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REVIEW OF THE STATUS AND STRUCTURE OF AGRICULTURE IN TOBAGO

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INTRODUCTION

Although the first Tobagonians - the Caribs - dabbled in some form of formal agriculture, it was the pioneering Europeans: the Dutch, French and English who initiated the agricultural development of Tobago. By the year 1763 Tobago, under occupation of the British was constituted an independent self-governing territory. Because sugar and its by-products (rum and molasses) were in demand on the European market, sugar cultivation quickly achieved prominence on the island. Coupled with the abundance of water, deep fertile soils on both hills and valleys, with African slaves to provide cheap labour, Tobago was producing more sugar per acre than any other West Indian island. Capital inflows were great, the numerous bays around the island were an asset to commerce. Tobago's agricultural economy was the envy of the Eastern Caribbean, attracting waves of immigrants.

Structured on the plantation system, using European technology, European entrepreneurship, African slave labour, Tobago's agricultural economy experienced phenomenal development.

Writers could not deny that these were the golden days of agriculture in Tobago. Ladies and gentlemen you will now understand why there developed the envious statement: "*As rich as a Tobago farmer.*"

Inevitably there was turbulence due to slave rebellions of enormous magnitude, invasions and capture by the French on no less than two occasions between 1781 to 1814.

By the early nineteenth century with the British having regained control, the fear of invasion reduced, and a stable government in power, Tobago's prosperity in agriculture continued. Then important events occurred to change the socio-economic fabric with far-reaching implications:

- (1) Abolition of slavery in 1834 with complete freedom in 1838.

- (2) Removal of protective tariffs from sugar landed in Britain, thereby exposing West Indian and Tobago sugar to competition from foreign sugar grown with slave labour.
- (3) Refusal by producers in Tobago to make timely technological adjustments in the manufacturing system.
- (4) Devastation of the island by the disastrous hurricane of 1847.
- (5) Bankruptcy of the West India Bank - a major financier to the industry.
- (6) The failure of Gillespie and Company of England in 1884.

With the collapse of the capital market, faced with the strong competition from lower cost competitors, and a disastrously low price for the major revenue earner, the inevitable accrued: *Tobago's economy collapsed.*

This event transformed Tobago from a rich envied nation to a pauperized little island that was united with Trinidad in 1889, and made a ward of Trinidad in 1895.

20TH CENTURY TOBAGO - 1900-1962

By the year 1900 Tobago ceased to be an international trader. It no longer exported sugar or cotton to England or lumber to Barbados. As a ward of Trinidad, whatever there was to be traded had to be handled by the business class of Port of Spain.

Sugar was now commercially dead in Tobago and so diversification into other promising ventures was necessary. Those sugar producers with the will either selected cocoa or coconuts.

With the changed socio-economic climate (large bankrupt estates, forced diversification into other production processes, with no cheap or free labour) Tobago's agriculture lost its dynamism. Comparatively, the period 1900 to 1930 was a period of lethargy for most farms. C.R. Ottley writes:

"She was a forgotten island, abandoned by Britain and scorned and derided by her new foster mother, Trinidad."

By the 1930s to 1940s, some state interest was shown in the agricultural sector of Tobago with the establishment of branches of Government Departments - the Division of Agriculture and the Cocoa Board.

With this changed structure of the sector, where there were large farms, small farms and Government agencies interacting, roles had to be prescribed. The following components should be mentioned:

- (1) The Agricultural Division: taken to mean the entire hierarchy of administrators, supervisors, specialist officers, extension officers from which the necessary information, expertise, institutional support could be obtained.
- (2) The Extension Officers: the group which functions to link the agriculture department with the client group - the farmers.
- (3) The Client Group - in which the extension officers attempt to induce changes in attitudes, skills and behaviour. Three sub-groups of the client system are recognisable:
 - (a) the small economic farmers
 - (b) the small commercial and small subsistence farmers, and
 - (c) the part-time hobby farmers and hobby horticulturists.

20TH CENTURY - POST INDEPENDENCE (1960-1980)

This period witnessed the establishment of a service sector for farmers and the development of a subsidy programme.

There was the development of an internal system of marketing for crop and livestock farmers called the Marketing Board, then later the Central Marketing Agency. These agencies guaranteed a market if private arrangements failed. Evidence available tends to suggest that the system in place was not as effective as it ought to be. There was no dynamism in the policy and by the time Hurricane Flora struck in 1963, the problems were magnified.

Through the decade of the 1960's there were no set targets. By the onset of the oil bonanza in 1974-75, the agricultural programme in Tobago was floundering.

Graduates of a farmers' institute who were bustling with energy could not be settled on

promised holdings. Access roads to farms were in a state of disrepair. Farmers could not attract labour because national programmes were pulling them away. The decade of the 1970's ended without achievement of the kind of diversification requisite to our needs.

1980-1990

Status

Agriculture in Tobago is still overwhelmingly a part-time operation. Government continues to be the major employer of the population. A large portion of the island's land resources is still under estate ownership (59% of all land not in forest or lastro). A considerable portion of this land is unutilized, both private and state owned.

Crop production on the large estates is relatively dead. Most of the cropping is mixed and is practised by numerous small farmers who operate on holdings of less than one (1) hectare. Most of the registered farmers who operate either on inherited property or estate may have a problem with security of tenure. Over 4000 of these people have no legal rights to the land they cultivate. Squatting is therefore a very common socio-economic phenomenon.

Livestock production is shared by a few large estates and most farm families. Most of the large estates persevere with beef cattle under coconuts in an extensive system. There is one estate which practices a zero grazing finishing system with great success. At least two of these large estates have some sheep production, but generally small ruminant production is still a small farmer activity in Tobago. Most families in the island have livestock ownership (a cow, sheep, goat, poultry).

Intensive small ruminant production is now quite popular with sheep and goat projects being targeted. Pig production is causing some interest with the establishment of a local processing plant.

With the demise of the pig and dairy farms at Hope and Goldsborough, and what was once a thriving dairy industry, there remains only one private dairy cattle farmer at Goldsborough in addition to the herd at the Government Station, Hope.

Structure

Tobago's agriculture exhibits features of state and private participation. Private activity is limited to:

- (a) - Large estates with beef cattle and sheep
- one large estate with beef cattle is now diversifying into the cut-flower business (Friendship Estate)
- small livestock producers (sheep, goats, pig or poultry)
- numerous small mixed farmers.
- (b) A state sector which comprises the Agriculture Division and provides the following:-
 - livestock stations (Hope, Blenheim, Louis D'or, Charlotteville, Runnemedede)
 - demonstration stations
 - a propagation station
 - administration station
 - extension service
 - veterinary service
 - quarantine service
 - a token crop research service (CARDI)

Service

Agriculture in Tobago does not display the dynamism which one expects. We are not seeing the creation of business units which would be supportive of the tourism thrust. Except for the dynamism and foresight of one large livestock farm, most of the large livestock projects exhibits traditional lethargy. Another large estate has demonstrated some foresight by venturing into horticulture for export.

Farming projects (crop and livestock) are not spawned in either the numbers or the aggressiveness of purpose as is expected.

Trafficking between Trinidad and Tobago still represents an extensive and lucrative business activity. There are identifiable disincentives to development. These are:-

- (1) Deep water facilities are absent. This results in logistical bottlenecks.
- (2) Limited airport facilities which are a prerequisite for shipment of perishables.

- (3) Land tenure and access road problems which reduce the attractiveness of farming as a full-time business are most prevalent.
- (4) There is a serious bird pest problem that is so underplayed, that when put in its correct perspective could rank as the most serious of all disincentives to the majority of potential farmers.
- (5) Praedial larceny is so prevalent that it can be ranked as one of the more serious concerns.
- (6) State officers who are expected to be that strong link between the Agriculture Division and the farming community (especially the numerous small farmers) are not as equipped as they should to be functionally effective. Accessing new material is difficult. Specialist support staff - entomologist, pathologist, engineering, enterprising private sector business people, laboratory service (except veterinary), cartographers, photographers, audio-visual technicians etc. are not readily available.

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