

STAKEHOLDER SPOTLIGHT: 79-YEAR-OLD

PAULA ABRAHAM TALKS ABOUT LIFE ON THE FARM

Grand Fond, Dominica

Ms. Abraham was where she could be found on any normal day: in her garden with her cutlass. On this particular day, officials from the PISLM, IICA (Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture, Dominica Delegation) and Dominica's Division of Agriculture climbed her steep hillside estate. Some of us found the hike daunting. Not Ms. Abraham. Scaling these slopes has been a way of life for her for decades now.

Paula Abraham represents the very people the Partnership Initiative for Sustainable Land Management came to Dominica to support. As the nation worked tirelessly to fortify its disaster resilience in the years that followed Hurricane Maria, IICA joined forces with the PISLM under the Sustainable Land Management in the Commonwealth of Dominica project. Project objectives include increasing the capacity and efficiency of farmers, the Division of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Agriculture. After interventions for more than 30 farmers nationwide were completed, IICA and PISLM selected farmers to visit to capture some of the stories behind the all the project planning and implementation.

As we approached, Ms. Abraham remained bent over, hacking at the weeds on her land with authority. Her field bag hung from a nearby tree in the shade as she laboured under the unforgiving heat of the sun. All of us were in profound awe at the sight. Because of the degree of the slope, the drainage system installed under the Sustainable Land Management in Agriculture



*Ms. Paula Abraham
on her farm*

STAKEHOLDER SPOTLIGHT: PAULA ABRAHAM (Cont'd)



*Paula Abraham on her farm overlooking Ti Grand Fond Road.
vertiginous hillside plot of land.*

As an ambitious young woman with vision, Ms. Abraham purchased her land from a man she worked for in the 1960's. Her boss deducted payments from her fortnightly wages.

Switching often between Kweyol and English, Ms. Abraham shared her journey with us. "I planted fig and I sold fig every two weeks," she explained. Of her ongoing expansion into new crops and growth into the export market, she recounted selling dasheen to DEXIA (Dominica Export Import Agency) "10 bags, 12 bags" while she still worked her job.

Dominica is situated along the Tropical Atlantic Hurricane Belt. In 1978, the nation won its independence from the United Kingdom. It was dealt a terrible blow by Hurricane David a year later. David depleted all the vegetation and left a newly independent populace to recover on its own. Naturally, Ms. Abraham's experience then and in subsequent storms had equipped her for what was to occur some 40 years later.

Component of the PISLM's Dominica projects were positioned as inclined steps. They look like a mud staircase. In practice, they both channel and impede runoff water, effectively hindering soil erosion in heavy rainstorms. Dr. Al Mario Casimir from the Division of Agriculture inspected the terrain like a caring parent, removing weeds here and there from around the vetiver.

Neither the approximately 15 extreme weather events that have battered the country over the last half century nor a recent stroke could stop Paula Abraham from thriving as a gardener on her



*Grand Fond,
St. David
Parish*

STAKEHOLDER SPOTLIGHT: PAULA ABRAHAM (Cont'd)

The PISLM arrived a year after Maria, the deadly Category 5 hurricane that pummeled the Eastern Caribbean in

September 2017. Its first project was launched in Dominica to support the country in building resilience against future superstorms by establishing and mainstreaming Sustainable Land Management best practices. Climate models suggest that because of global warming, these will occur more frequently and with greater strength.

“When they (officials from the project) called me, they told me they were going to give me a little help, I said ‘Not a problem!’”

-Paula Abraham, on her first contact with the Project

Rashida: “Talk about your experience after Hurricane Maria.”
Ms. Abraham: “I don’t take things for granted. God gives, God takes.”



Media Officer Rashida Serrant-Davis interviewing Ms. Abraham

At the time of the 2017 super storm, Ms. Abraham’s cousin had been working the farm under an arrangement made by her son. After the passage of Maria, she felt compelled to return to her land and bring it back to its former productivity with her own hands. Her son protested, doubting his mother’s ability to work the farm (she was 73 years old at the time). “I can work! You don’t know if I cannot work!”

Ms. Abraham proved her son wrong indeed, single-handedly replanting dasheen, plantain, cocoy (a local banana cultivar), turmeric, (sugar) cane, tania (a root vegetable) and paw paw (papaya).

Recently, her garden suffered another deleterious landslide during Tropical Storm Bret that passed through Dominica in June of this year. On the day of our visit, we could still see the large, missing chunk of land Ms. Abraham had worked on and nurtured for more than six decades. As a registered farmer in one of the five parishes targeted by the project,

STAKEHOLDER SPOTLIGHT: PAULA ABRAHAM *(Cont'd)*

Ms. Abraham was selected to be one of 33 farmers that benefited from interventions. The installations were completed after the passage of that trough. These critical interventions are designed to minimize the effects of future storms on the vulnerable topsoil supply that clings to her precarious sloping garden plot.

Tiffany Marcelle, a Physics lecturer at Dominica State College and an intern at IICA worked closely with Ms. Abraham and many other farmers to accomplish the project's goals. "Within the framework of the project, two pressing challenges emerged among women farmers: land ownership and farm labour. A significant number of women involved in the project did not have direct ownership of the land they cultivated; instead, it was often family land or rented property," said Ms. Marcelle. For Ms. Abraham, the project focused on the latter issue. "...female farmers reported instances of overpricing and harassment from laborers (in reference to payments), shedding light on the need for meaningful reforms in future agricultural initiatives."



