

**GROWING OUT OF POVERTY – A STRATEGIC DIRECTION FOR
OUR AGRICULTURE IN ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**

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INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is the mainstay in the economy of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and in a majority of the other Caribbean Islands. Agriculture contributes to food security, occupation and income for rural communities, through savings generated by import substitution and direct earnings of foreign exchange.

Export led Agriculture offers opportunity for the poor rural farm families to grow out of poverty. For the poor to benefit from export led agriculture strategy, they must be empowered and be given an opportunity to be active participants. Strategies that simply reflect good intentions of reducing poverty and helping the poor are just empty words and written document for the archives.

THE SETTING– ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES (SVG)

The small island state of St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) is plagued with high unemployment estimated between 15 - 25%. Per capital Gross National Product is around \$700. Unemployment is highest amongst the more volatile age group 16 – 30 years old with major problems such as drug abuse and HIV are rampant amongst this group.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) is among the least developed of the Eastern Caribbean states. St. Vincent and the Grenadines as part of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and larger Caribbean Community (CARICOM) gives the potential for growth and improved standards of living. This will only materialize if the proper infrastructure, policies and support mechanism are put in place to stimulate increased production and growth in the export sector.

THE ST. VINCENT & THE GRENADINES AGRICULTURE SECTOR

St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) economy is largely based on agriculture with the sector accounting for as much as 21% of GDP in 1977. However, as trade preferences have been gradually eliminated for mono-crops like sugar and banana, there has been a steady decline in the sector from 17% of GDP in 1982 to 9.91% of GDP in 2004. Nevertheless, the sector still accounts for an estimated 25% of the island's export earnings.

One-third of the total land area in St. Vincent and the Grenadines is classified as agriculture land of which 22% is cultivated. Most of the farms (78%) are less than five acres in size. The remaining 22%, however, account for around three-fourths of the arable land. In other words, most of the farmers in St. Vincent are small farmers, but the majority of agricultural land is relatively concentrated in private or governmental estates. Of the five government estates, two are undergoing a redistribution and settlement scheme, with 30-year lease terms.

By far the largest crop both in terms of production volume and foreign exchange earnings is bananas. This has been the dominant crop for almost twenty years with export total domestic export value. Virtually all the crop is sold on the British market under a preferential marketing agreement, which has been eroded constantly and created a drastic decrease in banana production and losing hundreds of acres of lands. In 1983, St. Vincent lost its principal arrowroot market to the US due to a combination of more competitive prices for Brazil arrowroot and the use of cheaper alternative starches by previous users. As a result, 95% of St. Vincent's 182 crops remained unsold. The production of coconuts, another export crop had also decreased due primarily to the combined effects of the natural disasters and disease infestations but appeared to be increasing again in 1982.

During the past ten years there has been increased emphasis in St. Vincent on the production of ground provisions, fruits and vegetables in an effort to decrease the food import bill. Although the annual production of most of the vegetables and root crops are sufficient for domestic needs, the distribution throughout the year was poor. Grown primarily by the small far holders, the food crops are typically produced with herbicides, insecticides or organic fertilizers. While some farmers use chemical fertilizer often obtained through the Banana Association, the fertilizers are usually not optimal for

vegetable or root crop production. Harvesting of the crops is done primarily through family labour although both family and hired labour is often used for planting, weeding and tillage chores.

Sweet potatoes, yams, dasheen, tannias, eddoes, and ginger are the most important root crops grown. Sweet potatoes are probably grown by more farmers than any other crop. Many of the potatoes are exported to Trinidad. Ginger is a fairly recent export crop, which like many of the crops is struggling to balance production with markets. In a recent year, about half of the ginger crop was reported to be not harvested because of marketing problems.

The main vegetables grown in St. Vincent include cabbage, cauliflower, melon, pumpkins, cucumbers, lettuce, eggplant, tomatoes, peppers, beans, and okra. A high demand for such vegetables exists both locally and regionally but their production is highly seasonal.

A variety of market outlets are used by the farmers of St. Vincent. Some crops are sold directly to the consumers, either at the farm or at the central market. Other market outlets include hucksters and traffickers who purchase crops from the farmers for domestic and regional resale; the National Properties, statutory government agency, ECTAD, farmer based organisations and producer associations (banana and arrowroot).

An estimated 40% of our labour force depends directly or indirectly on the Agriculture Sector of which this Sector has been on the decline. In SVG, this sector is counted for 90% of small farms and mixed crop cultivation. Major constraints to the development of this sector includes:

1. Limited access to Markets at all levels, National, Regional and International
2. High cost of production and high risks
3. Inadequacy of incentives and credit system
4. Inadequacy of the technology
5. Absent of adequate market information systems and well-organized trading companies.

