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Land and Labour in the Development of Dominican Agriculture

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The workshop thought that policy makers in the area seemed to be confronted by a dilemma in agricultural administration. On the one hand there was the need to improve agricultural productivity and on the other the need to provide for the welfare of agricultural workers.

The problem and possibility of adapting existing technology to small-farm needs had not been sufficiently observed. While it was important to ascertain what potential of farm-size for each territory could be considered economical, it was obvious that this depended on price of inputs and products as well as on the quality of land and labour.

In the case of Dominica, the question of possible alternative crops was important. It was difficult to determine without empirical evidence the actual economic size of holdings for particular crops or crop combinations. It therefore seemed even more difficult to ascertain economic size for potential crops.

On the basis of Lang's report and with reference to the main agricultural zones based on rainfall, the workshop attempted to ascertain the pattern of existing land utilization in Dominica. Generally, it was felt that there was no point in extending cultivations into the high rainfall zone if land in lower rainfall zones was under-utilised. It was observed that in nearly all cases, the alluvial areas were utilised by large estates.

The workshop seemed satisfied that there was a labour shortage in Dominica. Some people expressed the opinion that this was a matter arising from imbalance in distribution. The problem of labour availability was also related to the fact that a large proportion of labour in agriculture was own-account work.

The workshop observed the low levels of skills among the local agricultural population and the labour problem for medium-sized farms indicated by Prevost and Yankey.² It seemed therefore, that

¹Lang D.M. *Soil & Land Use Surveys* No. 21., U.W.I. Trinidad.

²See. Prevost & Yankey, "A Preliminary Investigation into the availability of labour in the Agric. Sector of Dominica for 1970-1980. This volume.

in addition to the problem of farm size it was necessary to consider:

- (a) Whether there was a labour shortage given the present cropping pattern;
- (b) whether in order to provide a desired cropping pattern it was necessary to have further adjustments in the labour supply.

In either case, examination of the reasons for labour shortages was necessary. These may be either:

1. expectation of better employment opportunities outside of agriculture; or
2. the low status ascribed to agriculture.

The workshop discussed the relative merits of the use of either the "push" or "pull" theories in agricultural labour availability. In fact it was said that in the present situation of supposed labour shortages, there was more evidence of the "push" forces operating rather than "pull" forces. Even on many estates, for some classes of workers, there was no assurance of steady employment. The tendency for labour to move between estates, doing less arduous tasks, was mentioned, and also the fact that partial estate employment was often associated with building up of the peasant's own agricultural and non-agricultural assets. Thus it seemed that the problem of labour availability was accentuated in those areas where peasants have already established holdings.

It was felt that perhaps too much significance was paid to the image of agriculture and not enough to improving economic returns from farming as an incentive to labour stability.

It was agreed that viability of agricultural production was related to size of holding and with reference to labour requirements it was felt that the small operator could draw on family resources. Large estates could provide some attractions such as housing bonuses. The intermediate-type farmer in Dominica was most susceptible to vagaries in labour supply.

Prospects of Increasing Labour Supply to Estates

Consolidation of small holdings and placement of displaced persons on larger estates were considered. However, these methods were felt to be indefensible due to loss of independence, the rise in the price of food and the effects on wages. The method used in Puerto Rico to solve labour-shortage problems is a good example of how to solve this problem. The method combined the use of:

- (1) one-third government subsidy on administration services incurred by farms in operating the scheme; and

- (2) location of workers in labour-deficit areas by means of housing incentives.

However, the importance of good relations in agriculture and payment of adequate wages must be emphasised.

The workshop agreed that not enough was known of the use of labour in the area. Unresolved questions were what factors affect the labour supply curve; whether there was a backward-sloping supply curve for labour in agriculture and even if this were so, whether the economy would necessarily be worse off if time saved was utilised in creating new assets. These were areas to which it was felt researchers might well devote themselves.