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Report on the Discussion on the Regional Food Plan - 27th April, 1977

Mr. Hayden Blades, an agricultural economist attached to Caricom Secretariat in Georgetown, Guyana, opened the discussion with a presentation on what the Regional Food Plan is.

At first he spoke of the importance of the Caribbean territories working towards the harmonization and rationalization of food production.

He later noted that the food import bill in the Caricom region for the year 1973 amounted to about one billion dollars.

Mr. Blades then continued:-

Mr. Blades: Instead of looking in terms of a large market plan, what one could do is to concentrate on a sub-sector, with the emphasis being on identification of the production projects.

Simultaneous with that decision by the Standing Committee of the Ministries of Agriculture, the Heads of Government Conference set up what was called a Food Working Party, whose terms of reference were:

- to identify specific project areas for agricultural production, and
- to look at the implementing mechanism of these projects that the Food Working Party was going to recommend.

Proposals were subsequently put up to the Heads of Government Conference for the implementation of what we now call the Regional Food Plan. These Proposals consisted essentially of project ideas in the following areas:

- livestock sub-sector; and
- emphasis on dairy production, mutton and lamb production, production of hatching eggs and processing of these commodities, and the production of these products as a spin-off of the dairy industry.

In the fishing sub-sector, emphasis was concentrated on exploiting what are basically the premium resources of fish in the Caribbean Sea - the Guyana Banks, the banks in the Northern Caribbean - Belize, Bahamas, Jamaica, and the Leeward Islands banks with Antigua, Turks and Caicos in that area.

Projects were also identified in the areas of fruit and vegetable production, the production of corn and soya beans, and finally the bulk-purchasing of agricultural inputs.

In addition to the projects identified in those areas, proposals were also included for the formation of what we now call the Caribbean Food Corporation, which would assist in the implementation of the production projects identified.

And that is the background to how we arrived at the stage we are at today.

In terms of the progress we have made up to now in implementing the Caribbean Food Plan, we are at the stage where we have developed

projects in livestock production in all the various member states.

We have completed pre-feasibility on all of these project; and we are now in discussion with governments as to their reaction to these studies.

We expect that we will commence carrying out full feasibility studies on the livestock projects, starting in May of this year, with a view to commencing implementation of these projects late this year or early next year.

In the area of fishing, the Caribbean Development Bank has developed three fishing projects - one for the Guyana Bank, one for the Northern Caribbean Bank and one for the Leeward Islands Bank, and these projects were discussed at the last Standing Committee Meeting of Ministers in November in Georgetown, and they are now at the stage of being carried to the full feasibility stage.

In the area of fruits and vegetables, the Caribbean Development Bank is now working on a number of projects for the establishment of a multi-purpose processing in the LDCs, and these are at the feasibility stage.

In the area of production of corn and soya beans, we have completed two feasibility studies: one for the production of corn and soya in Guyana and one in Belize. The Guyana project has started - a company has been formed, and it is now in the process of establishing infra-structure in the project areas and so on.

In the area of the bulk pruchasing of inputs, we are now at the stage of doing a feasibility study in fertilizers and one or two other agri-cultural inputs, and we are doing this with specific reference to the Windwards and Leewards, to be expanded subsequently to cover the whole region.

The agreement establishing the Caribbean Food Corporation was signed by all the member governments and established in September last year. The Food Corporation is now at the stage of starting up operations. We have had three meetings of the Board of Directors, and they are now in the process of recruiting staff for the Caribbean Food Corporation.

The Food Plan then, as we see it, is a sort of dynamic entity, aimed at implementing rural development projects, with the specific aim of in-creasing agricultural production. The emphasis in the plan is on project implementation, and as such, we have not developed any comprehensive document on this Plan.

We are proceeding by analysing individual sub-sectors, identifying - together with government officials - what is required in particular member states, in terms of increasing production in that sub-sector, and then trying to identify projects which can achieve the aims as we see them.

And we intend to proceed in this fashion: identifying projects, imple-menting, and coming back and having another look at what else is required, and identifying further projects and proceeding with them.

I don't think myself, that the Region today really requires another comprehensive planning document. I think what we in fact require is to identify specific projects that are needed to increase agricultural production and develop rural areas, and proceed with the implementation of these projects.