Despite its decline the agriculture sector remains a major contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and remains one of the largest foreign exchange earners in the economy. While many of our food, crops and livestock products can be expanded to meet a larger share of domestic and regional markets, this by pass for more readily available imports from outside our region.

POLICY CONSTRAINTS

One serious constraint that exists at the National policy level is inadequate incentives for farmers to expand and improve production. This is reflected in:

1. Uncertain land tenure arrangement
2. Poor rural infrastructure i.e. roads, communication etc
3. Inefficient delivery of public sector services to the rural areas
4. Low priority given to agriculture by the National policy makers as evidenced by budget allocation
5. Idle and underutilized lands
6. High partisan political influence in land distribution and other support to small farmers

SUCCESSFUL APPROACHES TO AGRICULTURE DEVELOPMENT

I can spend the time talking about the problems but I will like to focus on some positive practical efforts and current approaches to improve the agriculture climate for small farmers and to improve the quality of life for our poor rural farm families and maybe the poor in general.

GOVERNMENT

The Government of SVG has embarked on a number of agriculture initiatives to reduce the effects of eroding trade preferences in the global market.

One of the most successful agricultural initiatives thus far have been the income tax concessions to farmers. This has gone a long way of increasing incomes of small farm holders.

The Government of SVG has a three-year diversification project funded by the European Union. This project which is to help farmers be better business farmers is run in an extremely un-business-like manner to the extent that the implementation and distribution process. Thus far, the project had so little impact due to the cumbersome bureaucratic processes that exist within the Government. This has greatly compromised the full impact of this three-year effort.

The Government of SVG has also embarked on the registration of idle lands with the intention of setting up a land bank targeting young farmers. This has a nice ring to it but it will succeed only if the political partisan element can be controlled in its implementation.

FAIR-TRADE ORGANISATIONS

Fair-trade banana farmers are now playing a focus role in marketing of banana to the EU market. Ordinary farmers leaders are now being consulted to take part in the decision making process in the marketing of bananas. A lot still need to be done to cement this gain, which was fought by small banana farmers throughout their organisations such as the Windward Island Farmers Association (WINFA).

THE ECTAD APPROACH

Another approach by a farmer-based organisation is the ECTAD Approach. The Eastern Caribbean Trading Agriculture and Development Organisation (ECTAD) is focused on linking our agriculture to Health, Tourism, Agro-processing, Domestic and overseas markets and the environment. It has a network of village groups spread over 18 villages throughout the country. The focus is on core activities operation at the village level with focus on training in strategic areas that will build capacity at the village level. With assistance for training from our partnership arrangement with the Technical Centre for Agriculture and Rural Cooperation (CTA) located in The Netherlands and technical support from the Caribbean Agriculture Research and Development Organisation (CARDI), the Inter American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), and the Ministry of Agriculture.

We have trained over 500 farmers leaders in areas such as post-harvest management, market planning and management, production planning and management, packing, handing and grading of farm products meeting International standards, good agriculture practices, group management, leadership, planning and group dynamics.

ECTAD is a non-profit, non-governmental farmer base rural development organisation launched and registered in 1995. Its Mission is to improve the quality of life for rural farm families throughout St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the Caribbean.

ECTAD has over 60 volunteer coordinators and over 1000 members/project participants covering over 18 villages. Please note that paid activities are only on a task consultancy basis.

ECTAD approaches to counter some of the negative in our Production and marketing – what we are doing now:

1. Improve Agronomic practices,
2. Development of contractual arrangement with the final buyer,
3. Specialization in crops that we have a comparative advantage in, and
4. Consolidation of product collection

THE ECTAD SELF SUSTAINABILITY APPROACH

Over the last four (4) years, ECTAD has been working with its members to build and test a new ideological approach that will remove the shackles of dependency for Rural and Agricultural Organisations on donor agencies and governments by a large segment.

ECTAD approach is to build and strengthen local capacity at the village level so that farm families can become more independent and stronger together as a community; working together, producing together and marketing together, thereby keeping agriculture alive for generations to come while developing their rural communities. With such responsibilities and tasks entrusted to these village groups, they can depend upon themselves for finance, by creating projects thus providing employment to enhance the lives of their families and community. Such projects include fund raising activities, clean-up campaigns, Health awareness programmes, etc.

ECTAD does not burden itself with paid staff. All activities finance themselves. One such activity would be marketing. This new market pays for itself; therefore, it is of major importance to the organisation and most persons in the rural areas are dependant upon it as it creates employment for the unemployed.

When ECTAD receives grants for projects, the project pays for itself. Persons are hired as consultants to do a task, when the project is finished and all is accomplished, there will be left no overhead costs to cover.

Once this methodology of self help and self sustainability is practiced by ECTAD and is sufficiently tested and successful it can serve as the basis for the new ideological approach that will remove the shackles of dependency that plague most organisations in the Caribbean and will promote and increase the development in the region.

