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Historical Approaches To Problem Solving In Agriculture With Reference To Colonial Trinidad And Tobago

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Abstract

The realization that agricultural resource exploitation offered attractive prospects for profits resulted in the movement of numbers of adventurous individuals into the region to establish plantations. Most had neither farming experience nor credentials in agriculture but all shared the desire to make their ventures profitable. Initially, agriculture in the Caribbean was largely private enterprise under the full direction of the individual plantation owners, or managers who were usually attorneys, who ran the operations without state interference or professional assistance. This was the modus operandi until the second half of the 19th century when the most notable change discernible in the practice of agriculture in the Caribbean was a growing expectation of and dependence on government assistance of various kinds which heralded a period of state involvement in the agriculture of the region.

This paper examines the historical tradition of problem solving manifested in the agriculture of the region with reference to developments in the colony of Trinidad and Tobago during the colonial era. The paper identifies the earliest forms of government assistance to agriculture and the kinds of requests for assistance and the levels of response from both the imperial and colonial government. The paper then discusses the problems that were identified in the colony's agriculture and the methods used to deal with them. Central to this discussion is an examination of the reports of the various commissions of enquiry which consistently identified increased diversification, more scientific applications to agriculture, disease control and more education and training for the labour force. The paper argues that these were among the main factors which stimulated the development of extension services as a state responsibility in the colony's agriculture and determined the nature of its development and its efficacy up to the end of the colonial period.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Sugar Revolution of the 17th century, sugar became synonymous with agriculture in the Caribbean. Lured by the high profits its cultivation offered and the opportunities for enhanced social and political position, European migrants flocked to the region in their numbers. As sugar cultivation spread over the region, there occurred a rapid alienation of extensive acreages of land to private individuals leaving only the more mountainous and inaccessible land as well as swampy and otherwise unsuitable land, out of the grasp of sugar cultivation. The result was that sugar cultivation determined the land use patterns of the region for land was either sugar estate, and therefore classified as productive land, or unproductive waste land and forests. Once established, the administration of estates was a private matter. Land - owners made decisions with respect to the operations of their estates but this frequently involved decision making with respect to non - estate land as well. Generally, the government was expected to acquiesce to the wishes of the planting element for nothing was to be allowed to stand in the way of sugar cultivation, expansion and profit making. These came to be identified with 'development.' Planter influence on government decision -making was assisted by the fact that this group came to dominate the machinery of the colonial governments and virtually ran these colonial administrations to facilitate their own interests. There was thus a blurring of the private and public domains as sugar

plantation operation and colonial government administration remained in the hands of the same individuals.

Control of the apparatus of government permitted the planting element to implement policies to resolve its problems. Labour issues, both supply and control, were regulated by legislation. Trade became a state organised mechanism and trading regulations generally facilitated the importation of items desired by the planting community and of course, the export of the main staple. Central to this operation was the protection that regional sugar enjoyed on the market of the metropolitan government. With an assured market and control of the reins of the colonial government, it was assumed that problem solving mechanisms lay within the grasp of the plantation owners and could be achieved by legislation.

Agricultural decision making was an activity carried out by individuals who had invested in plantations but who were not themselves either trained or in some instances, particularly interested in agriculture per se. Their participation was sometimes the result of the quest for a new life, the promise of quick riches or enforced by transportation from Europe. Though there were some with an avid interest in gardening,¹ Caribbean agriculture did not begin with a corpus of trained or experienced agriculturists. It is significant to note that many estate owners did not even reside in the region for long periods of time, preferring to leave the operation of their estates to managers, generally attorneys, who administered multiple properties, and frequently hired a range of their own

services to the estates.² During the era of high profits, this practice translated into the development of a top heavy operation in which the opportunity to make money was seized at every level. During the 19th century a number of factors resulted in the erosion of the high profit earning levels of sugar cultivation. Planters turned to the machinery of government for assistance but as the century wore on it became clear that the planting community and the imperial government were sometimes at odds as to the direction in which Caribbean agriculture should be guided. Despite this development, the prevailing notion within the planting community was that sugar cultivation was a fixture of Caribbean agriculture and the cultivation of all other crops must be viewed as a secondary activity. It was also assumed that the government would maintain the traditional pattern of assistance to this industry.

The 19th century was a period in which there were increased demands placed on government for assistance to the sugar industry. There was also an expectation, on the part of the more liberal minded in the society, that government would assist the emerging peasant sector. All problems which developed in the sphere of agriculture, were therefore viewed against this backdrop of expected government assistance. Given the impact of these traditional developments on the evolution of modern day agriculture in the region, it is necessary to examine the way this process developed if only to be able to steer the direction of modern Caribbean agriculture away from the traditional impediments to efficiency and forge new, more dynamic approaches to agricultural development.

This study is an attempt to focus attention on these historical factors. It aims to show that the traditional approach to problem solving in agriculture led to (1) a dependence on government assistance by agricultural practitioners and (2) to a focus on education by government. This latter focus resulted in the emergence of agricultural extension services which developed with a heavy burden of responsibility to save Caribbean agriculture. The imperial government's response to problem situations in the colonies typically included the establishment of commissions of inquiry to investigate, report and recommend solutions. In this study, focus is placed on two of these commissions, the Norman Commission of 1897 and the Moyne Commission of 1938. These are examined to assess their impact on the development of agriculture in the region. The paper concludes that the pattern for agricultural problem solving was set by the colonial experience which established commissions of inquiry as the first recourse in the process. These commissions articulated the idea that the solution to the problems of agriculture lay in the development of effective means of educating farmers, especially small farmers, in the techniques of modern scientific farming. The result was a rapid application of agricultural extension programmes in Trinidad and Tobago to foster agricultural education as the salvation for the sector, in spite of which the agricultural sector remained problem ridden. These developments in agriculture must be seen against the background of the general historical occurrence of the era, to which the discussion now turns.

BRIEF HISTORY OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Tobago

Tobago became a plantation colony during the 18th century after a long existence as a no man's land when the European powers competed for full possession of the island.³ Given its size and physical features, the opportunities for extensive sugar plantation operations were limited. When the island became firmly established as a British possession at the beginning of the 19th century, the plantation system faced economic decline.⁴ Planters there appealed to the government for assistance during periods of natural disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes as well as for assistance to stall the decline process. After Emancipation, their requests for East Indian immigrants to deal with their labour problems were rejected by the British government.⁵ They were allocated liberated Africans in 1851 and 1862⁶ but the numbers of these immigrants were not adequate to the desires of the planters who ultimately sought refuge in the metairie system.⁷ The history of the island throughout the 19th century is the story of the decline and final denouement of the sugar industry. As the sugar industry declined, land came into the hands of small land owners whose peasant agriculture came to dominate the agricultural landscape of the island early in the 20th century.⁸ At this time too, cocoa cultivation was introduced into the island with the assistance of immigrants from Grenada.⁹ Teaching the proper methods of cultivation, harvesting and preparation was important for the success of this crop.

The unification of Trinidad and Tobago in 1889, and more closely in 1898, brought Tobago under the control of the Department of Agriculture of the colony of Trinidad and Tobago. The Tobago sugar industry was totally dead by the beginning of the 20th century and the island remained essentially a producer of cocoa and subsistence crops with a small plantation sector producing coconuts. Agriculture in the island faced severe problems after the devastation of Hurricane Flora in 1963. The agricultural sector never fully recovered from this visitation and the island subsequently became heavily dependent on the government services for employment and on imported food.

Trinidad

The early experience of Spanish administration of Trinidad was that of a "bankrupt" colonialism.¹⁰ Spain's focus remained on those territories with mineral resources and it was only towards the end of the Spanish era that there was an attempt to exploit the agricultural resources of the colony. Agriculture was encouraged by the Cedula of Population (1783) which offered land grants to those immigrants from French territories who were desirous of migrating to Trinidad and who had the capacity to cultivate the land. Land grants were given on the basis of size of family and available labour force. Thirty acres of land were given for each white member of family and 15 acres for each enslaved person that was brought to the island. Non -whites were given a half of the white allocation.¹¹ The changed approach meant that it was the government which provided the first stimulus to export-oriented agriculture in Trinidad. Not

only did the Spanish authorities make generous provisions of land *pro bono*, they also instituted a number of other regulations, which included protected trade, to facilitate the operations of the new landowners.¹² Once established, the plantation owners took full control of the administration of their estates making their voices heard in those matters of state which affected their operations. As a result, there was a rapid transformation of the economy of the island which quickly attained a huge trade surplus and was on the way to becoming a prosperous agricultural colony.¹³

In 1797 the island became a British possession and further agricultural growth occurred. While Trinidad enjoyed a protected market for its produce, the labour supply was affected by the British policies of Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1806 and 1807 and Slave Emancipation in 1838. Seeking to convince the British government that the colony's agriculture was negatively affected by these policies, they clamoured for special treatment as a new colony and when that failed, they argued that their operations were jeopardized by labour shortage.¹⁴ The situation was aggravated when there were further imperial changes in the form of the Sugar Equilisation Act of 1846, which ended the protection that British colonial trade had hitherto enjoyed.

Rising to a crescendo, the chorus of protest reverberated in both the colony and the metropolitan centre prodding a parliamentary debate in London and a later decision to alleviate the situation in the British West Indies. There appeared to be some conviction that the colony was in distress and that labour was one of the chief components of the problem. The second

part of the 19th century brought increased competition to cane sugar from the beet sugar producers in Europe. This triggered further clamour from the planting community for government assistance with exaggerated arguments of post emancipation labour trauma which led to increased costs of production causing estates to be placed in danger of going bankrupt.¹⁵ There were pleas to the British government to intervene to bring the bounty system to an end and to adjust the trade regulations to facilitate sugar produced by free labour in the British West Indies. Harping on the shortage of labour issue, Trinidad planters were able to convince the British government that theirs was a *bona fide* case of scarcity as the formerly enslaved population were said to have displayed an abhorrence for agriculture and were lazy and negligent.¹⁶ They obtained support for the introduction of subsidised schemes of East Indian immigrants as indentured workers on the estates. Towards the end of the century the competition from beet sugar intensified and the requests for labourers under the scheme increased.¹⁷ Both the British and colonial governments approved the increased allocation.

A clear pattern was evident. Estate owners assumed full responsibility for their operations during periods of high profit levels. At these times, agriculture was seen as a private business enterprise. But in periods of distress there were two significant developments. Firstly, whatever the problem faced by planters in the operations of their estates, the solutions they applied focused on labour. Secondly, there were increased instances of planter requests for government assistance from the second half of the 19th

century. These loud appeals for assistance established the element of government's responsibility to the agricultural sector thus suggesting that it was a part of the public domain. The response would always result in an investigative team being established and some alleviative measures implemented as was recommended. When severe crisis hit the British West Indian sugar industry in the 1880s and 1890s, cries of desperation from the planters of the region stimulated the British government to send out the Norman Commission

THE NORMAN COMMISSION

The Norman Commission was established to inquire and report on the condition and prospects of the West Indian colonies and to suggest measures to restore and maintain their prosperity.¹⁸ This investigation was prompted by the depressed condition of the sugar market due to intense competition from bounty fed beet sugar. The Commission visited the territories between January and April 1897 and hailed Tobago as an example of "the serious character of the economic and administrative problem that must arise in the West Indies... if there is a collapse of the sugar industry."¹⁹ These were decreased exports, migration of labour, and a shortfall of revenue to maintain the necessary government expenditure. As a result the Commission sought to restore the sugar industry to profitable levels, as this was seen as the measure that "would completely avert the dangers" that threatened the industry and substitute other agricultural industries for the cultivation of

sugar as a palliative in the event of the collapse of sugar.²⁰

Arguing that should sugar crash, it would be impossible to find a suitable replacement, there was "no choice but to consider how means can be found to enable the mass of the population to support themselves in other ways than as labourers on estates."²¹ The Commission recommended settlement of labourers on the land as small proprietors but noted two drawbacks of peasant proprietors " ...their want of knowledge and care in cultivation, and the habit of what is called praedial larceny."²² Generally they were ignorant of the best means of cultivation of any other crop and are not aware of whether the crop is best suited to the climate and soil types or better suited to another crop. This Commission saw as urgent, the need to put agriculture on sound scientific footing and as a result it recommended the establishment of a special department to deal with all questions connected to economic botany and the growth of plants in tropical countries which would embrace the existing Botanic Gardens and the new ones it also recommended.²³

The Botanical department in Trinidad was to devote more resources to experimental cultivation of economic plants and to acquire improved varieties. It should comprise a branch for the teaching of tropical agriculture" and form the centre from which teachers should be sent to give practical lessons in the cultivation of tropical plants and the selection of suitable locations for growing them"²⁴ and an Imperial Department of Agriculture was established.²⁵ The Commission supported diversification of Caribbean agriculture and gave particular

support to peasant agriculture as a measure to ease the distress in the communities from falling sugar prices.

The Central Agricultural Board of Trinidad moved with alacrity to implement some of the recommendations. These fitted into some of its own initiatives for an Education committee which it established in 1892, had recommended the need to create a class of agriculturists not mere planters" who were exposed to Botany and Chemistry.²⁶ Thus agriculture became added to the list of subjects offered as a part of the Teachers' certificate for it was agreed that the trust to agricultural education should begin at the elementary school.²⁷

The Imperial Department of Agriculture (IDA) was established to deal with the issue through a two- pronged programme. First, it sought to make agriculture popular since it was felt that there was a need to dispose the minds of the population more favourably to agriculture to get rid of the existing "distaste" and "to get the children to take to the soil and show the dignity and true benefits of agriculture."²⁸ This plan involved using school gardens to demonstrate proper agricultural husbandry.²⁹

The second segment of the programme was agriculture for profit to be taught at the secondary schools and as an outreach programme which targeted those employed in the field through, correspondence and a cadetship system, as well as a scheme for assisting planters to become more efficient and scientific. The IDA published a journal and circulated frequent information to the planting community.

In 1908 a Department of Agriculture was established in Trinidad because the IDA was overburdened. A part of its mission was

to make agriculture profitable and popular.³⁰ The Department extended the agricultural programmes which were already in operation making the subject compulsory for all boys at elementary school and Forms 3 to 6 at secondary school. There was a great felt need to educate the farmer in the field hence the programme of education embraced farmers and farm workers to make them effective and efficient workers. Since such training could not be allowed to interfere with the work routine, it was offered in the field. Farmer education was handled by officers called agricultural instructors and agricultural advisers.

One of the earliest areas of need for this type of instruction was seen in the attempt to introduce cocoa cultivation in Tobago. A cocoa instructor was appointed on the island in 1895 and agricultural instructors more generally in the colony in 1899.³¹ Agricultural instructors were used to teach proper methods of husbandry and modern methods. Two factors made these instructors necessary. First the need for more general application of scientific techniques to agriculture was evident in the colony, This was stressed by the Report of the Norman Commission which lamented the continued use of inefficient, traditional methods and the lack of scientific applications by some in the region. But in addition, the incidence of plant diseases and pests made agricultural instruction mandatory. Since these diseases were not well understood and there were fears that they would be transported from one estate to the other by the labourers, it was therefore necessary for the workers to be made aware of the symptoms of diseased plants and how to deal with them. The demand for the services of the instructors

therefore increased as the 20th century progressed.

Agricultural advisers were appointed to supervise courses in primary schools, to advise farmers, to conduct lectures and courses and to assist the formation of voluntary organisations and cooperatives.³² Agricultural advisers were trained at ICTA through its diploma programme.³³ When the land settlement schemes were established it was the responsibility of the advisers to supervise the conduct of agriculture therein.³⁴ The advisers were supervised by agricultural officers. With these appointments it was felt that the mechanism was in place to effect the recommendations of the Norman Commission with its emphasis on creating modern efficient farming operations through agriculture which would be transformed into a noble and desirable profession.

One of the best means to attest the level of success of this new trust is to consider the comments on the state of agriculture in the colony made by another commission of Inquiry which was established later.

