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SURVEY OF MELVILLE HALL LEASEHOLD SETTLEMENT SCHEME

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Methodology

A case study of Melville Hall was undertaken in February 1976. The objective of the survey was to try to assess its success, and the problems encountered, with a view to determining to what extent it could be adapted as a model for the settlement of Geneva. Melville Hall is the only leasehold settlement scheme in Dominica.

The population that is covered by this case study consists of 18 of the 20 leasehold farmers who operate agricultural holdings on the Melville Hall Estate.

The information contained in this study is largely sociological and was collected by a team of three highly-skilled professionals: two statisticians and one sociologist. The editing, coding, tabulation, processing, interpretation and presentation of the data was done by the author.

The accuracy of this study can only be considered in the light of non-sampling errors. (This is a case study, and not a sample survey, hence the concept of sampling errors does not arise.) The following precautions were taken during the enumeration of the farmers, to keep non-sampling errors to a minimum:

- (1) the enumerators were the best that could be obtained;
- (2) confidentiality was paramount during the study - the farmers were aware of this, and the enumerators respected it;
- (3) the Management of the Estate was divorced from the Case Study;
- (4) enumeration of each farmer was done privately;
- (5) the farmers were encouraged to answer the questions freely and frankly; and
- (6) every effort was made by the survey team to eliminate bias.

There is, therefore, every reason to believe that the results of this survey are very accurate.

Results of the Survey

1. Description of Population

Sixty-one per cent of the farmers are in the age group 30-39 years. The average age is 35.4 years. Over 80 per cent of the farmers are married.

The level of education of the farmers is relatively low. The highest level of educational attainment of approximately 90 per cent of the farmers is that of primary school.

All of the farmers reportedly belong to one of the Christian

denominations. Forty-four per cent are Methodist and 33 per cent are Roman Catholics. The remainder embrace the Christian Union and Seventh Day Adventist faiths.

The total number of dependents is 129. Of this number, 56 are male and 73 female. The average number of dependents per holding is seven ranging from 0 to 13. Of the 129 dependents, 89, or approximately 69 per cent, are below the age of 14. The largest number of dependents (42, or approximately 33 per cent) belong to the 5-9 age group. Approximately 56 per cent of farmers have five or more dependents, at least one of whom is four years of age or less. The majority of dependents (approximately 77 per cent) are either now in primary school, or have not gone beyond the primary level of education.

The number of dependents over 12 years of age is 54. Of this number, 39 (or approximately 72 per cent) reportedly provide a certain amount of assistance on the farm.

Ten of the dependents report *housewife* as their main occupation. These dependents are, in fact, wives of the farmers. It is very commendable, therefore that of this number eight assist their husbands with the farming operations.

It is of vital importance that a Family Planning Education Programme be instituted. The main purpose of such a programme would be to educate families in the advantages of family planning, with special emphasis on birth control information. This programme would have, as a major objective, the lowering of the average number of dependents per holding. The advantages of such a programme (which need not be confined to Melville Hall leasehold farmers) are obvious; but, eventually, this would be a first step in improving the quality of life for farm families.

2. Work History

The main occupation of over 55 per cent of the leasehold farmers, prior to the occupation of their farm lots on the Estate, was farming. These farmers all had over 10 years of farming experience. The remainder were either craftsmen or farm labourers. A relatively small percentage of farmers (16.6 per cent) reported farming as the main occupation of their spouses.

It is significant to note that approximately 89 per cent of farmers have been farming for 10 years or over, and 61 per cent have had over 20 years farming experience.

3. Economic History

The distribution of both incomes and savings prior to the occupation of farmers on the Estate was negatively skewed. Fifty per cent of farmers earned weekly incomes of \$20-\$50, and only approximately six per cent earned over \$150 per week. As far as savings are concerned, over 72 per cent of the farmers saved less than \$5 per week, and only 11 per cent managed to save over \$20 per week on average.