Through training of ECTAD's core village leaders and farmers leaders, ECTAD have marketed over two million pounds of produce locally, regionally and internationally over the past two years without any funding from government or donor agencies. Presently, ECTAD is marketing Dasheen, Sweet Potatoes and Eddoes, Yams, Tannia, Ginger on a weekly basis to the UK, Martinique and other Caribbean Countries.

This approach links the farmers directly into the market casting out most of the middle persons, for example, we were able to increase farm gate prices of crops exported by 100% in the case of dasheen and yams and over 70% in the other crops without increasing our prices to our buyers.

ECTAD has entered into a very successful partnership with the Technical Centre for Agriculture and Rural Cooperation (CTA) for over three (3) years. CTA has been assisting ECTAD with trainings and technical assistance in ICM Skills to enhance Group Development, Management and Leadership, ICM Skills to enhance Good Agriculture Practices GAP and ICM Skills to enhance Marketing and Management. Through these series of training sessions and information materials, farmers and the village persons involved in production and marketing are gaining enhanced skills. This will furthermore create an environment that will make rural areas more productive, thus keeping people from migrating to city areas.

Often times in the past, agriculture developers were in control from main city areas with farmers having to travel to city to do their agribusiness. It is great to see village groups working together, packaging, selecting, grading, etc. They create local markets and local employment, and they bring revenue to local rural village communities.

It has been noted that the community groups involved directly in marketing tend to be stronger, and we believe that the action programmes such as marketing, planning and managing export, product, pricing, harvesting techniques to assist post harvest loss, pack house management and operation, grading and selecting, stocktaking and storage, proper transportation, market information and intelligence, linking of farm gate prices to production costs and other rural projects, serve to further strengthen the groups capacity to supply local, regional and international markets.

ECTAD - Main fields of activities:

1. Training (linking with over 800 farmers throughout 18 villages),
2. Production Planning,
3. Group Leadership and Development
4. Good Agriculture Practices
5. Marketing (Local, Regional and International),
6. Information and Communication:
 - (Production and Development of Manual, Greenlight Newsletter, Good Agriculture Practices manual, Production Planning manual),
 - Content Development for Rural Radio
7. Technical Support for local cooperation and regional integration of farmers' groups.
8. Youth and Women Development
9. General rural development (village clean-ups, disaster preparation, HIV awareness activities etc).

These activities are carried out by village groups based on their needs.

THE CARIBBEAN FARMERS NETWORK (CAFAN)

In 2006, ECTAD was designated the Secretariat and Project Coordinator for Caribbean Farmers Network (CaFAN) charged with the responsibility of coordination, development and implementation of projects and programmes for this network. ECTAD which is a registered non-profit farmers rural organisation is also a funding member of CaFAN and is responsible for its' secretarial/project coordination. ECTAD has carried out over four national partnership projects with the Centre for Agriculture and Rural Cooperation (CTA) including CTA's recent Regional Caribbean Partnership Conference in November 2005.

The Caribbean Farmers and NGO Network (CaFANN) – now known as Caribbean Farmers Network (CaFAN) was initiated by a group of farmers and NGOs participating in a regional workshop organized by the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) and the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI), during 2002.

Thus CaFAN is the brainchild of farmers, which has been kept alive through the efforts of the Eastern Caribbean Trading Agriculture and Development Organisation (ECTAD), working in collaboration with the Caribbean Agricultural Information Service (CAIS), CTA Regional Branch Office for the Caribbean, the Agricultural Society of Trinidad & Tobago (ASTT). More recently the Jamaica Agricultural Society (JAS) and Barbados Agricultural Society (BAS) have joined in these efforts. These institutions have been functioning as the Management Coordinating Committee to channel resources and ideas into the further development of CaFAN. CTA has worked closely with the group to fund and support their activities to date.

It was recognized by CaFAN that there was limited information about farmers and NGOs in the Caribbean, which would facilitate further planning and development of the groups. The collection of such data was therefore identifies as the first step on support of the CaFAN.

CTA agreed to fund a regional survey to collect and analyse data and information on farmers' organisations and NGOs in fifteen Caribbean countries. The CaFAN project began in December 2003 with the design of the survey used in the collection of data on Caribbean Farmers Organisations and NGOs in 15 countries. The countries that were surveyed were Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Suriname, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago.

The goal of the CaFAN survey was to collect the necessary data and information that can be used in the formation of a strategy and framework for the improvement of networking and cooperation among farmer's organisations and NGOs, through the development of a regional network in the Caribbean.