Mr. Charles Maynard's Presentation

Possibly my approach would be what an impact the Food Plan is likely to have when it gets into top gear, because from what Mr. Blades has said, it is quite clear that it is still very much a plan, and that the execution of the Plan has not got into full gear as yet, although some of the projects have started.

What I would like to say first of all is that in terms of an understanding of the Food Plan by people in the Region, I think this is the way we ought to see it. As pointed out by Mr. Blades, we suddenly discover that what we have been doing in the last few years in the Caribbean (certainly in the 1960's) - before that, it appeared that we were pretty well taking care of our food needs. But in the 1960's we moved into a situation where what we were doing was living off other people's surpluses. And it became very clear that that kind of arrangement could not work.

At the same time we were saying that we were a region, and that our principal resource was in agriculture, and yet we were importing substantial quantities of agricultural products from outside of the region, and products which we could produce for ourselves. And we suddenly discovered in fact that, in 1973, we were importing one billion dollars worth of these products into the region.

Not only had it reached that figure, but we were discovering that we had to compete with other people who were in a better position than ourselves to obtain these products. We, therefore, had to try to devise some plan of moving from the stage where we talked about agriculture being the mainstay of these territories, and doing something serious about it.

I see this Plan in terms of some effort by these territories to maximize the various strategies that individual territories have devised for dealing with the agricultural situation.

I understand that the Plan has four or five basic headings from the point of view of pulses and grain, this is supposed to take care of the aspects of protein and nutrition. My understanding would be that if this aspect of the Plan is properly orchestrated, it would be doing two things.

Firstly, we would be providing for ourselves in these areas, things that we can produce in terms of grain, and also we would be assisting in meeting the deficiencies in the protein requirements of the territories.

Then, with regards to fish - I think one of the important areas here that make it essential that we do this as a joint project - this brings us straight away into a resource that is very, very close to use in the region, and which we have not seriously begun to consider as a resource.

Generally speaking, we usually say in the Caribbean that we have no resources, and more latterly, we have tended to make the statement that our principal resources are human beings.

But I think that we have not yet asked ourselves - in what way can we exploit fully the resources of the sea which is close to us, and which is all around us. And the whole question of fisheries, and the development of fisheries, needs to be seen in that context. And obviously, no one territory has the resources to be able to do this effectively.

Regarding what impact this is likely to have, well there is one immediate impact that the Food Plan would have - and that is why a discussion like this is desirable - because the Food Plan involves our having a willingness to change our tastes and habits in terms of our dietary needs in the Caribbean. We have an on going debate in the Caribbean about things which are produced in the region. The on going debate usually resolves itself, as I understand it, in this way: why should we buy (in this particular context we are talking about agricultural products) products that are produced in the region, if they are more expensive? Why shouldn't we continue to import them because they are cheaper? And I suppose it is dawning on us that whether we talk about agricultural production of whether we talk about industry, the truth is that what is more expensive in terms of the human resources in the region, is the large numbers of people who could be gainfully and meaningfully employed in agriculture, if we were prepared to change our strategy and make more use of the things that we can produce.

And if we are serious about the question of coming to terms with the problems, not only of agriculture in the region, but also of employment, then we have to be willing to make the sacrifices it involves, in substituting the local products for those that are imported.

The other impact that I see it having is to deepen the regional integration process. At the moment, we still have our ups and downs in the regional integration effort, and I am sure that many people will be saying in relation to this Plan, that we still need to know much more about it even when we have finished the discussion here tonight. In fact, perhaps hopefully, what the discussion will do is to lead people to ask many more questions of those who are supposed to be able to answer them, about the Regional Food Plan, because when I was coming here tonight, there were some people who were telling me that they had never heard of the Plan, and had never seen the Plan.

And I suppose really, that one of the things that will enable the Plan to have an impact, is to determine in what way can this Plan be communicated to the various publics in the region - to the farmer, the people in schools, the students, people in the governmental sectors who are directly connected with the Plan.

Because what I was saying earlier is that we need some kind of common focus in this whole regional integration effort to give it momentum. And I think no better focus can be designed than one which is connected with meeting the food needs of the region. I think the point has often

been made that the reason why the people of the Caribbean cannot come together somehow is that they do not have a common enemy. I suspect the shortage of food in the region is as much a common enemy on which to focus, as any, and I believe that if we can, to our mutual advantage, take the individual plans each territory has (all of them have individual plans) I don't believe, as Blades pointed out, they are short of plans. In fact, I think in all our ministries in all these islands, we have more plans than we can implement, certainly for agriculture. And these Plans, I believe, have a local basis.

And I think, what the Regional Food Plan is attempting to do, is to take these Plans and give them a regional focus. And if we can do this, then hopefully, this could have a tremendous impact in moving the integration process forward, and in dealing with a basic need in the Caribbean.

Mr. Edward Cumberbatch's Presentation

I see that the Regional Food Plan will have to operate in an atmosphere that is influenced by what I call the four P's:

- the existing policies;
- the existing planning which we have in the Caribbean;
- the projects and programmes (and Charles Maynard has just mentioned that we have any number of them, some of them sitting down on desks); and
- people.

Agricultural policies, at the moment, are in many territories not very clear, and is this Regional Food Plan to operate against a background of that type of policy which we are acquainted with in the Caribbean? Policies which seem to favour, from a farmer's point of view, the consumer, policies which seem to think in terms of fixed prices that as far as the farmer is concerned, are very low. Policies which don't seem to devote an awful lot of money to the agricultural sector, though everybody confesses that this sector is very important.

The Regional Food Plan has got to operate in a background in which a policy decision - making process has been lacking.

Secondly, it has to operate in a process in which planning has been in many cases haphazard and *ad hoc*. And this arises out of the lack of a clear policy. Sometimes planning seems to arise overnight as a result of circumstances that are forced on a particular unit territory.

I hear from Hayden Blades that they have some beautiful Plans all laid out. The truth of the matter is that in the Caribbean we may have the beautiful Plans, but when it comes to putting them into operation, confusion often seems to arise.

We have got to operate in an atmosphere in which you have plans and programmes, but I doubt that we have the manpower. Ant I am yet to hear from those who are advocating this Plan, what training is being executed. It may be that Hayden could tell us later; but what training is being prepared now, for the people who must implement these plans?

And then it has to operate in an atmosphere in which we have done very little, if any, evaluation of the various plans and programmes which we are supposed to be carrying out.

We have got to operate in an atmosphere in which as unit territories we have been carrying out some of these plans, but not sharing the experience with one another. So often we are repeating what the other fellow has done already, and done badly.

We have to operate in an atmosphere where Caribbean people, especially farmers, have not traditionally in the past, always been involved in plans. I was talking to a very senior government planning officer, the head of a big planning unit, and I was telling him that I had been listening to farmers being told about their five-year development programme. This was year 3. And the farmers were being told this by the members of the Ministry who had drawn up the Plan - a five-year development programme for the farming community. And the farmers in year 3 said: "We haven't even heard of this Plan, we have never even seen that booklet you are showing us, the 52 pages of the Plan which was for us."

We have to operate in an atmosphere in which this sort of thing happens. And when I told this big planning officer that, he said, "Well you know, we in the planning unit have a staff that is so thin on the ground that we are really unable to co-ordinate plans for a particular sector, and compare them with the plans in other sectors."

We have operate in that kind of atmosphere. Now what are the implications as I see them?

If this Plan is to operate properly, it is going to call for a very close collaboration between the various staff members - professional, technical, administrative and so on - throughout the Caribbean. This is going to call for public relations.

If this Plan is to succeed, the implications are that we must train staff.

We must try to reduce the jealousies that exist - let's not pretend they are not there. Jealousies exist between unit, between staff and between various regional organizations. We have got to try to reduce those jealousies if the Plan is to succeed.

We have got to involve the farmers, and this means more public relations.

We have got to involve the consumers, the housewives, and the businessmen. We expect the businessmen to help provide money in one way or another, and the housewives to eat the food. Unless they are involved and understand it, we want their support. More public relations.

And then, as I see it, there has got to be some regional umpire who is going to have to try to coordinate all these plans and programmes, which I understand from Hayden talking to him at some other time, the Caribbean Food Corporation may be carrying out either themselves in a territory or as a business, or in collaboration with the unit government. And if you are going to have collaboration of if you are going to work in

somebody's territory, there's going to be some regional umpire who has the confidence of ministers and people and administrators and so on, who can bring some order into what could very well be confusion.

Those are my views; they may sound very negative, but I think we need to look at some of these problems, if we hope that this Plan is going to succeed.

