

RESTORING AGRICULTURE TO ITS RIGHTFUL PLACE

Dr Clayton A. Shillingford, Dominica Academy of Arts & Sciences
(DAAS)

Dominica Reunion 2008 “Development Conference”

OBJECTIVE

Our broad objectives in the Agricultural Sector are to ensure food security, but also to move to higher levels of diversification, production and productivity of economic plants and animals, to enhance our competitive position in regional and international markets and to restore and conserve our natural environment.

WORLD FOOD DAY

The World marked World Food Day on Thursday October 16., 2008 to draw attention of the people of the World to the high cost of food and existing shortages and to explore ways to meet the needs of growing populations. We need the Agricultural Sector in Dominica to prosper in response to the challenges of climate change, our social and economic issues and the global financial crisis.

CHALLENGES

EPA

EPA (European Partnership Agreement) was signed on Wednesday October 15, 2008 by the EU and thirteen Caribbean countries including Dominica. The EPA covers trade in goods, services and investments, and provides for development assistance to CARIFORUM countries (CARICOM and Dominican Republic). The Caribbean had to renegotiate previous preferential regimes with the EU after challenges from the World Trade Organization (WTO). Under the proposed EPA reciprocal agreement these countries will have duty free access to EU markets aimed at guaranteeing the region privileged access. It is hoped that the EPA will create new opportunities for the region as a step to regional integration and economic development. It is expected that there will be stronger growth in export and more jobs. The *quid pro quo* is that the Caribbean will gradually open its markets to Europe over a 25 year period. Many countries in CARIFORUM are not entirely happy but felt it was better than no deal at all. In Agriculture it was thought that the Caribbean should be competitive because even with subsidies Europe is still a high cost producer of agricultural products.

In spite of this analysis CARIFORUM countries see a difficult position ahead in that our exports would be placed under terms which would make the Caribbean non- competitive. There will be no restriction on EU companies setting up in Caribbean countries in competition with local companies. They have deeper pockets and local companies could be put out of business. The

[Type text]

response of CARICOM countries is to plan to boost agricultural production in all the territories including Dominica as quickly as possible.

HIGH COST OF LIVING

Agriculture like other enterprises is being impacted by the high and increasing cost of energy internationally. There are efforts afoot by Government to address this factor of production by looking at longer term alternatives such as wind, solar, and geothermal sources of generation. In the short term Minister Savarin has stated that to deal with the high cost of energy Government is looking at obtaining more efficient generators. The other factor is the high cost of fuel. These have a direct effect on the rise in food prices. The effect is greater in Dominica where agriculture is in decline and food imports are high.

These trends are further worsened by the perceived danger of the production, subsidy and use of biofuels that increasingly diverts corn supply to energy use resulting in escalation of basic food prices. The Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) in its new edition of '*State of Food and Agriculture in 2008*' asks for revision of this practice as it is causing intensification of the current world food crisis.

The region already grappling over the past decade with erosion of preferential access to its UK market for bananas must now deal with the US financial meltdown which will have a direct negative effect on tourism and the hotel and restaurant businesses.

NATURAL DISASTERS AND EFFECT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

The Caribbean and Dominica are in an area subject to frequent hurricanes, earthquakes and bad weather which have a negative impact on agricultural production, distribution and marketing. In addition to these natural disasters is the growing effect of climate change on the terrestrial and marine environment. Warming of the sea water causes coral bleaching and death, which has a direct negative effect on marine life including fishes. Dominica's coral reefs are important because they provide areas for food, growth and reproduction of many marine species.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Collapse of agriculture poses other societal changes such as unemployment especially in the rural areas, out-migration of individuals in their productive years, increased poverty, negative impact on the youth and children, and school drop-outs. These societal changes result in a worsening human resource picture and inadequacy of a competent and productive labour force. Added to that is lack of direction in policy formulation, credit from banks and other financial institutions and low investment in agriculture. There is also urgent need for infusion of good agricultural practices through scientific and technological education. The consequences of these trends may well be increased drug trafficking, and rising crime. Praedial larceny would then have an additional negative impact on farmers.

CARIBBEAN RESPONSE TO CHALLENGES

At the recent eighth “Caribbean Week in Agriculture Conference” in St Vincent Caribbean countries were encouraged to capitalize on the downturn in the US economy by boosting farm production. The Bahamas and Barbados have seen a decline in local construction, investment and tourism. Many Caribbean countries with tourism-driven economies import a very high percentage of their food needs. Statistics in Dominica suggest that our food imports are ten times as high in value as our exports. These countries are now intensifying their efforts to produce their own food. Our own Erwin Larocque, CARICOM Trade & Economic expert asserted that the region’s Agricultural Sector should be oriented to an internationally competitive and environmentally sound production of agricultural products to improve incomes, employment, nutrition and alleviation of poverty.