Main problems coming out of the CaFAN survey and consultation amongst farmers' organisations in the countries that the regional network can address are:

1. Lack of information in particular:
 - Production
 - Marketing
 - Consumption patterns
 - Imports and exports of key commodities by counter
2. Marketing specific to:
 - Trade Policies
 - Transportation
3. Information sharing and consensus building on a sustainable and on-going basis at a regional level (e.g. training, research, technology, resources)
4. Advocacy, lobbying and collaboration at a regional level to influence policy related to agriculture and rural development from the perspectives farmer's and rural community members.

Objectives coming out of the survey that farmers' see their regional organisation should focus on:

1. Increase communication and exchange of ideas, information, and technology between and among farmers association and NGOs in the Caribbean.
2. To facilitate sharing and exchange of experiences and resources that can impact positively on the competitiveness and sustainability of the agriculture sector.
3. To enhance the marketing management capability of the Caribbean Farmers Organisations and improve capacity to deliver services to members, and facilitate intra and extra regional trade
4. To raise awareness, advocate, and collectively:
 - a. Influence decisions on strategic issues affecting regional agriculture and rural development, and
 - b. Mobilize resources for and on behalf of network members

Areas of intervention as identified by the survey:

1. Acquiring and effectively using all forms of communication channels and technologies as appropriate (internet, Audio-visual, electronic, print)
 - a. Training in use of information and communication technologies
2. Advocacy to influence agricultural policies, in particular trade (CSME)
 - a. Transportation (policies, mechanisms, arrangements)
3. Capacity building and provision of services for membership
 - a. Training
 - b. Research
 - c. Technology transfer
 - d. Credit facilities

Main activities include:

1. Organizing national and regional workshops

- a. Training: (e.g. advocacy skills, network management; project management; proposal writing; policy analysis)
2. Data collection and dissemination
3. Advocacy and lobbying up to CARICOM level
4. Development of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) infrastructure including the establishment of a network website
5. Resource mobilization
6. Promotion of products to facilitating marketing and trade at intra-regional level
7. Providing services to members (e.g. technical assistance)

Strategy for Resource Mobilization:

1. Establish a sub-committee on finance
2. Funds and other resources from regional and international development agencies
3. Funds and other resources from the regional private sector
4. Membership fees.

CaFAN is working with its members and with the Technical Centre for Agriculture and Rural Cooperation (CTA) to implement its activities.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

- **Production Input Revolving Fund**

Bulk import agriculture inputs linking with other Caribbean islands to afford the opportunity to get and provide inputs at better prices for our farmers

- **Marketing Revolving Fund**

We also plan to set up a joint marketing revolving fund that will allow our farmers organisation to pay within 1 to 3 days for products purchased from small farmers thus improving the small farm families cash flow position.

- **International Trade Center (ITC)**

We intend to partner with the International Trade Center to improve our agriculture production, marketing through business support, market development, market intelligence and Information Communication management to facilitate our full participation in the International Trade arena.

- **Crop Insurance**

In consultations with our other sister organisations in the Caribbean we aim to explore an Agriculture Insurance Scheme for our farmers.

In terms of the overall National and Regional strategic direction for our agriculture, we need to form forward and backward linkages in agriculture production, processing and marketing:

1. An agriculture strategy emphasizing exports and real diversification is appropriate in light of our national resources endowment in fertilize lands, flexible economic structure and proximity to large markets along with a consistent weekly shipping link to UK and the rest of Europe. Because of our multi-tropical climate, our comparative advantages are in the tropical foods, fruits and fish so let us maximize this.
 - Proper management of export promotions linked to agricultural diversification can contribute significantly to increased employment. Export activities require more labour to perform assembly, packages, grading, transportation and other marketing direction.

2. The strengthening of farmers' organisations especially small farmers' organisations to increase their capacity to bulk purchase inputs, access to credit, access to technology, new and applied research, precision agriculture and managed and efficient strengthening the overall marketing.
3. The improvement of physical handling and storage facilities to support marketing
4. Setting up a proper marketing service such as price information and market intelligence
5. The need for policy consultation on the increased role of the private sector in agriculture and a reduce role for government issues such as private sector marketing and land tenure reform in line with practical business development and conservation.

THE STRATEGIC DIRECTION OF AGRICULTURE

1. We believe that by specialization in crops and livestock, we have comparative advantage.
2. We also believe that our agriculture while focus on export to generate foreign exchange earnings must also focus on linkages to basic food security linkages to health and nutrition which could help reduce the incidence of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD), linkages to tourism which could help keep more hard currency in our country, linkages to the environment which should help us reduce the use of dangerous chemicals and manage soil erosions and better water management.
3. Linkage to Agro-processing focused on utilizing products that will otherwise got to waste
4. We also believe that we must constantly applied appropriate technology and apply research adoption to improved productivity, efficiency and management
5. We believe that we must promote farming as a real small business applying the skills of business support and incentives that are now currently available for agriculture farming businesses.



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