4. Attitude of Tenure

Approximately 67 per cent of farmers report that they like the Leasehold System of tenure. This is very encouraging, in view of the fact that the Leasehold System, as operated by the Government, is a relatively new concept. Even more encouraging is the fact that most of the respondents who reportedly like the Leasehold System are the experienced farmers, having 10 or more years of farming experience.

The reasons advanced for liking the Leasehold System of tenure are many and varied. These include: (a) a feeling of independence, (b) a sense of security, (c) the prospects of higher income, and (d) farmers' inability to purchase their own holdings.

Although a significant percentage of farmers like the Leasehold System, an even greater percentage (over 83 per cent) would like to have this system of tenure changed. Seventy-two per cent of farmers prefer the Freehold System, and 11 per cent prefer the Cooperative System of tenure. A further analysis of the farmers who would like to have the Leasehold System of tenure changed to Freehold showed that a significant percentage are in the 30-49 years age group, and have five or more dependents.

The future of the Leasehold System of tenure is very encouraging even though the Freehold System is still the most popular form of tenure. With an increasing population, and an already high unemployment rate, a philosophy of land redistribution must be developed which will result in increased production and productivity because at present a small number of holdings account for a significantly large acreage of all the land in farms.

The factor which farmers like least about the Leasehold System is insecurity. Appropriate legislation could be enacted that will give a greater feeling of security to lessees.

5. Attitude to Management

One-third of the farmers report that of all the services which are offered by the Land Management Authority, the one that they like best is the transportation of their produce from field to market. Some of the other services which farmers like are the marketing of their produce, and the provision of fertilizers. Although transportation of farm products is recognised as an essential service, approximately 28 per cent of farmers complain about the high cost of this service by the Authority.

Approximately 78 per cent of the farmers are satisfied with the extension services that are provided. Of the satisfied farmers, 93 per cent are very experienced in farming, each having acquired over 10 years of farming experience. Fifty-five per cent of farmers, all of whom have 10 years or more of experience in farming and representing over 71 per cent of farmers who are satisfied with the Land Management Authority's extension services, report that their satisfaction of the extension services is based on the sound technical advice which is given to them.

As far as the extension officer is concerned, 67 per cent of the farmers report that they find him helpful which is a smaller percentage

than those who report that they are satisfied with the extension services. Of those who find the extension officer helpful, more than 58 per cent are the very experienced farmers, each with over 20 years' farming experience. These farmers also report that they find the farmer-training courses 'very good'.

It is very commendable that nearly 78 per cent of the farmers report that they could not have performed as well without the help, advice and guidance of the extension officer. This percentage is made up of 58 per cent who find him helpful, and 22 per cent who do not find him helpful.

A significant percentage (89 per cent) of farmers have expressed the wish to increase their farm sizes under the present Land Management Authority. Of this number, over 81 per cent gave as a reason 'to increase farm income' the rationale for wanting to increase their farm sizes.

There is a positive relationship between the wish to increase farm size under the present management and the number of dependents, and also between the wish to increase farm size and the age of the farmer. Farmers with five or more dependents and also those falling in the age group 30-49 years are more desirous of increasing their acreages than the other categories of farmers.

Because of the relationships mentioned above, it is difficult to conclude that the farmers are interested in increasing their acreages primarily because of the high level of management, and the satisfactory services which they receive from the Authority. It is highly probable that their reasons for increasing farm sizes are motivated by the need to increase farm incomes, in order to support larger families, while they (the farmers) are still relatively young.

Only half of the farmers report that the Authority provides any type of incentives for them to produce more food from their holdings. Of this number, about 33 per cent gave 'encouragement to diversify' as the incentive that was provided. Farmers did not regard such factors as transportation of produce and technical advice as important incentives.

Foremost among the suggestions for improving farming conditions on the Estate is the need to improve credit facilities to farmers. This recommendation is made by 67 per cent of the farmers, 92 per cent of whom are the more experienced farmers on the Estate.

