

Testimony of Sommer Sibilly-Brown
Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, Inc.
“Issues impacting the Success and Resiliency of local and Regional Food Systems”
House Agriculture Committee
Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research
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Thank you Chairwoman Plaskett and Ranking Member Dunn for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research regarding issues impacting the Success and Resilience of local and regional food systems.

I am Sommer Sibilly Brown, Founder and Executive Director of Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, Incorporated (VIFGC). VIFGC is a community based domestic non-profit organization licensed in the Virgin Islands of the United States of America. I am not a farmer, but I am tied to agriculture and I am tied to food. We all are.

The Virgin Islands as a territory has a vibrant and interesting history with food and agriculture. We have a capable, dedicated agricultural community comprised of approximately three hundred producers across four islands. Ten percent of which are full time producers whose farm size ranges from a quarter of an acre to ten acres. The other ninety percent are part-time and home-based producers. The ratio of full-time to part-time producers that support our local food system coupled with a 99 percent import rate creates a unique dynamic. Nevertheless, when it comes to agriculture, we are a community of strong will despite a fragile food system.

The devastating impacts of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017 accentuated our fragility, which increased interest in local and regional food systems across the Territory. The increased

frequency and intensity of significant environmental events (hurricanes, droughts, floods, etc.) have exacerbated our community and resulted in the need to prioritize the creation of a healthy, resilient food system.

I would like to state on the record that while the United States Department of Agriculture has a comprehensive approach to support agriculture within the contiguous United States through resources, technical assistance and grants, the territory lacks capacity and resources to apply or receive many of the support systems provided, and thus, has seen no forward movement in our agricultural programming. It is my experience that content, and context are not the same, we can't take a cookie cutter approach to building place-based systems. Though I understand it is the goal to make laws and policies that apply to all, I would be remiss if I did not use this opportunity to state the need to excavate the deep social, cultural, and structural barriers impacting our local and regional food system, of which one system includes the policies at play within the USDA Farm Bill.

The barriers that I will address in this testimony are ones that I see pertinent to efficient development of an effective local and regional food system: fiscal/financial/resource allocations, community infrastructure, and social capacity.

Barrier # 1: Funding and Resource Allocation

Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, Inc., has Identified funding and resource allocation has a major barrier. There has been no significant investment in building up our food system. We do not have the same access to assets as other parts of the Nation. Our territory is not equipped

through local government and small businesses to do the type of investment seen mainland or in large metropolitan locations. While the United State Department of Agriculture has a progressive grantmaking portfolio and provides various levels of resources to bolster communities all around the nation, these are not accessible in our territory. USDA offers a competitive grant structure and programmatic criteria that provides equal funding opportunity; however, this is not done equitably. The current USDA grant structure assumes that every applicant (farmer, group, state agency, community-based organization, university, etc.) has capacity, staffing, partnerships, technical skills, and community support (i.e. match or in-kind) to write such proposals. While these may seem simple, I assure you, after seven years of trying they are not. For example, the Value-Added Producer Grant requires a non-federal funding match that is at least equal to the amount of the federal funding requested; the Farmers Market Promotion Program and the Local Food Promotion Program grants require a twenty-five percent match (cash or in-kind). The hardest thing to do in a small community is create partnerships with under-funded private and public entities or find a cash or true in-kind match. Therefore, communities like the U.S. Virgin Islands with the least assets, a shortage of technical expertise, limited resources for matching opportunities, and a higher level of need often go unserved.

Another opportunity to highlight fiscal barriers that affect resilience is the post-hurricane funding priorities. Since the hurricanes there have been several conversations regarding the tranches of money that are available to support the Territory in its rebuilding and resiliency efforts. I am familiar with the efforts regarding the commitments for funding of the Education System, Health Care System, Housing Support, Hazard Mitigation, and Federal highways. I have

been a part of several conversations around the need to support agriculture and local food systems as well but no commitments for funding has been made. We do not have access to funds that would allow for the infrastructure for local food to be developed. Similarly, there are still producers waiting to be reimbursed for damages to their farms from the hurricane. This has a major impact on their way of life, their businesses and our local and regional food system.

Barrier # 2 Community Infrastructure

For us to increase production, reduce the import rate and create a healthy local and regional food system we must address the food system infrastructure issues. This means every resource necessary: seed, feed and compost suppliers; equipment repair and fabrication services; food processors; distributors; retail outlets; professional services such as logistics managers and waste handlers; surplus food rescue; and financial, workforce, civic, and land and energy resources. Currently in the Territory's model, the farming community is primarily dependent on services provided through the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture. Through qualitative interviews and the post-hurricane community food system assessments, farmers echoed their frustration around access to water and land preparation. VIGFC has concluded that on average a farmer may wait three months, or in extreme cases, over a year to have their land prepared. These services are primarily conducted by the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture. This is sad, realizing that farmers in the contiguous United States have much different protocols for preparing and managing their land. There are different technical trainings, provisions, and access to capital that exist on the mainland than those that are afforded in the territory, leaving a stark difference in land control and preparation.

