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# LAND REFORM FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE EASTERN CARIBBEAN

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## ABSTRACT

Sustainable agricultural development depends on access to land and judicious use made of that land. Such uses should be geared to satisfy two ends: export production to obtain foreign exchange and local production for food security. If sustainability is sought, however, the effective use of land is hampered by several factors, some intrinsic to the farm such as the adequate use of technologies, and others extrinsic to the farm such as re-market, credit, and extension services. Finally, the author proposes the land bank concept as a means to address many of the problems which other land reform programmes have failed to address. If these are not put in place, there is the possibility that no matter what land reform strategy is used, it will prove to be deficient.

## INTRODUCTION

Land reform has been regarded as an instrument of social change and economic progress. In the Caribbean the history of land and man is filled with examples of the above. In each case the over the counter reasons given for land reform are the redistribution of wealth and the change in the social order. Whatever the case the fundamental conditions leading to land reform are:

- \* A response to land-related problems which are deemed socially unacceptable;
- \* Attempt to restructure the institutional framework of land ownership and land use;
- \* Attempt to transfer power property and status from one group to another; and finally
- \* Efforts to stimulate economic growth.

These conditions are not mutually exclusive. In this paper land reform is defined as a change in the tenurial pattern of the land, while sustainable agriculture is looked at from two perspectives: (1) physical and (2) social. Physical sustainability looks at the use of agricultural lands with regards to the potential for future generation while social sustainability looks at the farming system which ensures access to resources and empowers the working class. This paper, therefore, examines land reform in the Eastern Caribbean since emancipation showing the problems which it addressed and proposes an alternative model which the author hopes will lead to sustainable development.

## LAND TENURE AND ECONOMIC GROWTH SINCE EMANCIPATION

In the late 19th and early 20th century the plantation system dominated the land tenure pattern in the Eastern Caribbean. These plantations were mainly privately owned. Side by side with the plantation system was the presence of an emerging peasantry. As in the other parts of the world where such a system exists, the plantation occupied the best arable lands while the peasants occupied the marginal lands surrounding the estates. This spacial relationship was encouraged for the prime reason of providing labour for the plantation system.

Agricultural production on the plantation was geared towards the export market while the peasantry produced food for the local market. This model produced economic sustainability since the two important objectives of agricultural production were met: (1) production geared to obtain foreign exchange and, (2) production geared towards food security. However, this system was not socially acceptable because both economic and social power remained in the hands of plantation owners.

The fall in sugar prices in the first half of the 20th century provided the first real opportunity for land reform in the Eastern Caribbean. Estate owners were no longer able to pay their workers, many estates became encumbered. Many estates were sold out to peasants either entirely or in part. This economic down-turn brought about the region's first spontaneous land reform since emancipation. However, although there was a change of tenurial pattern, the overall economic and social power base of the islands did not change.

In the Windwards, where the plantations were privately owned, the situation was more acute than in the Leewards where the plantations were state owned. The British introduced banana production in the Windwards as a means to stop the rising social conflict. Banana production was labour-intensive and adaptable to the small farm situation. This crop allowed for the continued provision of foreign exchange since it was geared for the export market. Small farmers for the first time contributed to the generation of foreign exchange earnings. They also increased significantly their capital base and were now in a better position to challenge the plantation system by having the economic base to buy lands as they became available. What was observed at that period of time was a rise in ownership and a fall in tenancy. This phenomena was observed in other countries. The United States experience shows that as agriculture becomes prosperous ownership increased in relation to tenancy. One can conclude, therefore, that as agriculture becomes prosperous, the demand for land will increase. In the Eastern Caribbean where land is limited because of size and other sectorial demands like tourism, housing and industry, it can create serious social pressures especially when agriculture is prosperous, this situation can in turn engender land reform.

The rise of the banana industry in the Windwards and vegetable production in the Leewards created opportunities for the small farmer to acquire land and in so doing obtaining some economic and social power. In the Windwards the rural folks withheld their labour bringing down many estates in the process. Some of these lands were bought by the rural people.

The plantation system was slowly being eroded away, at the same time the economic success of the banana industry pushed small farmers towards producing more bananas for export at the expense of local food production. The farming systems, geared to feed the family and earn money for buying goods not produced on farm, was changed to one of obtaining money to buy nearly all that is needed for the survival of the farm family. The production system which earlier ensured food security and foreign exchange earnings was slowly being eroded away. Today land reform measures are now being implemented to ensure that a sustainable balance is achieved; one example is the Mabouya Valley Development Project--St. Lucia--which ensures that the production system encompasses export crops and food crops, unlike the St. Lucia Model Farms whose production system was geared for export.

#### EXAMPLES OF LAND REFORM

The land reform measures employed in the Eastern Caribbean falls into two categories: Distribution Reform and Collectivist Reform.

##### Distribution Reform

Distributionist reform allows for the land to be distributed to the landless. These lands can either be expropriated in the case of privately owned lands or released in the case of state farms. In Grenada, the "Land for the Landless Programme" implemented by the Gairy's regime is an example of this reform. In the Leewards, the state distributes land on a lease basis. This system is not purely distributionist. However, in this case, the state acts as a big land owner and distributes land from time to time. This system will be dealt with later.

Normally distributionist reform is used to achieve equitable distribution of wealth, income and political power. However, land distribution which transfers title to a new owner in a free market does not guarantee sustainable agricultural development. Several reasons can be forwarded for the non-use of distributed lands; for instance, lack of interest of new land owners' labour, market and credit problem, a change in goals of the farm family. When this occurs the chances are that the distributed lands can fall into the hands of a larger land owner or real estate agent thus destroying the purpose for which the land reform was done.

##### Collectivist Reform

Collectivist reform transfers large blocks/parcels of land to a group, for instance a Cooperative. Castle Bruce in Dominica and the farms created by the National Agricultural Cooperative Development Agency (NACDA) in Grenada during the Bishop's Regime are examples of this reform.

Collectivist land reform in the Eastern Caribbean has failed because of a lack of preparation of the members of the Cooperatives to undertake cooperative farming. Further, the Eastern Caribbean experience has shown that collectivist land reform does not fit the value system of today's rural folks. As such, collectivist land reform with today's present values will not achieve sustainable agricultural development.

Generally, land reform in the Eastern Caribbean has not achieved its ultimate purpose of passing on property, power and status from one group to another. The integration of the new land owners into the wider community may be unduly delayed because of intrinsic factors such as limited use of improved agricultural technology and level of investment and extrinsic factors such as accessibility to credit, market and extension services. These factors are compounded in some cases by insecure tenure. Whenever this situation occurs, economic growth is slowed down and the sustainability of the system is questioned.

## PROBLEMS OF LAND REFORM

No matter what method of land reform is employed, there are some inherent problems that must be addressed; the following are some of the more important problems:

- \* Deficient cadastre
- \* Criteria for determining land to be expropriated
- \* Criteria for farmer selection
- \* Lack of supporting institutions
- \* Speculation

### Deficient Cadastre

Deficient cadastre hinders the use of land resources. Ownership is not clear which leads to the underutilization of land and social conflict among contending parties. To date, St. Lucia is the only island with updated cadastral surveys. Clear titles will certainly stimulate sustained agricultural production.

### Criteria for Determining Lands to be Expropriated

Successful land reform must begin with clear criteria for determining which lands are to be expropriated. A comprehensive land use policy, supported by a zoning strategy will certainly help. At the moment, the islands in the Eastern Caribbean either do not have these policies in place or if they do, they are ineffective. The need exists for the development of comprehensive land use maps to guide a zoning strategy. These land use maps can also be used to come up with criteria for compensating land owners from whom lands have been expropriated.

### Criteria for Farmer Selection

The distribution is usually plagued with complaints of political favouritism. Many land reform initiatives have failed because of selection of farmers, among other things. The question of land ownership per se has to be reexamined. The value system in these islands is such that most people express the desire to own land. The question is: ownership of land for what purpose? or is it ownership or accessibility? This desire has to be redirected and redefined if agricultural sustainability is to provide guidelines for directing people's interest to ownership (re: land for housing, land for productive agricultural purposes). A system must be

put in place to ensure that those who own land utilize it productively. Farmer training ought to be an important ingredient in farmer selection. Today's agriculture calls for a special farmer, one who has production and productivity as foremost goals in his/her development plan. Farmers selected should be prepared to work with researchers and extensionists in identifying best production alternatives. Criteria for farmer selection should include those elements cited above.

### Lack of Supporting Institutions

The lack of supporting financial institutions can be felt at two levels: (1) obtaining lands and (2) post distribution support.

