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# Op-Ed: Fostering a Culture of Collaboration in the U.S. Virgin Islands Agricultural Community

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**Congresswoman Stacey E. Plaskett represents the USVI's at-large Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives. She is currently serving her fourth term in Congress and is a member of the Ways & Means Committee, the Budget Committee, and the**

As the Member of Congress representing the United States Virgin Islands who serves on the House Agriculture Committee and as Chair of the Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture and Research, I am deeply invested in the development of our rural communities and providing support to agricultural producers. My fellow House Agriculture Committee members and I are presently conducting targeted engagement with the agriculture industry to receive their input for the creation of the forthcoming Farm Bill. This engagement included participating in a

congressional delegation to Denmark to learn about the Danish approach to agriculture, sustainability, and public-private partnerships. When it comes to innovation in agriculture and biotechnology, Denmark continually produces world-leading discoveries using efficient, sustainable, and economically viable processes.

While we met with a diverse group of stakeholders, the common vein in every meeting was the necessity for **collaboration**. The roots of the Danish culture of collaboration can be traced back to the late 1800s when the first farm cooperatives illustrated the power of collective efforts to maximize production, optimize research and development, and target new business opportunities. This is still true today, as the government, academia, and industry stakeholders in Denmark consistently work in conjunction, employing a tri-helix of collaboration. This structure allows for all involved parties to have a seat at the table, providing constant feedback and building a consensus throughout the development process. This became abundantly clear while meeting with the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration, which recently updated the nationwide dietary guidelines to shift towards a plant-rich diet that simultaneously provides adequate nutrition and lowers carbon emissions. The Danish meat industry has embraced this change by reframing the public perception of meat consumption. The industry has begun to market meat as a luxury item – much like fine wine – which is best suited for occasional indulgence. This allows companies to maintain their profit-margins while contributing to climate-friendly practices. However, this change in national guidelines and direction is possible only because the government included academia to provide data with the private sector throughout the dietary guideline development process. When all stakeholders reach a consensus **together**, widespread buy-in facilitates implementation.

The collaborative method is thoroughly integrated in the Danish agriculture and food sector – in particular, through cooperative farming. Nearly every Danish farmer is a member of at least one agricultural organization and one or more farmer cooperatives, which results in increased knowledge, innovation, and success. While learning about the positive impacts of cooperative farming in Denmark, I compared it with the silo, individual nature of farming in my district, the U.S. Virgin Islands. In the Virgin Islands, 98% of food is imported, with very minimally tapped yields in production from our own soil. As we have seen throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, a strong local supply chain increases resiliency and keeps pricing fair for consumers and producers. However, we frequently see a mismatch between the supply provided by farmers – both the type and amount of produce – and the demand of consumers and grocery stores.

The congressional delegation to Denmark illuminated the increased role I can play to facilitate a greater degree of cohesion and collaboration for producers in the Virgin Islands already working with my office. Increased agricultural production, variety, and profitability necessitates increased collaboration, which can be achieved by adopting the Danish tri-helix approach. By uniting all stakeholders, including government and non-government agencies, academia, and food supply chain businesses – producers, retailers, suppliers, the value-added industry – we can collectively determine the best approach to maximize resource utilization.

I am particularly interested in bolstering value-added food processing and the export of high value-added products, which present new market opportunities and can extend the marketing season. Furthermore, we must increase collaboration amongst producers and retailers to align individual farmer supply and industry supply with consumer demand. During the Farm Bill review process, I am keenly focused on the role of biotechnology to provide innovative, sustainable solutions to food production, facilitate a transition to green electrification, and develop more efficient products. I look forward to continuing engaging the Virgin Islands community, as well as leading innovators across the globe, on collaboration, sustainability, and economic success.

My interest in participating in this congressional delegation was two-fold, because while Denmark is a global-leader in innovation, there is a reproachable past between Denmark and the U.S. Virgin Islands. It has been more than 100 years since the transfer of the Danish West Indies to the United States, yet Denmark has never acknowledged the hundreds of years of atrocities and economic extraction in the Danish West Indies. While meeting with U.S. officials based in Denmark, as well as representatives from the Danish government, I felt compelled to call out Denmark's unwillingness to recognize the lack of funding and support provided to the U.S. Virgin Islands before and during the transfer. While Denmark may be ranked amongst the happiest countries in the world, this success is possible because of the sweat and toils of my ancestors, primarily in the agricultural space. Given the ties of Denmark and the U.S. Virgin Islands, I am hopeful we will continue to have productive conversations about our shared history, as well as the ways Denmark can support the Virgin Islands agricultural community.

The information and knowledge shared during the congressional delegation to Denmark has the potential to transform the nature of agriculture in the U.S. Virgin Islands. As a remote, rural area, it is incumbent upon us – government officials, academics, producers, and the private sector – to invest the time and resources necessary to chart the best path forward for the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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**Submitted on Tuesday by:** Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett.