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SURVEY OF CASTLE BRUCE COOPERATIVE PROJECT

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Introduction

The Castle Bruce Estate is a 1,300-acre estate, located in the Parish of St. David on the east coast of Dominica. The estate, which adjoins the village of Castle Bruce, was formerly owned by the Commonwealth Development Corporation. As a result of a struggle between the workers and the owners of the estate, the estate was taken over by Government, through the Land Management Authority, in 1972. Although the nature and the outcome of this struggle is central to the analysis to be made in this study, it has been sufficiently documented elsewhere.¹ Hence, only a broad outline is given here.

History of Castle Bruce

The Castle Bruce Estate was purchased by the Commonwealth Development Corporation in 1948. However, organised production did not commence on the estate until some ten years later. In 1958, 250 workers were hired to clear the land, and to commence cultivation.

The estate was planted predominantly in coconuts and bananas, and as it developed, its regular labour requirements declined correspondingly. In 1972, the owners of the estate, the Commonwealth Development Corporation, took the decision to reduce the labour force by 30 per cent, on the grounds that the estate was not operating profitably. The company had just recently employed a graduate Dominican as the Manager of the estate, on whom the responsibility of selecting the workers for dismissal was placed. He refused to carry out the instructions, and was dismissed. This action led to a strike by the workers on the estate in support of the new manager, which began a protracted struggle between management and workers. Government intervened in the struggle, but not in support of the workers' demands and proposals, which were at the time considered by Government, as well as many elements in the community, as an undesirable and 'communist inspired' development. The workers offered to purchase the estate, but were unable to do so, because they could not command the funds.

Government finally purchased the estate, along with the other estate owned by the Commonwealth Development Corporation in Dominica, Melville Hall, at a combined price of \$3 million.² A struggle then developed between

¹ *Interim Report of the Evaluation of the Castle Bruce Farmers' Cooperative* by an evaluation team headed by A.N. Williams, and from *Chance for a Change*, a document prepared by the Castle Bruce Cooperative.

² The Chairman of the Land Management Authority stated during the discussion that the price paid was \$1 million.

the workers on the estate and the Land Management Authority, in whom Government had placed control and administration of the estate. Negotiations between the workers and the Land Management Authority revolved around the question of the terms under which land could be leased to the workers, the rental fee, and the acreage to be released.

The Castle Bruce Cooperative was formed in 1974, and in May 1974, 150 acres of the estate were finally leased to the Cooperative. Initially, the rental set for this portion was \$7,338 which the Cooperative protested as being too high. The rental fee was later revised to \$5,538.

The land leased to the Cooperative by the Land Management Authority contained about 50 acres already cultivated in coconuts, bananas, cocoa and limes. The rest was under forest or scrub. Since leasing the land, the Cooperative has cleared much of the other portion, which has been planted with food crops, plantains and bananas. It can be noted that the Cooperative decided, as a matter of policy, to reduce the production of long-term crops, such as coconuts, and to develop production of food crops, vegetables, etc., with the primary objective of meeting the food requirements of the Castle Bruce community, and breaking with the plantation traditions of farming.

The Castle Bruce experiment attracted wide international interest, and has come to be viewed as an important model of transformation from the plantation system to a worker-managed farming project. Financial support was obtained by the Cooperative from several international aid agencies, which has facilitated the purchase of machinery and equipment, and provided working capital for the project.

The ideological background to the Castle Bruce experience is provided in a publication entitled *A Chance for a Change* which was released by the Cooperative. Among the goals identified in this document are: (a) the enhancement of the social and economic security of the workers, through their effective control of the means of production, (b) to increase employment through diversification into labour-intensive crops, and subsequently into agro-industrial complexes, and (c) the provision of social and economic services to the workers in specific, and the Castle Bruce community at large.

The Cooperative is now registered under the Cooperative Ordinance of Dominica, 1948, and has its own rules and bye-laws. In terms of human development, however, and the progressiveness of the approach, this particular experience far outdistances - both in concept and in practice - the conventional cooperative entities registered in Dominica. The motive force behind the Cooperative is summarily stated as 'the need to adjust relationship between man and man', and to maximise community benefit through concerted thought and action in the deployment of the means of production. Such principles must, however, manifest themselves in the solution of the practical, day-to-day problems of life and living in the community, and this is the essential challenge of the group.

Management Structure

The management structure by which the Cooperative proposes to develop its objectives is built around three instruments: a Workers' Assembly, which would correspond in function to the general membership of any organized

group, the Management Committee, or Board, and an executive arm, the Work Groups into which the Workers' Assembly is divided. Emanating from these are a number of specialist or standing committees, serving areas such as Marketing and Education.