#### Obtaining Lands

Farmers who need lands may not have the funds to purchase those lands. Even in cases where the down payments seem to be minimal farmers express difficulties in meeting these payments. The Rabacca farmers in St. Vincent expressed concern of the high lease/rental rate although management seems to think that the rates are not too steep. The absence of supporting financial institutions in this case can result in the lands going to farmers who do not really need lands.

#### Post Distribution Support

A common failure of most land reform programmes is lack of supporting institutions (re: Credit, market, extension service, community based services). In the Eastern Caribbean it is common to find land reform programmes which distribute land to farm workers without the necessary supporting institutions to ensure success of the programme. These programmes are doomed to fail.

To recall redistribution of lands may be the primary goal of a land reform programme, however, the integration of the new land owners into the social and economic life of the country may be more important than the distribution itself. This integration can be unduly delayed by the lack of supporting institutions.

#### Speculation

Speculation can be a cause for land reform and is in itself a problem for lands distributed under a land reform programme in a free market system. Davis cited three reasons why speculation poses problems in land reform programmes: (1) it inflates the commodity value of land that socially desirable uses of land are often thwarted, makes access to land more difficult for those of modest means, (2) prevents a community from using its lands as equity base for its own development, and (3) makes it more and more difficult for the community to guide the pace and direction of its own development.

Recent economic growth resulting from agricultural and tourism activities in the Eastern Caribbean and the returning immigrants from

the United Kingdom and North America have created forces leading to increase land prices which in turn leads to speculation. Agricultural lands are fastly becoming alienated either for tourism, industry or housing. Some land owners are finding it more profitable to defrain from agricultural activities, the aims being to transfer these lands to different land use--housing for instance. In the light of this growing threat governments in the Eastern Caribbean seem not to have a response. Agricultural development is certainly threatened and given our natural resource base situation if agriculture is threatened then our development is threatened.

#### AN ALTERNATIVE LAND REFORM MODEL

Past attempts at land reform in the Eastern Caribbean did achieve some measure of success, however, most have fallen short in laying the framework for sustainable agricultural development. The author will like therefore to propose an alternative model: the land bank concept. The land bank should not be regarded as an all inclusive land tenure system. Other land tenure systems can and should be allowed to exist side by side the land bank. This is not entirely new to the region as will be seen later. Outside the region the land bank is being used successfully in Western Europe, Canada and Israel (Kiboutz); the management of these varies. In Guyana and Trinidad the government owns substantial acreage of agricultural land. In fact they possess land banks. What is a land bank? A land bank is the consolidation of land under the control of an authority for specified uses. Generally, land within the bank can be held by an individual, family unit or group. Land will be leased not sold thus guaranteeing future generations access to lands. Leases should be mortgageable and transferable. The land bank should be provided with the authority to buy and sell lands. Only the bank should be given that right, not individuals within the banks. In a state where the land bank operates the bank should be given first preference to buy agricultural lands.

Certain policies should be put in place to create a favourable environment for the successful operation of a land bank. Such policies should include:

- \* A land zoning strategy.
- \* A land pricing policy.
- \* A land taxation policy to discourage the utilization of agricultural lands.

The land bank authority should be responsible for putting in place supporting institutions to guarantee the success of the uses of the land bank. The land bank concept, in addition with dealing with lands, also addresses the issues that the land reform programmes have failed to address and these are (a) guarantee for future generation access to land, (b) greater control of land use--export production, food security, (c) deals with issues surrounding distribution of land (re: supporting institutions), and (d) controls speculation of land/land price.

At present all the Eastern Caribbean possess a wonderful opportunity to put this in effect. Government owns or has access to significant



acreage of lands. In the north, the government of St. Kitts owns most of the agricultural lands. In the south, the St. Vincent government owns more than 7,000 acres of land most of which is arable. What is needed is the will and organizational capacity to put the pieces together.

To conclude, sustainable agricultural development depends on access to land and judicious use made of that land. Such uses should be geared to satisfy two ends--export production to obtain foreign exchange and local production for food security--if sustainability is sought. However, the effective use of land is hampered by several factors: some intrinsic to the farm (the adequate use of technologies) and others extrinsic (re: market, credit and extension services). Finally, the author proposes the land bank concept as a means to address most of the problems which the other land reform programmes failed to address. It was strongly put forward that if supporting institutions are not put in place then no matter what land reform strategy is used, it will prove to be deficient.

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