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DISCUSSION REPORT

(Paper presented by I.E. Johnson & M.O. Strachan)

The paper generated much interest as indicated by the number of questions raised during the discussion. The view, that in Jamaica agricultural development and rural development were synonymous, was emphasized; if this were not the case, then very strong remedial action should be taken. The population is rural; 50 per cent of the rural population is in agriculture; 1.5m. acres are in farms and 1/3 of the employed population is in agriculture. Consequently, emphasis has to be placed on rural development to lessen the rural-urban income gap and to make the lives of rural people more meaningful. The existing skewed land distribution pattern, declining contribution of agriculture to Gross Domestic Product, and increased agricultural imports were symptoms of an inefficient agricultural system. In the light of this, Government had undertaken a mammoth agricultural study to revive the agricultural sector.

Dr. Johnson mentioned some problems and achievements. The problem of agriculture were concerned with: (i) the continuous desire of people to take land out of agriculture and government's failure to enforce existing laws, (ii) land use, originally geared toward exports with the aim of providing opportunity for land ownership for many small farmers, food for the nation, earning foreign exchange, providing work for the unemployed and to a limited extent raw materials for industry, (iii) the large amount of land left idle because of the infertility of the land, assumed lack of credit for land development and the relative ease in obtaining this idle land, much of it bare stones; in some cases the quality is low, forcing the farmer to find employment elsewhere to augment his income, (iv) the definition of a farm as farms were very small, fragmented units most under one acre in size. Many of the rural people were disenchanted with farming, the average age of farmers being over 50 and did not have the skill, know-how to get more out of the land, or to take up other work. Returns were also low and consequently they flock to the towns. The question was: how could these people be kept back in the country?

The philosophy in Jamaica was to look at rural development strategy as a package deal - consisting of improving themselves by simulating conditions in the rural setting as obtained in some towns, e.g. by providing health centres, education, social welfare, and other infrastructure, with emphasis on extension services, training, credit, marketing facilities and housing, with much stress on housing. The Ministry of Agriculture was, first of all, attempting to increase the size of farms to make them more viable. Lands had either been continually fragmented through the permissive inheritance laws or rendered inaccessible to those who wanted to obtain land because of speculation by the large owners. As a result the Town and Country Planning Law was drafted which requires agricultural land to be maintained and used for agricultural purposes.

Dr. Johnson was questioned closely as to the considerations given by the government to the size of small farms and kind of tenure found acceptable. Delegates learnt that the government was committed to a system of leasehold tenure and as to the size of farms, the major criterion was the income potential, estimated at between J\$1,500 and J\$2,000. Lands must thus be found with the capability and suitable crops to generate such an income. Government's priority for leasehold in development and its requirement of mortgage titles as securities would be reconciled by legislation enabling leaseholders to use lands they occupy and operate, in the same way as they would freehold land, on a long-term basis - 49 years - with the option to renew. The Government would also provide loans without security.

Dr. Johnson was asked to elaborate on the successes of agriculture in view of the fact that some of the solutions prescribed, like providing infrastructure and technological inputs, had not prevented a decline in agriculture. Was giving young graduates land and capital to go into farming not part of the solution? The answer was that the export crops, and the marketing boards had failed. Jamaica's problems in marketing were in the small size, scattered distribution and inaccessibility of farms. The achievements mentioned were: (i) the broiler meat industry producing 40m. pounds annually which had grown from scratch through private sector activity, (ii) the output of root crops which had grown considerably from 1962 to 1971, for example, Irish potatoes, and (iii) the development of the Jamaica Hope Breed cattle which produces an average of 7.58 quarts of milk per day. The Government was also going back to growing rice as was done during the Second World War. On the question of education, Mr. Johnson stressed that it must be at both the school and farm levels.

One delegate contended that one of the most important factors in agriculture's declining contribution to national income was the rapid deterioration in the prices of agricultural products. Concerning the relevance of the income target proposed, given the rapid rate of inflation, two things emerged as important: the prices and the incomes received by the farmer and the income potential of the purchaser. The discussion ended with the suggestion that the farmer's income should be considered under the following: (i) in terms of his capital resources, including land, whereby he is given the amount consistent with the popular rate of interest in the economy, (ii) the farmer's role as an ordinary worker, and (iii) his role as a manager. While, in arriving at a return for the farmer, the level of production was important, so too was the pricing of farmer's products, and an effective government pricing policy.