Another challenge in infrastructure is interisland supply and value-chain operations.

Affordable and reliable inter island transportation for agricultural products that is grown, harvested, or prepared in the territory is not existent. Farmers working to create a supply chain to the entire territory have used non refrigerated cargo barges, private boats of people going across the Island and even chartered planes. Currently there is a cargo boat that leaves once a week in between St. Thomas and St. Croix that can hold 20 cases of food. For us to have a more successful food system a consistent , climate-controlled, affordable inter-island means of transportation is a priority.

We need the opportunity to engage in capacity planning for our supply-chain. This could include assisting producers in determining production scale and market demands, there is great opportunity for producers to supply wholesale local food to hotel and cruise line markets.

There are opportunities to create a plethora of value-added food related businesses that can fill gaps in the supply chain. However, we need opportunities to train persons in the community to lead these entrepreneurial endeavors. Which sheds light on another issue, lack of access to training and certifications that could bolster our food system.

Barrier 3: Social Capacity

For many years efforts were targeted towards the Agriculture Industry and focused solely on employing technical experts that could speak to increasing production. VIGFC has worked to convene and host larger conversations, through a partnership with Iowa State University and the Federal Emergency Management Agency Office of Community Planning we have trained 20 people in the territory on Local Food Leader and Community Food Systems. The purpose of the

training was to increase capacity within the territory to participate and lead community-based food system work.

When considering our regional relationships and what would be most beneficial, I would like to look at the USDA structure for assigning Territories and Regions. Our state Rural Development office is in Gainesville, Florida and our local area office is in the Virgin Islands. In Farm to School we are paired with the Mid-Atlantic Region and are shifting to the Northeast Region. Regions are not consistent between programming, and do not make sense regarding support or technical assistance. We are not similar regarding scale, environment, transportation needs, governance structure, or even culture. The territory would greatly benefit by being paired with and cultivating relationships with other islands and territories. I think that there is a need and a space for the Virgin Islands to have the opportunity to work and share directly with Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, Northern Marianas, Hawaii and Alaska. While oceans away their geographic location, infrastructure challenges, cultural nuances, government structure, transportation solutions and agricultural practices will be more aligned with what we are experiencing.

Our territory is comprised of socially disadvantaged populations; however, we are still asked to deliver and withstand the same procedures as the mainland. The Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act defines a socially disadvantaged group as one whose members have been subject to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities. USDA regulations further define socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (SDFRs) as belonging to the following groups: American Indians or Alaskan Natives, Asians, Blacks or African Americans, Native Hawaiians or other

Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, and women. The 2018 Farm Act includes dedicated funding providing increased cost share, loss compensation and loan assistance to SDFRs, as well as provisions to incentivize research on issues faced by SDFRs. There is an understanding of the marginalization and lack of support given to these communities, however, there is no due-diligence or change in the outreach, technical assistance, or other resources provided in order to meet the communities where they are. As a territory we don't have the same technical expertise and assets; we are under-represented as all our farms are underserved by crop insurance, and we continue to experience these constraints due to systemic barriers both federally and locally.

I may not be a Farmer, but I am the descendant of two great men Jean Joseph Sibilly and William Florian Glasford who spent their life developing Farming Communities in St. Thomas and across the Caribbean. I am humbled and honored to steward their vision of a food secure territory. The time has come for us to take an innovative approach to how we support the development of a healthy local food system. It is my suggestion, through testimony, to encourage new policy and technical assistance regarding supporting marginalized communities, such as the USVI territory by making provisions to change (resource allocations, technical assistance, funding allocations for infrastructure, and support of social capacity).

Once again, I would like to thank the Subcommittee for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today on the needs of advocates like myself when it comes to resiliency of our local and regional food systems. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, Inc.

Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition was founded in 2012 and is the only community-based organization of its kind in the territory. Our work seeks to understand and address the complex as well as historic systemic issues that affect the Virgin Islands food system. VIGFC serves as a conduit for information and a pipeline of opportunities that flow between policy makers, philanthropy, institutions and private industries to facilitate long-term change in the Virgin Islands food system.

We have three primary focus areas; Food Security, having reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food; Food Sovereignty, the right of people to have culturally appropriate food produced through sound ecologically sustainable methods, and Sustainable agricultural practices, which means meeting society's food and textile present needs, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

The vision of the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition is to build a thriving local food economy that ensures that healthy food is available and accessible to every resident in our territory through supporting farmers and locally owned food businesses. We seek to raise awareness about the importance of a healthy local food system and the impact of defining our own agriculture systems in the territory as well as highlight the role that we play in the global Food System. The mission of the organization is to aid in the revitalization of agriculture in the Virgin Islands by uniting local food producers, local businesses, and local consumers to create a sustainable network of local food options.