It must be noted however that sugar planters were not the only ones to appeal to government for assistance in times of distress. Cocoa cultivation spread rapidly in Trinidad from the 1870s and this industry came to dominate the economy-if only for a brief period- by the early years of the 20th century. The phenomenal growth of this industry is related to the great demand for cocoa during the era of the growth of the confectionary industry and the fashionable English tea habit. The golden age of cocoa was brought to a dramatic halt when the cocoa culture was introduced into West Africa, which came to outstrip Trinidad as

the main supplier on the world market. The Trinidad cocoa industry crashed causing distress in the agricultural sector as cocoa cultivators became unemployed and cocoa districts became veritable ghost towns where the younger population migrated to the urban areas in search of alternative employment.³⁵ Planters, some of them also sugar planters or members of sugar planting families, appealed to government who provided relief in the form of a subsidy, primarily to large estate owners. Thus a clear pattern was established. Whatever the distress, the onus was on government to assist what would otherwise be a private undertaking.

It must also be indicated that there was little anxiety, on the part of the colonial government in Trinidad to implement the recommendations with respect to agricultural diversification and the disbursement of crown lands to labourers. Large plantation owners remained obstinate in their opposition to new crops standing firm in the belief that all resources of government should be injected into the sugar industry to put it firmly back on its feet. There was total opposition by planters to the idea of giving increased access to small farmers to crown land.³⁶ This, they felt would enhance the independence of this group and reduce the pool of cheap labour available to the plantations. To them the peasant sector was a potential competitor which did not deserve government assistance. It was therefore the responsibility of the agricultural instructors and advisors to encourage new cultivation among the peasant class as the planting community was largely opposed to it. The vista for their success in agricultural

diversification was limited even before they started.

THE MOYNE COMMISSION

The Moyne Commission was established by the imperial government in response to the dangerous simultaneous outbursts in the region in the 1930s. The Commission reported in 1938 but withheld publication of the report because the imperial government was embarrassed by its frank and damning nature. The Commission reported that agriculture in the region displayed a level that was "low in technical knowledge, business organization and managerial efficiency: Systematic agriculture, by which it is meant mixed farming on a plan suited to the inherent circumstances of the area is unknown."³⁶ The Commission noted that the attitude of the West Indian people towards agriculture was problematic. It found that the level of technical knowledge was low and a narrow outlook was typical of many sections of the agricultural community. It stated that better education would help to some extent "but it will be more difficult to overcome the noticeable lack of self help which has been fostered in part, by the frequency and form of assistance from government by way of provision of relief from hurricane damage or subsidy for certain crops [and a] reluctance to embark into any novel agricultural enterprise."³⁷ The Commission also commented on what it saw as the poor standard of production.³⁸ Noting that the Agricultural Departments were established for the triple purposes of investigation, instruction and administration, the report was critical of their tendency to help estates rather than peasants and to neglect food

crops and focus on export crops.³⁹ Describing the school gardens programme as disappointing, the holding of well structured agricultural shows was urged,⁴⁰ and the Commission strongly recommended the articulation of a clear agricultural policy to guide the activities of all those employed in the sector. Further, the Commission recommended that there should be greater collaboration between the departments of education and agriculture as was done in Guyana.⁴¹ It was the view of the commissioners that government assistance to particular agricultural industries ought to facilitate rehabilitation rather than relief. On this issue direct reference was made to the cocoa industry of Trinidad and Tobago which received a relief subsidy from government.⁴²

The criticisms raised in the Moyne Commission Report suggest that the programme of agricultural education (or extension) had not proved successful by 1938. Though the use of the instructors was widespread, the desired changes in the agricultural sector had not been effected. There are several explanations for this development. In the first instance, one of the primary aims of the programme was to make agriculture popular and desirable as a profession. There are two issues to be considered here. Among the labouring population plantation labour was hated and no amount of education could change that. Agricultural labour on their own plots or those of their friends and relatives as well as on rented land was accepted as a noble activity. Secondly, it sought to enhance the skills of the labouring class to make them efficient workers but they would remain workers. This was contrary to the ambitions of the workers themselves and therefore

hardly likely to be attainable. Not surprisingly, there was intense opposition to the introduction of agriculture as a subject in both the primary and secondary schools. If it was the intent to use agricultural education to maintain the class divisions of society then it was destined to fail. The second factor worth noting is that agricultural education provided a new opportunity for upward mobility in the society. Many of those trained in the DICTA programme used it to move on to other fields. Teachers moved into agriculture and then on to other professions notably Veterinary science, as the DICTA certificate provided university matriculation and also enabled some to access scholarships to study abroad. This was an important window of opportunity in a society of limited opportunities for higher education. Thirdly it assumed that workers were old fashioned and ignorant but were they? One Agricultural instructor noted the irony of being sent as a young officer out of ICTA to work among small farmers in the country. He found the farmers to be very knowledgeable about the soil and the environment in which they worked and had a good sense of planting methods. For him working with them was a learning experience and for the most part his text book knowledge had to be shunted into the background.⁴³

World Wars I and II provided an enhanced opportunity for agricultural extension work. Normal plantation activity had to be reduced as a part of the war effort and food cultivation was encouraged. Farmers were taught methods of cultivation, storing and preparation of these crops especially during the crisis periods of World War II when trade disruption was common.