Mr. Rupert Lake's Presentation

My first comment will relate to what we heard initially from Hayden Blades, in that the historical patterns of development of these various regional institutions are important to study in order to find out whether or not we are going along the right road towards acceptance.

You all know about CARIFTA, when it was formed, and what happened to it. And while we are dealing with the sub-sector of this, or refer to the development of Caricom, we should remember the lessons and some of the conflicts which arose in the process of the development of these institutions.

I mention that in order to point out that the imposition of these technically sound drawn-up situations always seems to falter or to suffer from lack of speedy implementation owing to the fact that those who are to accept them or become involved in the implementation do not seem to have enough knowledge or concern or even commitment towards the implementation of these programmes.

Therefore, I would suggest, as has been said before, that a strong education programme (and this of course would involve a consumer education programme) would be regarded as being an important companion programme going along with the establishment of the Regional Food Plan.

This is important because if we recall the historical situation again, in our industrialization programme, one of the things we fret about is the refusal of consumers to buy local. Now if these things are coming up in their secondary and tertiary stage to substitute for things that we import, which we already had objections to, earlier on, I think that we should take it as a lesson to try and evolve new programmes in terms of information, and also bring about change.

Now, if we are dealing with a matter that requires reaction and social change, we will realize that it is not easy to achieve this. Therefore, a rate of acceptance will also lead to a rate of implementation, in that we would not expect a ready acceptance or a speedy implementation of the thing. So there would not be so many disappointments because, judging by what happened in the past, we know this is the rate we will go, once we are mindful of the situation.

The consumers in the region, I am sure, will be very glad to know that they can identify what they have to consume, they would be certain of the protein and other nutritional values, and, therefore, they would accept it, bearing in mind that they are very conscious of price and also the way in which the item is distributed.

So these things will have to be given some thought and developed, if not by the Caribbean Food Corporation, by some other agency working along with it. Because, what we don't want is a lot of time used on developing institutions which would then take more time in trying to get implementation, as we would not have proper acceptance, or we do not start from below, involving the people in an early stage to ensure a speedy implementation.

In the region there seems to be quick disappointment when things don't go forward as fast as we hope they would go, while we are still unmindful of the fact that we did not take certain steps to ensure that they went at the rate we desired. I think this is now being reflected even in the Caricom situation.

While we recognized that certain things had to be done, we probably glossed over those things and did the other things which were perhaps more glamorous or perhaps even more elaborate. And so when the thing does not move as fast as we wish it to move, we get frustrated and say it will not succeed.

And so with this kind of thing in mind, we should be mindful that in any new situation we are going to establish, we should take those steps that would enable it to go faster in terms of implementation, and bring about change for better in the region.

Everyone in the region is a consumer, so everyone will be concerned about the Regional Food Plan, so we are, therefore, assured of concern. What we need to develop is a commitment and that will come out of information. I think we already have mass media regional communication programmes going; these should be used to try and sell a programme like this.

I hear a lot about a lot of other things in the region; but of a very important matter like the Regional Food Plan, I don't hear as much locally or regionally, as we ought to hear, especially when it's a new thing which we are trying to develop and to have implemented by the people in the region.

I think we must be concerned about the people and what they have to do, in order to make the thing work. Because if we are not, we are going to have disappointment again, and we may even have a break-up of some things already established; because sometimes, out of impatience, comes haste to decide to try something new.

Bearing in mind all that was said by the other speakers, and our time factor, I would like to conclude my opening remarks by saying that it is an important thing we will be concerned about, because we are all consumers; we are people of the region.

But let it not be imposed, let it rise from below, and be totally involved with the people at every stage. And I am sure it would be acceptable and quickly implemented.

Summary of Points from Discussion that Followed

A small communications team has been appointed to mount a project to sell the Food Plan, and to work along with people involved in some of the Food Plan projects. High priority has been set on this project.

It is also very important for communication on the Food Plan in all territories of the region, especially about projects. There is a communications gap at the local community levels and this must be bridged.

There are several agencies and organizations in the region that can help in the communication programme, e.g. Caribbean Consumers' Union, Home Economists' Association.

Basic requirement in any food marketing mecahnism is a guarantee to farmers that whatever commodity they are motivated to produce will in fact be taken care of. Farmers must not be left with the problem of disposing of local produce after being guaranteed markets.