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THE MARKETING OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCE IN BARBADOS

by

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Food crops in Barbados has played a traditional, though small part in the Agriculture of the island. At the turn of the century until today when sugar is the main contributor to the economy, food crops have been planted in most cases as a cash crop to sugar and only in recent years has some attention been given to their production after it became lawful to plant a minimum acreage. This apathetic attitude to food crops has also spread to small producers throughout the island who are still prepared to plant their holdings completely in sugarcane.

It is reasonable to expect therefore that the marketing of food crops in Barbados has been rather less developed than in the case of sugarcane. As far as the latter crop is concerned, associations have been in existence over the years which look after the economic welfare of the producer. Even in the case of small producers, sugar producers have merged and co-operated and have reaped benefits from such co-operation. It is only recently with the formation of the vegetable section of the Barbados Marketing Corporation and the Barbados Vegetable Growers' Association, that some major attention has been given to the production of food crops and it is hoped that through the development of marketing channels, greater production will be forthcoming and greater rewards will be achieved by the producers.

Traditionally, the marketing of food crops such as yams, sweet potatoes, eddoes and cassava took place on the farm or plantation. In the case of yams, the owner or manager first reaped a quantity of the produce for personal consumption and as planting material for the next crop. After sampling a few holes of the crop, sometimes in the presence of an intended purchaser, the owner obtained an average weight per hole and used this average as a measure of price per hole. For example, if the average weight of a hole of yams was 5 lbs. and the price was 4 cents per lb., then the Manager was very likely to establish a price of $20.00 per hundred holes. This price would of course vary from field to field depending on the average weight of the sample obtained from the particular field. It is interesting to note that the Manager had no problem of harvesting. The purchasers carried out their own har-

vesting and assuredly left the soil clean so that the next operation on the soil could proceed immediately. These transactions were generally done on a cash basis on the large estates so that the producer was freed from much paper work, etc. This method of marketing is similar for other root crops as well. In the case of sweet potatoes, there may be a special charge for potato slips and a reduced rate for small potatoes (pickings).

Carts and vans enter into the consumer market and dispose of their produce in a market of high demand. Price control on sweet potatoes and yams ensured that the consumer was not engaged and jibbed in a bargaining process. With the recent decontrol of prices the latter situation could develop as these crops are rather limited in supply and seasonal in production.

Most vegetable crops in Barbados with few exceptions can be produced all the year round. Cabbages, cauliflower and khol rabi generally succeed better in the wet districts from October to June; leek preferably from November to Marck and squash from about June to October in the wetter districts. The best results from tomatoes are obtained by planting them from October to May. These crops are generally not grown to any great extent on the large estates but mainly from numerous odd pieces of land managed by small proprietors who produce all types and qualities of these food crops for the island community. With such a large number of producing units and possibly as great a diversity in produce, marketing has got to be the key role, firstly by encouraging greater quality produce and secondly by establishing an awareness of the availability of such produce through some kind of market intelligence.

Traditionally, it has been the custom for hawkers to visit small producers and purchase their produce. Little care was given to the quality of the produce, variety or grade. With futile promises to pay for some of the purchase at a later date, this produce found its way into the consumer markets at various and generally exorbitant prices. Indeed, the consumer and to some extent the producer have been fleeced by the hawker as the sole marketing agent.

With the large quantity of small producers of food crops as they are in Barbados, what is urgently required is a system of market intelligence and crop information. Such a scheme should be designed to give information to producers, middlemen and consumers as to the extent of the availability and trend quality and current prices of the types of producer available so that the producer would know if and what quantity of a given commodity he should reap and whether the consumer should purchase a greater or lesser quantity at what prices.

In fact such a service would protect the interest of the producer and consumer and thus enable the middlemen to function efficiently.