The rationale of the structure is to allow or facilitate the widest possible involvement in decision-making by members of the Co-operative, consistent with the requirements of sound management. The Workers' Assembly is responsible for decisions on the broad policy of the Co-operative, which is thrashed out in intensive discussions among all members. In actual practice, it is likely, however, that the theoretical framework for such discussion is formulated or suggested by the group's leaders, who present the options for discussion, as well as guide the course of discussion. Policy decisions agreed by the Workers' Assembly relate to matters such as production alternatives for the farm, and the distribution of income, which are fundamental to the success of the Co-operative. Reports indicate that the Workers' Assembly is by no means a passive body, restricted to rubber-stamping Management Committee decisions. In fact, in the formative stages of the Co-operative, the Workers' Assembly played a very dynamic and purposeful role.

Working from the policies adopted by the Workers' Assembly, the Management Committee defines 'the ways and means of production', allocates the workload and supervises the work groups in the attainment of the production targets. This function, however, is discharged within a framework of regular consultation and communication which is basic to the principles of the Co-operative. The Management Committee is made up of the General Manager, the General Secretary, the Office Manager and all field supervisors.

Methodology

Unlike the survey of the Melville Hall settlement, the assessments made of the Castle Bruce experience are not based on individual responses by members of the Co-operative. A group interview was conducted of 10 members of the Co-operative, randomly selected. This interview was conducted by a member of the consulting team, who recorded the individual responses as they arose, without attempting to solicit corroboration of these responses from other members of the cooperative. Every effort was made to avoid leading questions, or suggestions by the interviewer, but the possibility of bias in some responses cannot be entirely ruled out.

The questionnaire used for the survey of the Melville Hall farmers was also used as a guide by the interviewer in the group interview of the Castle Bruce farmers, but no attempt was made to follow the sequence of the questions as given in the questionnaire. Members of the group were drawn out in spontaneous discussion, with interruptions by the interviewer only for clarification of certain points.

The members of this group interviewed were invited to form part of the group by the Secretary of the Co-operative, who was simply requested to invite a representative sample of the Co-operative's members. It is recognised that the selection of the sample might have implications for the reliability of the responses, in so far as any bias was inadvertently introduced in the selection of the group.

The group was comprised of men and women in different age groups, drawn from different areas of responsibility in the Cooperative, and appeared, to the interviewer, to be fairly representative in these terms.

Bearing in mind the inevitable limitations of a group interview, particularly the caution and reserve which may qualify individual responses, and the influence of highly respected members, the consultants are of the opinion that this survey method is more meaningful in a survey of the members of a cooperative such as the Castle Bruce Cooperative, more so than it would be for a survey of farmers on the Melville Hall settlement. This is so, because of the historical background of the former project. One can expect a greater legitimate identity of views and responses, from a group whose members have shared a common struggle for survival as an entity, and who have been exposed, as a group, to a continuous programme of education as to their aims and objectives, as well as to continuous dialogue as to the means of implementation of these objectives. A strong *esprit de corps* must, inevitably, result from their shared experiences, which could not be evident in a group drawn together for pre-established objectives, by a third party, as in the case of Melville Hall.

It needs also to be reported that the interviewer was no stranger to the members of the group, and had had occasion to hold discussions, and work along with them at other times, on other projects.

A full explanation of the objective of the survey was requested by, and given to the group. It was explained to them that the Castle Bruce experience was being used as a guide, in designing a model for the implementation of a Geneva Development Scheme.

Results of the Survey

Although the views and opinions expressed in the interview were put forward by individuals, it was clear that there was considerable consensus among members of the group, reflecting the cohesiveness of the group referred to earlier.

1. Membership of the Cooperative

The present labour force of the Cooperative is 98 farmers, of whom five are non-members of the Cooperative, although all are residents of the Castle Bruce area. Since the start of the project, 15 new members have been recruited into the Cooperative.

Within the Cooperative itself, there are strong, individualistic personalities, who have criticised the project, but these have not made much of an impact, and have not caused internal frictions which could threaten the breakdown of the Cooperative. According to responses, no members of the Cooperative are interested in individual ownership of land, either freehold or leasehold. All the members are committed to the Cooperative as designed. There are some members, however, who have shown an interest in, and have requested permission to work their own gardens after the allotted time for working on the Cooperative (i.e. after 1.00 p.m.). This request cannot be granted, because the available land does not permit it.

