



FARMING IN THE CARIBBEAN

LAND REFORM IS NOT ENOUGH

By FRANK A. CAMPBELL

An Antiguan farmer put it this way: "Just giving a man a piece of land and not providing other facilities like water... I think farmers will still find themselves in a lot of trouble." These words summarize some recent research findings on Caribbean land tenure.

The researchers to whom the farmer's opinion was directed were trying to discover the actual and potential impact of land reform in Antigua and Montserrat on agricultural and, generally, economic development. The research conducted by the Faculty of Law of the University of the West Indies (UWI), Jamaica, and funded by IDRC suggested that the security of tenure available to farmers through government land settlement schemes was not sufficient to maximize such development.

According to the research team headed by Caribbean land law expert Dr Nick Liverpool, the situation is disappointing. "The existing land settlement schemes do not and indeed cannot achieve those objects of modern economic uplifting in their present form." But the situation is also encouraging, according to Dr Liverpool, "because the scope for innovation, improvement, and modernization is so easily within the reach of the Governments... if only they were willing to take advantage of the general desire for reform since most of the agricultural land in both countries is owned by government."

NO PRODUCTIVITY DIFFERENCE

Of the general desire and need to reform agriculture in these and other Commonwealth Caribbean countries there can be no doubt. Montserrat's 12 000 and Antigua's 76 000 people, notwithstanding their growing tourist and fledgling industrial sectors, depend on agriculture for national survival and growth.

Government ownership of most of the

agricultural lands in Antigua and Montserrat results from the collapse of the previously dominant sugar and cotton enterprises respectively. Through the division and distribution of the former sugar and cotton plantations, the two governments hoped to mobilize local farmers to take over where the producers of these two crops had left off.

Dr Liverpool, together with social scientists Dr Patrick Emmanuel and Dr Christine Barrow and with the assistance of statistician Eric Armstrong, tried to find out the extent to which these hopes were being realized. Has there been, for example, any increase in the size or improvement in the soil quality of small farms? Two survey teams — headed by former Agriculture Minister Franklyn Margetson, in Montserrat, and Senior Agricultural Officer McKenzie Harper, in Antigua — asked 300 farmers and a number of agricultural officials. The questionnaires from this survey, plus literature reviews and other work by the principal investigators and the statistician, provide some tentative answers.

The researchers find no evidence that productivity differs between government land settlement schemes and other farms. However, the majority of farmers, especially in Antigua, believe the former arrangement provides greater security of tenure.

This greater feeling of security is apparently founded in the belief that governments are unlikely to risk political fallout by evicting farmers. Formal leases or other written titles are rare in both systems. "Of the 175 plots on settlement lands in Antigua," the research team observes, "written agreements were given for only 13... compared with 9 plots of 65 in Montserrat. With respect to private lands there was only one plot with a written agreement out of 38 plots in Antigua and one plot out of 69... in Montserrat."

NO LAND HUNGER

Concerning soil quality there was some difference in perception between Montserratian and Antiguan farmers, but little between settlement and non-settlement farmers. The Antiguan farmers thought the soil on all but 17 of their 217 plots to be "fair to good" or "very good". The Montserratian farmers, however, believed more than half of their plots were "so, so", "poor" or, in one case, "very poor". Montserrat is more mountainous than Antigua.

Farms continue to be quite small. More than 75 percent and 85 percent of the plots in the Antiguan and Montserratian samples respectively were less than four acres. (The average Canadian farm in 1981 was more than 490 acres.) Notwithstanding Montserrat's policy of "economic-size farms", over 45 percent of the plots in the Montserratian sample were less than one acre compared with 5.8 percent in Antigua's case. However, in Montserrat, government-owned plots are larger than private ones.