A market intelligence and crop information service should provide statistics on production, consumption and prices. These would provide producers with some broad, long-term guidance as to future cropping programmes. Information as to whether current crop planting is high, normal or low relative to former years should be given as well as the progress of crops; expected yields and quality. It is felt that information of this nature should be released at least once or twice per month. The commencement and progress of harvesting and consequently the availability of supplies; day to day retail prices, the quality and quantities of produce entering the markets are also important factors to be included.

As far as standards and grades are concerned, a major requirement is to raise the general level of quality of produce by selection of varieties, choice of seed, sound agronomic practices and adequate pest and disease control. With regard to local trading, grading will not be necessary and under the traditional huckster system would result in little or no benefit to the producer. However, with the set up of the Barbados Marketing Corporation and the possibility of exportation, then grading would have to be set up for at least that part entering export market and superior domestic markets.

One of the major problems of the marketing of agricultural produce in Barbados is the lack of information pertaining to the production and the availability of produce. Lack of staffing in the Marketing organisation has made it not possible for this type of information to be collected and it is not fair to expect that the extension staff of our Department of Agriculture to provide this service for us. The Barbados Marketing Corporation has therefore been faced with gluts it never expected and therefore were never geared for. In order to attempt to reduce this it must be borne in mind that these are three type of producers we have to deal with and these can be dealt with only by contracting with the Corporation. First of all there is the type of producer who will not care to market his produce through the Corporation, secondly there is the type who will contract but later sell his produce elsewhere and the third type will contract and fulfil the agreement. Our Marketing Corporation has not yet gone into agreements with producers, but we find this to be a necessary step to take in the very near future. This would ensure that marketing would commence at the time it should i.e. at time of planting, than at the usual time, when the product has just or is about to be taken out of the land. As this system

develops our Marketing Organisation would have to be in a position to advise growers of what to plant. This could of course be done by the Marketing Corporation saying that they could handle say:-

x thousand pounds of y in June
and a thousand pounds of b in June

When the Corporation has fully contracted for the first quantity, it could then contract for the second, etc. In this way the Corporation would effect diversification.

I believe that the Marketing Corporation in Barbados is unique in that it is not only designed to assure a market for local produce but it also operates in the context of a business in that the least it is expected to do is to cover its cost of operation. It therefore has a wholesale sales section as well as a retail outlet where it also sells items like fish, pork and chickens.

One final aspect of marketing of food crops in Barbados would be through marketing societies which would facilitate the work of the extension service and assist in the application and spread of new and improved techniques. Such societies would have to aim at uniformity of production and sell collectively in retail markets with benefit to themselves, yet bringing influence to bear on the lowering of prices. It is very possible that bargaining power would be greater than at present in respect of sales to the hawker. With the existence of the Barbados Marketing Corporation such societies could enter into supply contracts and organise the collection of their members' produce in order to simplify delivery to the Corporation

The above outline as stated with reference to Barbados undoubtedly exists in the other Caribbean territories. Indeed the symptoms of inefficient marketing are outstanding in any under-developed area. The problem becomes acute when at some-time, in spite of our lack of resources and production, we run into the inevitable glut which results in waste and disposal of food grown on the soil. The normal low production of food crops, the fact that different food crops are prevalent in different areas of the Caribbean, and the possibility of gluts at different times throughout the area are factors which point out the necessity for a market intelligence service throughout the Caribbean area. It is possible that through proper marketing facilities and information one territory in the area could be supplying another territory with produce. This could result in a reduction of the cost of living in the area and to some extent change the pattern of food production so that only economical crops would be produced, but in sufficient quantities for local consumption and inter-territorial export.

The major inhibiting factor to such a scheme would be the problem of communications. However, with the development of information on supply and demand of food in the area and the build up of a regular trade, reduced freight rates and increased services would likely result. The Barbados Marketing Corporation has entered into trade with the St. Vincent Marketing Board and the Guyana Marketing Corporation. This trade is concentrated on commodities which are unavailable or in short supply and we look forward to receiving more of this type of trade developed within the Caribbean area to the mutual benefit of all the territories concerned.