

The Plight of Windward Islands Bananas

by

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I am distressed at the present plight of the banana industry of the Windward Islands after dedicating over two decades to its development. One has to accept the changes in world trade brought about by the influence of mega-blocks of nations and the rulings of world deliberative bodies representing for the most part the interests of the more developed countries. It is nevertheless incumbent upon less developed countries to adjust to those changes some of which are beyond their control and to seek to confront the new challenges through improvements in efficiency of production and the introduction of innovative and appropriate technologies as well as management systems.

Our banana industry is no different from other industries facing competition among more developed countries and less developed ones. Published data inform us that some of our more developed countries inject millions of dollars in order to keep their industries afloat at home and overseas and to assure competitiveness in the global arena. They also inject together with their private sector millions of dollars in new management structure and science and technology.

Recognizing these hard realities and the predicament of our banana industry, in 2005, Edmunds and Dr Clayton Shillingford former Executive Officers and Technical Directors of the Windward Island Banana Growers Association and Jamaica Banana Board respectively, made a submission to the Prime Ministers of the Windward Islands copied to the Ministers of Agriculture entitled “A Program for the Resuscitation of the Windward Islands Banana Industry and Recommendations to Contribute to its Sustainability in World Trade”

We were motivated to make this submission based upon reports from certain quarters that our banana industry “now faces extinction”

The submission covered the following areas with recommendations for review and in some cases implementation strategies: Production and Market Perspectives, Evaluating the Viability of the Industry, Technological Perspectives, Organization, Management and Administration, Improvements in Technological Areas and Support Services. The report stated that

“The authors are of the view that in this world of global competitiveness, no industry can survive without the underpinning of appropriate quality management systems, and sound science and technology. This is true for our banana industry as it is and has been for agricultural industries in more developed countries. The authors believe there is much scope for improvement in productivity and quality at reduced costs if due consideration is given to the above considerations” (in the submission)

The only Prime Minister who responded to our submission was the then Prime Minister of St Lucia, Dr Kenny Anthony who informed Shillingford that he referred the submission to Bernard Cornibert, Executive Director of WIBDECO for review, comment and action. Cornibert indicated that he received no such referral.

In Cornibert’s response to the submission addressed to him by Edmunds he informed that the problem with the banana industry was with the realities of the market and the non-competitiveness of our industry resulting from high cost of labor and inefficiency of production. He also indicated that **“we lack the appropriate attitude and disciplined business approach necessary to produce bananas successfully and profitably”** It is noteworthy that our submission addressed these very issues and suggestions were made for measurable improvements in efficiency, yields and quality. Further, it should be pointed out that some of our growers are already producing over 10 tons per acre which is considered to be a minimum banana production level for world trade. Perhaps those growers may be used as examples or as model demonstration farmers.

It is ironic that in spite of Cornibert's pessimism about our suggestions, Edmunds and Shillingford have made several well-received presentations to banana industries in West Africa, Philippines, the South Pacific, Australia, the countries of Latin America as well as within the French and English-speaking Caribbean and in 2006 they were invited to the XVII ACORBAT (Association for the Cooperation in Banana Research in the Caribbean and Tropical America) World Banana Conference where they presented a paper to over 800 banana and plantain producers and researchers from several countries entitled "The Role of Science and Technology in Small-Scale Banana Farming"

I am of the view that we have lost ground in the leadership of S&T in bananas. I am not suggesting that we try to recreate the past but I recall that we acted as advisors to the industries of Latin America, the South Pacific islands, the countries of Nigeria, Cameroon and Ivory Coast in Africa, and the small growers of Suriname to mention a few. It is also worthy of note that according to a report by Edmunds and Low who was the Financial Analyst of the Windward Islands Banana Growers Association (WINBAN) published in 1976, research carried out at the WINBAN Research and Development Center in St. Lucia, resulted at that time in savings of millions of Eastern Caribbean dollars per year. This speaks to the importance of S&T to our industry.

There is no doubt that there is scope for improvements in our industry in many different areas, for example: agronomic practices where we can move away from a linear planting method to a non-linear geometric cluster system for immediate yield increases at replanting; the placement of fertilizers in the centre of cluster plantings or to linear plantings resulting in decreased fertilizer costs and reduced leaching and water pollution; the possible use of bio-degradable plastics; cropping systems approach with bananas using leguminous crops (nitrogen fixing) as intercrops and multi-layer cropping systems with bananas (Drs Rao and Edmunds have demonstrated these systems on farmers holdings with great success and published many papers and advisory bulletins on the subject). Dr Rao left WINBAN at the end of his contract to work for a prestigious Research Institute in India. We cannot fault him for using this technology in India based

on research at WINBAN. There are many other areas which need to be explored in addition to the whole structure and management of our industry.

On the question of diversification with bananas or separate from this crop, one cannot help observing the wide variety of tropical fruits and produce on supermarket shelves in the US and UK. One notices several “exotic” varieties of bananas, dwarf plantains and spotted plantains, and many other examples of agricultural produce from far away places. Are our farmers too indisCIPLINED and backward to produce for those niche markets or have we given up on our farming community?

This brings me to a question frequently asked. How is WIBDECO constituted? I am surprised that many in the islands are not aware that WIBDECO is the acronym for The Windward Islands Banana Development and Exporting Company. It is a company made up of the Governments of the Windward Islands and the banana growers with the objective of the “marketing and distributing of bananas and fresh produce from the Windward Islands”. WIBDECO therefore has as its mandate the interest of banana and fresh produce farmers in the Windward Islands and the development and export of their production.

A press release attributed to Cornibert stated that he would not encourage growers to invest in bananas. I hope that this was not his intended message. I also understand from a press release that he has given notice to the SLBC (St Lucia Banana Corporation) to the effect that WIBDECO intends to terminate its supply contract with the SLBC and that this matter is now being subjected to litigation by SLBC. A similar crisis is developing in Dominica. Should I presume that the pronouncements of Cornibert, (if correct), are the pronouncements of the board of WIBDECO of which our Governments are a part? Perhaps there is not sufficient information on the industry emanating from the stakeholders in the form of bulletins, newsletters, press releases and other public relations material.

I recall that in the course of our many years of association with Geest Industries there was always room for discussion and negotiation, with an understanding of the situation of the banana growers and the best interest of the economies of the islands. Both Geest Industries, the then marketing agent of WINBAN bananas and WINBAN were represented by eminent legal luminaries. Agreements were arrived at after much discussion, sometimes challenging, ponderous deliberations, but without the injection of litigation by either side. The present situation could not be in the best interest of banana farmers and the industry as a whole.

Let us hope that we are not close to the “extinction” stage mentioned earlier and that the final nails are not being hammering onto to the coffin of our industry. This is a time when all stakeholders must arrive at a partnership of understanding and take appropriate measures to save what is left of our industry

The Edmunds/Shillingford submission to the governments of the Windward Islands in 2005 is still relevant and could be updated based upon present knowledge of our industry and the introduction of new technologies a few of which are mentioned above.

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