Tiffany Marcelle

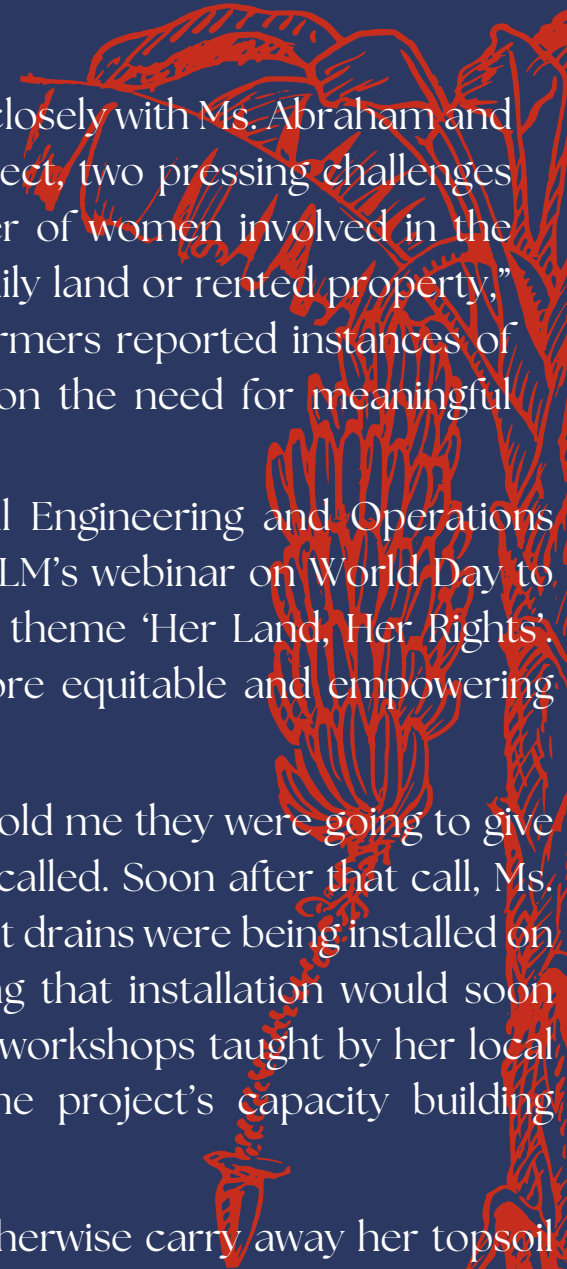
IICA Intern

Worked closely with Ms. Abraham on building capacity.

Ms. Marcelle, who holds master's degrees in Industrial Engineering and Operations Management, was one of the four presenters at the PISLM's webinar on World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought in June under the theme 'Her Land, Her Rights'. "Moving forward," said Tiffany, "I hope we create a more equitable and empowering environment for women in agriculture."

"When they (officials from the project) called me, they told me they were going to give me a little help, I said 'Not a problem!'" Ms. Abraham recalled. Soon after that call, Ms. Abraham received some new tools and was informed that drains were being installed on her neighbor's farm. The workers who were completing that installation would soon arrive to do the same for her. She also participated in workshops taught by her local extension officer, who was, in turn, trained under the project's capacity building activities.

With the new drains, she explained, water that would otherwise carry away her topsoil will be funneled down to Ti Grand Fond Road instead.



STAKEHOLDER SPOTLIGHT: PAULA ABRAHAM (Cont'd)

Vetiver plants were provided and installed by the PISLM as well to function as natural barricades that will further combat soil erosion. Ms. Abraham learned how to plant vetiver barriers from IICA's consultant Mr. Joseph Blanford. "He calls me granny," she mused. Mr. Blanford actively oversaw the work team, to ensure that the drains were done properly, efficiently, on budget and in a timely fashion.

To Ms. Abraham, these installations were answers to prayers in a renewed commitment to her faith. "God solved my problems for me!"

Paula Abraham is an award-winning farmer and a member of her local Women Farmers' Association. She's a pillar of her community, well known to Grand Fond residents young and old for her resilience and generosity. If all goes well, she will be joining the ranks of Dominica's octogenarians this November. Interventions by the PISLM have made it possible for Ms. Abraham to leave a sustainable land legacy to her children (her son is already instrumental in assisting her with the management of the garden and its crops) and her children's children.

end



*Foreground: Vetiver Installation
Background: Officials Visiting Ms. Abraham*

Vetiver is a bunchgrass that can reach up to 1.5 metres (around 5 feet) in height. In addition to its medicinal and insect repellent properties, vetiver is useful on hillside agricultural land for impeding the slippage of topsoil. A high cost-per-plant renders vetiver inaccessible to most farmers in Small Island Developing States. The PISLM provided vetiver plants to farmers across Dominica as a Sustainable Land Management strategy. These plants can be propagated in future years to create new bunches. The new bunches can either replace dead plants, fill in rows or create new rows along the contour of a slope.

Ms. Paula Abraham, Grand Fond, Dominica



Step drains on steep slopes impede soil erosion during heavy rains.



Under the SLM in Agriculture component, IICA facilitated the installation of drainage channels (including step drains, pictured left) and vetiver barriers to impede soil erosion



Ms. Abraham speaks with Dr. Al Mario Casimir Disaster Risk Management Coordinator Division of Agriculture

Photography by Kimari Casimir, Revolutionary Media

Strengthening Resilience of Agricultural Lands and Forests in Dominica in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria "The Post Maria Project"

Sustainable Land Management in the Commonwealth of Dominica

Partnership Initiative for Sustainable Land Management | GEF GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY INVESTING IN OUR PLANET | UN environment programme



"God blessed me with hands that can work a cutlass."
-Paula Abraham



Ms. Abraham stopped work to speak with us for a short while.