Having succeeded in increasing the food production levels of the colony, an agricultural policy was enunciated for the colony in 1943.⁴⁴ Officials vowed to maintain wartime food production levels by encouraging food production and making land more accessible to small farmers. Unfortunately at the end of the war there was a return to normal import export agriculture and the food policy fell into abeyance. This was the situation right through to independence. However the process of training continued and the facilities for training extension officers were increased at Centeno and then later at the University of the West Indies. Despite this, agriculture remained a problem – ridden sector in which government became saddled with the distress calls of the larger undertakings. It had become fully established that unprofitable agricultural enterprise was the government's domain and that when the sector faced distress, government's assistance was expected.

CONCLUSION

From the inception of commercial agriculture in the region, agriculturists faced a number of problems. Initially, government saw it necessary to stimulate agricultural production and so became involved in facilitating the sector through the provision of land grants and favourable trade regulations. Government was also the first recourse for assistance during natural disasters. But a pattern of appeal to government for assistance during bad economic times became manifest in the relations between the plantation sector and the governments. Planters came to demand and to expect

government assistance whenever the request was made. It became convenient for the planting community to assume that all their problems would be resolved by increasing their labour supply to reduce the costs of labour. In their appeal for government assistance, they stressed their economic plight and urged government assistance in the form of subsidised schemes for the importation of labour. The response of the imperial government was the establishment of commissions of inquiry which identified the problem of the colony as a preponderance of uneducated inefficient labourers and the need for more diversified and scientific agriculture. To achieve this, the recommendation was to make enhanced provisions for agricultural education which would teach new techniques of cultivation, the methods of cultivation of new crops and scientific applications to agriculture to generate a more efficient and productive agricultural sector. The strategy was centred around agricultural education with a critical role for the agricultural instructor or adviser.

Although there was never any attempt to implement any of the reports comprehensively, the use of agricultural instructors became wide spread. The planting community was firmly opposed to the introduction of new crops and to assistance to the peasant sector. While they did not necessarily fully support agricultural education for the labourers, they did not oppose it simply because other factors made it beneficial to them to do so. Primarily, it was the incidence of pests and diseases in plantation agriculture which ensured planter support for this measure and it was believed labourers moving from one estate to another could assist the spread of disease.

Education for them would provide a prophylactic device.

There was great expectation from the system of agricultural instruction but the results were not as anticipated. There was opposition to agriculture as a subject in the schools by parents at all levels of the society. The programme of instruction was based on the intent to make agriculture an appealing profession and maintain the existing class divisions. The ambitions of workers militated against the success of such a measure making it unachievable. The fact is that workers were not opposed to agriculture per se but there was disgust with plantation agriculture and especially the quality of planter/worker relations, which precluded any desire by workers to return to full time estate labour. Reference to the nature of Trinidad society is pertinent here for this was the age when there was a determination to break down the existing rigid social barriers. It was a period of a quest by workers, for new opportunities. While the system assumed that workers were ignorant for some Instructors working among the peasants was a learning experience. Faced with planter opposition to the introduction of new crops, Instructors had to attempt to attain diversification by working with the peasant sector which reduced the possibility of the successful achievement of this objective. While much was expected of the system of agricultural instruction, the programme was developed within a framework of social limitations. The position of agricultural instructor was itself a window of opportunity offering the possibility of tertiary education through entry qualifications and sometimes scholarships and social mobility for the officer himself.

The instructor therefore typified the wider social reality. Agricultural instruction came to be extended into agricultural extension programmes but it did not erase many of the problems faced by the agricultural sector in Trinidad and Tobago during the colonial era.

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