protocol to the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas, and the legal and economic groundwork, and the initiative now carries formal national and regional recognition. What would carry it forward is your introduction to those best placed to help develop and finance it. A word from you would open doors that, to an unsolicited voice, remain closed.

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