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CARIBBEAN FOOD CORPS SOCIETY



Annual Meeting
Georgetown, Guyana
1971

PUBLISHED WITH THE COOPERATION

OF THE

UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO

MAYAGUEZ CAMPUS

1980

VOLUME IX

SOME PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN THE PRODUCTION OF VEGETABLES
IN THE COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN

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This paper attempts to identify some of the more serious problems affecting Vegetable Production in the Commonwealth Caribbean.

The Caribbean Free Trade Association (Carifta) came into being during 1968. Provision was made for an Agricultural Marketing Protocol designed to stimulate, encourage and permit a greater volume of trade in agricultural commodities, including vegetables within the Commonwealth Caribbean area.

In some of the Commonwealth Caribbean territories one-crop economies existed e.g. Montserrat, Cotton; St. Kitts, Sugar Cane; Barbados, Sugar Cane; St. Vincent, Bananas. In those islands growing sugar cane and cotton in particular, it became obvious that because of marketing and other problems it was very necessary to diversify their agriculture. With just about all of the Commonwealth Caribbean territories concentrating on developing a tourist industry, it was also seen fit to produce much more local products and therefore import less. It is seen therefore that most, if not all, of the Commonwealth Caribbean territories had more or less the same motives for diversifying their agriculture, and later they tended to have identical objectives of import substitution.

One of the problems encountered in the production of vegetables in the Commonwealth Caribbean is the fact that growing seasons tend to be more or less identical. It is not uncommon therefore to find when there is a glut in one territory of a particular crop, the same is very often true in many of the other territories. This inevitably frustrates marketing particularly since vegetable crops by and large are highly perishable and storage facilities could hardly be considered as ideal or adequate in many territories. What is said of gluts is also true of scarcities, and very often produce has to be imported from the U.S.A. and Canada.

Agricultural Research is expensive. It is very often felt that Research work can be carried out at a central place within the area and the results applied throughout. This might be theoretically true but does not work out in practice, and therefore leads to repetition and duplication. Many of the Commonwealth Caribbean territories are not adequately staffed to do the volume and type of Research on Vegetable Crops that is necessary, Some territories therefore have considerable advantage over others from a research standpoint.

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In Barbados over the past four years or so where a vigorous research programme on Vegetable Production has got underway, our experience has shown that without Entomologists and Plant Pathologists on the staff our programmes would not have succeeded. It is questionable, therefore, how far a territory can get without what may be considered as basic staff.

In many of the Commonwealth Caribbean territories the labour force is somewhat inadequate and to further diversify will inevitably involve far greater use of mechanical equipment. In many of the territories, particularly the smaller ones, most of the terrain is unsuited to mechanisation. In the near future, territories that cannot mechanize are likely therefore to be at a considerable disadvantage.

The climate is generally the same with only slight variations between some territories. Basically they all tend to have a rainy or wet season and a dry season. In some territories the wet season might be slightly longer and wetter, and in others the dry season might be longer and drier. In the most of them, the wet season presents identical problems i.e. the incidence of pests and diseases are higher and difficulties are experienced in controlling them. Where a heavy or sticky soil exists, land preparation and cultivation presents a tremendous problem during the wet season. In most of the territories the dry season is more ideal for vegetable production, but very often water becomes the limiting factor. There are many territories that still depend almost wholly and solely upon precipitation for Vegetable Production. The result is that production is haphazard and unpredictable. Territories therefore with well established irrigation systems or those which have a potential for irrigation (by way of rivers, springs, wells or catchments) are likely to have a considerable advantage over those depending solely upon rainfall.

Planting material for vegetable crops is generally available throughout the area. Private enterprise as well as Governmental Establishments in some territories are importers of planting material. In some territories, however the importation of planting material is left almost exclusively to private enterprise. In such cases, planting material tends to be ordered from catalogues rather than as a result of local trials. This practice can present problems since in some cases factors such as day length and photoperiodism are not taken into account upon ordering.

Recently in Barbados our experience has been that Cabbage Seed imported from reputable seed companies are affected by bacterial diseases. It has been necessary to pretreat Cabbage Seeds before planting. This has been practical in Barbados because a qualified staff is available, together with the fact that the necessary equipment is available. Since Government through the Ministry of Agriculture is probably the largest importer of vegetable planting material also ensures that a fair amount of treated planting material is readily available. With the expansion of vegetable crops throughout the Commonwealth Caribbean, problems of this nature are sure to multiply and some territories will hardly be in a position to cope with such problems.

The production of vegetables can generally be regarded as not only a costly business but a particularly risky one, mainly as a result of perishability of the marketable product, and the fact that insects, diseases and even weather conditions can so easily affect the outcome.

Financing vegetable enterprises is probably one of the problems common to all the Commonwealth territories. It is true to say that the problem of finance is generally accepted and efforts are being made to overcome this obstacle by both commercial banks and Governments.

Marketing is one of the serious problems which has probably been most neglected. In most of the territories both private and government marketing institutions undertake marketing of agricultural produce. In most cases staff has not been trained in Agricultural Marketing. It has been difficult to set up meaningful grades and standards which can be understood by the producer, and in most cases storage facilities are totally inadequate. Market Intelligence Services are virtually nonexistent and transportation within and between territories appears to be totally inadequate. If the trade in vegetables is to develop to significant proportions within the area, it is going to be necessary for a far more sophisticated approach to be made toward solving the entire marketing complex. In some territories harvesting equipment is being used, and some growers have established packing houses, while others have constructed limited cold store facilities. Standards and grades which are meaningful to all the trading partners will have to be established.

This paper has identified several problems associated with the production of vegetables throughout the Commonwealth Caribbean. It can be seen that some territories appear at present to lack adequate facilities, staff, etc. and these naturally adversely affect systematic and reliable production of vegetables. It should be mentioned, however, that due to some inherent factors such as soils, climate, topography, rainfall pattern, large areas of level land, availability of irrigation facilities etc. some territories appear to have some comparative advantage over others for the production of some vegetable crops. It would appear as though serious consideration must be given to the rationalization of vegetable production within the Commonwealth Caribbean so that those areas best suited to the production of certain crops could be encouraged to produce some crops and supply other territories. Similarly, those same territories should be required to purchase vegetables not produced by them from the other territories. It is recognised, however, that this concept is much more easily advocated than implemented. However, if meaningful expansion is to take place within the area each territory competing with the other will probably do far more harm than good.

SUMMARY

The Caribbean Free Trade Association was launched in 1968 and one of its functions was to stimulate and encourage agricultural production in the Commonwealth Caribbean area.

There are several factors operating against the systematic and orderly production of vegetables in the area. Some of these include identical policies of import substitution, more or less identical periods of production and seasonal gluts. The fact that Research is desirable and expensive, together with the fact that many areas are not endowed with a topography conducive to mechanized systems of production imposes certain restrictions on production.

Irrigation is virtually non-existent in some territories, while others lack adequately qualified staff and facilities. Financing is generally difficult.