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Entrepreneur finds a solution to sargassum headache

Johanan Dujon solves Caribbean's environmental nightmare; featured in Forbes 30 under 30

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With rising temperatures and environmental pollutants, like run-off from fertilizers providing ideal conditions for sargassum to grow, this seaweed continues to be a headache for fisherfolk throughout the Caribbean, who heavily rely on the ocean for their livelihoods, and who are among the Caribbean’s most vulnerable.

Sargassum also threatens tourism, the main foreign exchange earner for many islands. With pile ups as high as six feet on beaches and the foul, sulfurous smell released as it rots, many Caribbean beaches, once the ideal place to relax and enjoy the island sun, have become a no-go for visitors to the islands.

But one standout innovator from the island of St Lucia, found a solution to this problem.

A decade ago, when Sargassum seaweed started invading Caribbean coasts, destroying ecosystems and threatening tourism, Johanan Dujon, a primary school teacher at the time, asked himself two life-changing questions: “What is the solution to this problem?” And, “how can I monetize it?” The answers to those questions led to the formation of [Algas Organics](#) in 2014.

Dujon’s startup is the Caribbean’s first indigenous agriculture biotech company. It harvests sargassum seaweed, currently an environmental nightmare for several Caribbean islands, and processes it, using their patented Pro-Enzymo™ hybrid fermentation process, to produce a tonic which enhances the efficacy of fertilisers, allowing them to better penetrate plant cell membranes to increase the nutrient uptake of crops by up to 20 per cent, thereby increasing yield. The process also removes heavy metals such as Arsenic, Cadmium, Lead, and Mercury, ensuring growers receive a pure extract which does

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Environment

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What is the main problem caused by the growth of sargassum seaweed in the Caribbean?

- ☐ Decreased fish population
- ☐ Threatened tourism industry
- ☐ Increased water pollution
- ☐ Destruction of coral reefs

Total answers: 1

1/7

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Algas Organics is scaling to produce almost 3,000 metric tonnes of Sargassum monthly, has processed 2 million pounds since the company started nine years ago, and supplies their fertilizer to retail stores and farms throughout the Caribbean, Canada, and the United States of America.



Tanks at Algas Organics warehouse

But at a time where world leaders are calling for greater innovation, potential innovators and entrepreneurs say there isn’t enough investment. So how does a 30 year old man from a Small Island Developing State, with a great idea and a modest bank account, transform his vision into a globally recognised and respected brand?

Dujon, who was featured on the [Forbes 30 Under 30](#) list in 2020, started with his own money, foregoing spending on parties and hanging out with friends, choosing instead to invest in his vision. As the business grew, mum and dad invested a portion of their retirement fund, and came out of retirement to help run it.

“My dad stayed on as Operations Manager. My mom was the Administrative Assistant and my brother was the CFO. I come from a very educated family,” Dujon said of his parents and brothers, who all hold Master’s degrees. “And they provided not just capital, but also the skillset we needed to scale.”

Their support played a huge role, Dujon said, in taking Algas Organics from “just an idea” to attracting technical support and grant funding from regional and international organisations and programmes like the [Caribbean Development Bank](#).

“Pitbull”.



With international farms producing thousands of acres of produce opting to use his product, Dujon believes that throughout the Caribbean, there is unlimited potential, innovative minds that could be on the verge of producing the next solution to a global problem. But two things stand in the way, he says, 1) our failure to believe in our homegrown talent, and 2) the absence of a robust funding ecosystem.

“I think there is a lack of intrinsic value Caribbean wide that comes from what I believe is an inferiority complex many of us have in the region, where we don’t believe what we produce is good enough,” Dujon said.

“We need to change that, because I have gone to the US and seen some of the largest companies in my industry and others, and if you look at where they started, they don’t have more talent. They are not smarter. They are not more innovative. They just believe that they can make a contribution,” he said. “And there are ecosystems to support that.”

One regional offering he credits with getting it right is the [Compete Caribbean Partnership Facility \(CCPF\)](#), a multi-donor private sector development programme established in 2011 and working across 13 Caribbean countries to deliver innovative and practical solutions that stimulate growth, increase productivity and foster innovation and competitiveness while promoting economic inclusion.

[The Inter-American Development Bank](#), the [United Kingdom](#), the [Caribbean Development Bank](#), and the [Governments of Canada](#) are donors.

“Low rates of growth of Caribbean countries since the 1990s was traced to very low productivity,” said CCPF’s Executive Director, Sylvia Dohnert. “Compete Caribbean aimed to facilitate ways in which growth could be stimulated by supporting individual businesses and groups of businesses to be more innovative, and to develop new products and services for new export markets. We also support governments with regulations and policies that could make it easier to do business in the region,” she said.

Compete Caribbean is now in its second phase, which ends in 2024. Both phases were roughly US\$30 million dollars in size, and provided technical assistance for private sector development. Through the financed projects across both phases, Compete Caribbean has helped create nearly 15,000 new jobs, and supported over 2000 businesses to introduce new products, services or processes for export markets. In addition, Compete has strengthened nearly 70 private sector development institutions throughout the Caribbean region.

A pivotal moment in Algas’ journey came when Dujon won the [2018 Blue-Tech Challenge](#), a partnership between the IDBLab and the CCPF, which sought out business models that apply new technologies or solutions to foster the long-term sustainability of the ocean economy. Target countries included: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.

Algas Organics, with its proposal to convert Sargassum Seaweed from Problem to Industry, was among five Caribbean startups with winning proposals.

Blue-Tech winners received assistance with preparing proposals that could be presented to an investment panel, financing for project implementation, manufacturing, marketing and research and development. Compete Caribbean also assisted the winners by connecting them with key networks – governments, academia, investors, and other partners in the multilateral agencies like UNDP or FAO.

“One key connection for Johanan included a CCPF counterpart in Belize’s sugarcane industry,” said Carlos Marinez, CCPF Project Development Consultant. “Negotiations may lead to important breakthroughs for Algas Organics ,” he said.

Through his Blue-Tech Challenge win Johanan received the financial support needed to build out his infrastructure and

Johanan’s story demonstrates what’s possible when great ideas are supported by sound investment, technical know-how and key networks; and is proof that the Caribbean has what it takes to innovate at a global level, producing ideas and products that can indeed change the world.

What’s needed though, to ensure success stories like that of Algas Organics are the norm, rather than the exception in the region, is greater capacity to support the development of ideas as well as a friendlier business and innovation climate.

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