There is a great deal of satisfaction on the part of farmers with the management services and the extension services that are provided by the Authority. Farmers have expressed dissatisfaction, however, with the conditions under which credit is being made available to them.

The provision of farm credit on a land-lease project, such as Melville Hall, is difficult, particularly when the leases are not the type of term-leases considered satisfactory by the on-lending agency.

It is felt that the provision of farm credit on easy terms for financing infrastructural development, farm implements, farm inputs (such as planting materials, fertilizers, pesticides, etc.) and labour is vital in a country where agriculture forms the base of the economy, where land redistribution is a primary goal, and where the unemployment rate is high.

6. Attitude to Record-Keeping

One of the highlights of this investigation is the attitude of farmers to the keeping of farm records. Sixty-seven per cent of the farmers feel that the keeping of records helps them to plan wisely, and 28 per cent feel that it is a necessary exercise.

It is difficult to accept the view that the attitude of Melville Hall farmers to record-keeping is typical of the farming community in Dominica. The attitude of these farmers to record-keeping is very commendable, however, and every effort should be made by the extension officer to maintain this high degree of interest.

The farmers, for instance, could be taught to prepare costs of production for each crop or livestock enterprise, and annual profit and loss statements. These exercises would reinforce the farmers' beliefs that farm accounting does help the farmer to plan wisely.

7. Attitude to Farming

Over 94 per cent of farmers report that they would elect to remain in farming, even if they had a choice of occupation. This percentage represents a very high cross-section of farmers, i.e., those with previous occupations other than farming, those from different age groups, and those with varying number of dependents.

Sixty-seven per cent of farmers believe that farming in this country faces a 'bright future', but approximately 17 per cent see a bright future only for coconuts.

It may be of interest to note that the farmers (16 per cent) who are pessimistic about the future of farming belong to the experienced category of farmers, and fall within the age group of 30-49 years.

Over 83 per cent of the farmers report that they would encourage their dependents to choose farming as a career. Of this number, slightly over 80 per cent have five or more dependents. The main reason which is given for the encouragement to dependents is that farming provides economic independence.

The farmers' attitude to farming is probably more encouraging in Dominica than in most of the other West Indian territories. One can formulate a number of hypotheses why these attitudes prevail: foremost among them is the low level of education among farm families, resulting in high levels of unemployment, and a narrow range of job opportunities for dependents of farm families. If this favourable attitude to farming is typical of the small farming community, the success of similar land lease programmes will be assured.

Farmers' plans for increasing farm income include Crop Diversification, Livestock Rearing, and an Increase in Banana Acreages. Over 44 per cent of farmers plan to introduce livestock into their farm programmes while 33 per cent plan to increase their acreages in bananas. All the farmers with very large families (11 dependents or over) plan to introduce livestock, probably because of the availability of family labour to assist with the planned increase in the farming operations, or probably because a mixed

enterprise tends to lessen the financial risks involved in farming.

8. Attitude to Rental Value

Approximately 89 per cent of the farmers regard the rental value of their holdings as 'too high'. There is no apparent relationship between the number of dependents and the percentage of farmers who regard the rental value as 'too high'.

There might be some justification to the claim that the rental value is high. This claim should be examined in the light of the capacity of the farm to generate a fixed income, which should be based on the existing cropping patterns. The fixed income should be considered in relation to the opportunity cost of the farmer's labour.

9. Attitude of Training

Fifty per cent of all the farmers report that the training programmes which are offered by the Authority are very good. It is interesting to observe that of the farmers with at least 20 years of farming experience, 64 per cent hold a similar view.

Approximately 67 per cent of farmers suggested that the training programmes could be improved by holding training sessions more frequently, while 28 per cent suggested that field training as opposed to classroom-type instructions would make the training programmes more meaningful.

It can be inferred that training programmes which have been organised by the Authority are effective and relevant to the needs of the farmers. The suggestions for improvements deserve some consideration, however.