2. Relationship with the Land Management Authority

The land operated by the Cooperative is vested in the Land Management Authority. The rental of the initial 150 acres given to the Cooperative was originally set at \$7,338. Through subsequent negotiations with the Land Management Authority, and because of the hesitancy of the Cooperative to pay what they considered this exorbitant rental, the Authority agreed to reduce the rental to \$5,538 per annum, for the 150 acres. Even this rental is considered by the Cooperative to be unrealistic and exorbitant, and is at the moment one of the Cooperative's most serious causes of dissatisfaction with Government and the Authority. This is accentuated by the fact that, for an additional 50 acres granted to the Cooperative in January 1975, an additional rental of \$3,000 was imposed. Opposition to this rental is unanimous, and the feelings of members on the question of payment of rental run very high. The argument put forward by the Cooperative is that the Government negotiated the purchase of the land from the former owners, and that Government expects to recover from those to whom they had leased the land, or part of it, the funds for the repayment of their debt. They argue that, under the Land Management Authority, much of the estate remains idle, and that the small part under productive use by the Cooperative is expected to generate sufficient reserves to pay for the entire estate. Members are of the opinion that public support was never officially given to the Cooperative, but, on the contrary, it has been frustrated in many tacit ways, from the outset.

3. Educational Development

Members attribute most of the success achieved by the Cooperative in its struggle, to the full involvement of the former workers on the estate, as well as to the educational programme which preceded the actual formation of the Cooperative, and the formal leasing of the land from the Authority. From mid-1972, members were exposed to an intensive educational programme, including seminars, lectures, panel discussions, etc., intended to educate them as to what the Cooperative is, how best it can achieve its ends, what is involved in running a business, etc. From this point of view, they consider the delay in granting the land to them a fortuitous circumstance, since this delay enabled them to build up their knowledge in a wide variety of subjects, which better equipped them for the responsibilities of management.

Members of the Cooperative interviewed felt that, had they obtained the use of the land at an earlier stage, the project might well have failed, as it is a deeper understanding of issues which has kept them together in the face of all adversity.

4. Attitudes to the Cooperative

The group indicated that members of the Cooperative, as well as other villagers not directly involved, were very responsive to the educational programmes. They estimated that some 25 per cent of the people of the Castle Bruce area were either not responsive, or indifferent to the training programmes.

At the commencement of the Cooperative, an attempt was made to involve the whole village in discussions. The view was expressed that some villagers who were against the project, and who did not want to become involved, either did not fully understand (for the most part), or if they understood, were against the idea of a Cooperative because of their own interests.

Some members of the group interviewed described some of the people who were against the project as 'the bourgeois' including in the term small shopholders, civil servants and the like, who had their own interests to support, and independent means of livelihood, and who were, therefore, not particularly interested in being a part of any project that threatened to change their lifestyles.

According to the respondents, in spite of the progress which has been made, there are still many who are opposed to the Cooperative, and who are, in fact, attempting to persuade existing members to break their ties with it. So far, this opposition has not been successful.

5. The Cooperative and the Community

In response to the question as to whether there were any institutions which gave their full support and backing to the project, it was indicated that no institution, as such, came out openly in support of the effort, although, in the case of the Catholic Church, the particular minister of the church at the time gave his full support. On the other hand, there were no groups which came out, as such, as opposing forces to the Cooperative. Opposition came from individuals.

The Cooperative has, from its inception, been concerned about those people who do not support their objectives from within the village community. Since they are all convinced of the justification for what they are attempting to do, they have been very interested in finding out why other people, in similar circumstances, do not understand or accept it.

To attempt to resolve this problem, the Cooperative has mounted evaluation meetings with the villagers, at which the latter are prompted to air all their criticisms and queries, and to stimulate dialogue, with the objective of eliminating the gap being stressed, since it is felt that a divided community would do damage to the principles espoused by the Cooperative, and for which they have struggled so long.

6. Material Benefits

The group explained that some members are somewhat disappointed that the Cooperative has not been able to generate as much, by way of material benefits, as they had anticipated at the outset. These members expect more than the Cooperative can give them at this stage. One of the aims of the continuous programme of education is, therefore, to strengthen the determination of members, particularly those who are not fully convinced of the benefits.

In relation to the question of how the wider community of Castle Bruce benefits from the activities of the Cooperative, members explained that the Cooperative gives other members of the community, as well as themselves, the opportunity to widen their horizons, to develop their knowledge and self-reliance, and generally to become involved in the process of charting their own lives. In material terms, the Cooperative, by producing more of the food that the community requires, is also providing an important service. In addition, the business people or commercial sector benefit directly from the small cash which the Cooperative is generating. The Cooperative, because of the facilities it now commands, can also offer, for instance, transportation to villagers to the town,

airport, etc. The Cooperative intends to give scholarships to attend high school to young people in the village at a later stage.