In spite of the persistence of the mini-farm and the proliferation of verbal rental agreements, farmers ranked "insecurity of tenure", "unavailability of land", and "problems with lease/rental agreement" respectively as the eighth, fourteenth and fifteenth (and least) most important of their

problems. In Antigua, home of 200 of the 300 farmers interviewed, non-settlement farmers were more worried than settlement farmers about security of tenure. The situation was the reverse in Montserrat. On both islands, however, the vast majority of farmers on land settlement schemes prefer to own their farms rather than remain tenants of the government.

Despite the apparent absence of land hunger among the farmers, Dr Liverpool feels that farm size is a problem, especially for more enterprising farmers. "After a while," he said, "two or three acres become insufficient."

NO AGRICULTURAL TAKE-OFF

Whatever the various views about security of tenure or farm size, land reform in these two territories has not produced the needed new agricultural take-off. "While it is clear," say the researchers, "that access to land and security of tenure are important prerequisites for agricultural production, they are by no means the only ones."

This is exactly the point made by the Antiguan farmer quoted earlier! Crop damage by untethered livestock and poor arrangements for irrigation, marketing, credit and input are among the farmers' problems.

That half of all small farmers do other jobs and that the average farmer earns less than a construction labourer reflect the problems facing the sector. Another symptom, and result, of the countries' agricultural problems is the avoidance of farm-

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ing careers by young men and, more so, by young women. Two of every three farmers are over 50 years old, and fewer than 15 percent are under 30. Yet, the majority of the older farmers interviewed started farming in their twenties or earlier.

STRAY ANIMALS

The livestock problem has been rated number one by farmers in Montserrat where beef production is encouraged. Antiguan farmers rate this problem second. Both countries have laws against strays. However, the legal remedies have been ineffective. There is no easy solution to this problem as to whether "the livestock farmer should fence his animals in or the vegetable farmer fence them out", as a

Montserratian agricultural officer put it.

Irrigation is problem number two for Montserrat's farmers but number one among the Antiguan whose rainfall is inadequate, irregular and badly distributed. An estimated 90 to 95 percent of Antiguan farmers and 98.4 percent of the cultivated land are without irrigation water. "When it rains the farmers rush to plant, all at the same time," according to an extension officer.

The researchers have referred to the poor marketing arrangements in both territories. "Farmers complain," they say, "of having to spend time 'running about the place' looking for markets and occasionally having to plough back their produce or dispose of it cheaply as pig food."

Government agricultural marketing bodies face gluts, spoilage, and insecure domestic and international markets. They lose money, although market guarantees partly explain Montserrat's 10-fold food production increase between 1971 and 1975. Farmers are angry over the importation of foods which can be produced locally. They allege an apparent preference for such imports in the tourist sector. According to Dr Liverpool, these marketing problems have led many Caribbean farmers to concentrate on a few "safe crops" such as banana and nutmeg for which there are more or less guaranteed export markets.

The researchers have done more than identify problems. In marketing, they recommend effective government guarantees for a wide range of farm products, including livestock. They propose import bans on locally available food items and contracts with local hotels, but note that "much depends on the expansion and reliability of intra-regional markets and the accompanying facilities of transport and storage."

They recommend written leases and rental agreements and the payment of rents retroactively rather than in advance. Higher pound fees, better credit arrangements, and an end to the splitting of small farm plots among heirs of deceased farmers are other recommendations. The team also points to the need for further research, especially on marketing.

The researchers hope to have their findings discussed at a special conference of agricultural officers, planners, policy-makers and farmers. Dr Liverpool believes Caribbean leaders wish to solve the problems. He offers as evidence Antiguan Prime Minister Vere Bird's ready agreement to accord him an interview and the St Lucian government's implementation of a recommendation by an earlier study team, which included Dr Liverpool, to conduct a cadastral survey of the country.

Money is likely to be the major obstacle preventing the governments from implementing the findings of the IDRC-supported UWI study. But Dr Liverpool and his fellow researchers remain hopeful. "We would like to see the results of our research influence the lives of people." □

Frank Campbell, a Guyanese journalist and ex-diplomat, writes regularly on Caribbean and international issues.