10. Marketing Problems

The main problems, in order of importance are: (a) price offered is too low, (b) unreliable transportation, (c) unavailability of labour for harvesting, etc., and (d) inaccessible roads.

An efficient pricing policy in terms of farm-gate prices in relation to cost of production is a vital necessity in stimulating production. When production is stimulated the spin-off effects are: (a) an increase in employment, (b) an increase in exports, resulting in valuable foreign exchange earnings and, hopefully, a favourable balance of trade, and (c) a lowering of food prices.

A carefully planned price support policy in which Government subsidises the farmer by offering guaranteed prices for primary products which are labour intensive, and for which an export market exists, should be given consideration. This subsidy could have the effects mentioned earlier. Experience in other territories shows that a subsidy which is given at the marketing end in the form of reasonable, guaranteed prices, is easier to monitor and control, than when it is given at the production end, in the form of planting materials, fertilizer, or the like.

11. Constraints to Production

The main constraints to production, as reported by the majority of

farmers are: (a) high cost of farm inputs, such as fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, etc., and (b) lack of credit facilities.

Other constraints are inadequate farm size, poor weather conditions, and agronomic factors such as insects and disease control.

While farmers refer to the lack of credit, it is to be observed that credit is available to the Dominican farmer through the AID Bank, and the real problem might be the incapacity of some farmers to qualify for credit, particularly due to security requirements.

Agriculture, in most developing countries, is undergoing acute strains at the present time, because of the rising prices of farm inputs from the industrialised countries. One possible and partial solution to this problem is the more efficient use of land. Others are bulk purchase of inputs, through a central commercial unit, operating along cooperative lines, and the application of proven scientific crop rotation programmes, which could maintain soil fertility and reduce build-up of pests and disease, particularly under Dominica's forest and high rainfall conditions.

Albeit, there seems to be no immediate short-term solution to the problem of increasing costs of farm inputs, except to absorb the increased cost by an increase in labour efficiency.

12. Credit

Over 83 per cent of farmers report that they are not satisfied with the amount of credit that is made available to them. Of this, 60 per cent, who are also farmers with over 10 years of farming experience, would wish to have long-term credit facilities, and 27 per cent would wish short-term credit facilities for purchasing farm inputs. Of interest to note is that the farmers who are over the age of 50 years, are not interested in farm credit. This is a typical situation which exists in the Caribbean farming community. Innovative credit plans need to be devised so that these farmers can be reached with new ideas of deficit farm financing.

13. Labour Sharing

It is not very encouraging that only 50 per cent of the farmers think that it would be a good idea to organise farmers to work cooperatively on the Estate. Opinions on cooperatives are divided among the more experienced and the less experienced farmers, among the farmers who like or dislike the Leasehold System, and among farmers with a large as well as a small number of dependents. All of the farmers who are over the age of 40 years, however, think it a 'good idea' to organise work cooperatives on the Estate. Fifty per cent of the farmers are already assisting other farmers with their farm labour operations.

From the foregoing, it is doubtful that the cooperative system of tenure will become an acceptable system among the farming community. However, much cannot be inferred about the problems or difficulties in implementing such a system by analysing the responses from leasehold farmers.

14. Most Pressing Problems

The most pressing problem among farmers on the Estate is the inability of the farmers to qualify for credit from concessionary sources. Three other problems, in order of importance, are: (a) high cost of transportation, (b) need for farm housing, and (c) agronomic factors, e.g., diseases, availability of planting materials, etc.

15. Selection of Farmers

The Land Management Authority, and especially the Farmers' Selection Committee, must be very highly commended for the obvious unbiased and professional manner in which the farmers were selected. The majority of farmers (78 per cent) think that the method of selecting leasehold farmers is fair. When farmers show such confidence in the selection process, it becomes relatively easy to get their co-operation afterwards - provided, of course, that they display a similar degree of confidence in the management of the Authority.