7. Wages and Working Conditions

Members of the group were vocal in their condemnation of the wage which was paid by the former regime. The wage was considered entirely unsatisfactory, and equated to slave earnings under slave conditions. As an example, one member indicated that he formerly had to husk 1000 coconuts for \$1.44 and this was up to quite recently. Again, in 1968, a worker was paid \$1.68 per 6-hour day. According to the group, the worst aspect of this, was that no worker had the right to query anything. A query of the wage paid was sufficient to ensure instant dismissal. Workers could be fired for something as simple as coming into the Supervisor's office to ask questions. The Supervisor's office was, in fact, out of bounds. The group felt that, even though the current wages allowed by the Cooperative were lower than what they formerly obtained, they would still prefer the benefits under the Cooperative: members get a small wage, but they have the full right and opportunity to enquire, to know, to be educated on all aspects of the business operation, on all aspects of the Cooperative.

8. Main Problems

The group was asked to identify the two or three main problems which they faced. The first problem was identified as ensuring a better understanding among members of the Cooperative. The second problem, related to the first, was seen as the education of the members. The view was expressed that everything else would flow from a better understanding and education.

9. Employment Opportunities

On the question of unemployment, the group reported that there was a large number of unemployed people in the community, particularly youths. The Cooperative itself cannot accommodate more workers on the land available to them at present. However, if they had access to the whole estate, they could support many more people, if not the whole working force of the village. In relation to young people, members felt that it was somewhat paradoxical that many of them did not really want to join the Cooperative, but would willingly and readily respond to the opportunity to work for a guaranteed weekly wage. Members did not, in general, concur with the view that the youths were lazy or indifferent.

10. Alternative Occupations

Members were asked if there was any occupation that they would turn to, if the opportunity arose. The response was that farming and agriculture is the way of life they know, and from which they can benefit. The whole world depends on the farmer. Although members were not clear as to whether they would turn to alternative employment, they confirmed their total dedication to the Cooperative and its work.

Asked whether they would induce their children to leave, or to work in the Cooperative, members' responses were mixed. Some members felt that they would not influence their children, since the children should be free to pursue their own course in life. Others felt that, since they were

committed to the project, they would influence their children to support it, and to work with it. Still others felt that it was their responsibility to give their children all the facts and guidance, but allow them to make their own decisions. One member was strong in his insistence that he would not encourage his children to stay in Dominica all their lives. Others felt it was their responsibility, since they were committed to the Cooperative, to convince their children of what it could do for them, and since the present members had the responsibility to make the Cooperative a progressive enterprise, if they succeeded in this, others would not have to be persuaded, later, to become part of it. The whole question was also related to good leadership of the country. If the leadership was sound and progressive, then talented and capable young people would remain. If the leadership was bad, progressive young people would always want to leave.

Discussion

There has been discussion as to whether the Castle Bruce Cooperative is successful or not. In the consultants' view, it is far too early to determine this question, and perhaps it is premature to raise the question at all. For one thing, it is still an emotive subject, with its advocates and detractors motivated more by considerations related to their interests, prejudices or views of society, than by their knowledge of what is taking place at Castle Bruce, or by objective criteria.

It is, of course, possible to analyse certain developments or trends at Castle Bruce, and see to what extent these are related to the goals and objectives which the Cooperative has established for itself. Against this yardstick, some might be successful and others not, but this may not necessarily reflect the possibilities for the overall success of the project, since success seldom excludes wrong actions. A project's achievements must be judged by reference to its own stated goals or targets. Although divisible into economic and social objectives, both short-term and long-term, the basic goal of the Cooperative has been conceptualized in terms of promoting the total human advancement of its members and the rest of the community, bring-into into their control the means of providing for their own livelihood, and in a wider sense, of shaping their own future within a framework of freedom and equality. Such goals are not generally fully realized overnight, since they involve, for one thing, re-educating the target community and inspiring it with the confidence that people need to assume responsibility for their own development. However, the most important step is the first step, and in their struggle and its outcome, the members of the Castle Bruce Cooperative have taken that step.

The work of the Cooperative, in introducing and maintaining a viable system of production, in establishing markets for its products, in devising the best system of sharing benefits, etc. is just beginning, and it is subject to all the pitfalls and reverses to which all economic ventures, particularly in agriculture, are liable, and which are, indeed, the cause of underdevelopment.