Current developments are not encouraging. Jamaica’s Agriculture Minister Dr. Christopher Tufton saw a grim future for bananas now that Jamaica Banana Producers (JBP) which grew 90% of export bananas would no longer grow fruit for export. JBP plans to look at the strong Jamaican domestic market and agroprocessing for snacks, banana chips, and other banana products such as banana flour, banana drinks etc.

DOMINICA’S AGRICULTURE

Agriculture has always been a vital part of Dominica’s economy both in food and non-food products. We have grown and marketed vanilla, limes and lime products, grapefruits, oranges, coffee, essential oils & spices. We have expanded some of that production into agroproducts such as rum, Bello juices, Benjo’s sea moss, confectionery, jams and condiments, Dominica Coconut Products’ soaps and creams, bay rum, teas, and herbal medicines.

In order to restore Dominica’s agriculture to its rightful place peasant agriculture which has served its purpose and kept many of our citizens out of poverty and still does so must change to meet today’s challenges which require other strategies as well.

There are certain weaknesses in Dominica’s agricultural production practices. Land use practices must reflect the suitability of land to particular crops and underutilized land must be brought into production in balance with conversion of land to industrial or tourism/hotel development and housing. We must maintain that delicate balance between agricultural and industrial development and protection of the terrestrial as well as the marine environment.

Shipping and distribution continue to be vexing problems in our agriculture as does the quality of product, packaging and marketing.

The Dominican Government has received financial support from the EU to initiate a strong private –public partnership to develop a national export strategy through DEXIA

BANANAS

[Type text]

We need to reexamine the role of science & technology in banana production in order to address some of banana production issues but also to look at our attempts to build diversified agriculture to include organic agriculture, and new ways of controlling tropical pests and diseases.

Bananas went from FOB US\$24 million in 1994 to 7 million in 2006. At the same time number of active growers went from 7,000 in 1994 to about 700 at the present time. Export production also declined from 43, 000 tonnes to 11, 000 tonnes. We were faced with a number of constraints, our topography, small holdings, high wages, high input and shipping costs, pest and disease control problems, and on top of all that low yields. Besides the industry appeared to be plagued with political, organizational and administrative issues which finally led to fragmentation and conflict. The functions and orientation of Windward Islands Banana Development &Export Co (WIBDECO), farmers' organizations were not well understood

UNATTENDED AGRICULTURE?

Dr Bernard Yankey in a recent article titled "*Unattended Agriculture*" states that agriculture is the most critical economic sector. It provides employment, and sustains rural communities. He asked why our agriculture is in decline. Why are the agricultural support institutions subdued? In that context we can ask what is the role of institutions such as FAO, Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), Caribbean Agricultural Research & Development Institute (CARDI), IICA (Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture), Banana Industry Trust (BIT), Aid Bank, Environmental Coordinating Unit (ECU). Is agricultural education adequate and what is the role of youth? Is the National Association of Youth in Agriculture (NAYA) given enough support?

To those questions one may ask what happened to the Ministry of Agriculture Corporate Plan of 2004 and the more recent Agriculture Symposium
Are we running the risk again of being accused of talk shop...and lack of implementation?

OPPORTUNITIES

UK Trade & Development Minister Gareth Thomas has announced US\$78 million funding for the Caribbean to go beyond sugar, rum and bananas in a move to developing the regional market under Caribbean Single Market & Economy (CSME). The Caribbean has the natural resources and talents and skills to be a global player. We should look to develop Caribbean food chains in Europe and North America. EU funding is to be catalyst to reducing poverty, increasing employment, development of new products, and services, increased trade opportunities,

We should pursue a policy which builds on the relation between agriculture and eco tourism

We need to develop a national strategy for agriculture within an overall national economic plan. I was under the impression that the Agriculture Symposium was to point us in that direction to establish new targets of production with a wider range of vegetables, fruits, root crops and livestock products.

[Type text]

Minister of Agriculture Arnold Piggott of Barbados has announced the creation of a National Agricultural Advisory Commission. We should do the same

WHAT TO DO?..OTHER ACTIONS

- Establishment of an agriculture diagnostic laboratory to provide prescriptive recommendations to farmers on soil conditions, specific fertilizer amendments, and optimal weed, pest and disease control measures
- Expand tissue culture and nursery capability to supply healthy, adequate quantities of suitable varieties of horticultural and crop plants
- Irrigation where needed to boost yield
- Extensive training for extension personnel to enable them to give the best advice on science- based agricultural practices
- Farmer training in good agricultural and business practices to assure a sustainable and profitable enterprise
- Quality control and proper packaging and presentation for market penetration
- Increased production of food and non-food plants and animals to satisfy local demand and for export
- Involvement of the Dominican Diaspora in national development efforts including agricultural production, pursuit of ethnic markets in areas of residence overseas for fresh and processed products.

These actions will require a high quality of leadership among the sectors of Government, the public and private industry for appropriate incentive policies and services, investment in this crucial industry and identification of markets.
