

“ECCU governments must ensure food security through an explicit regional agricultural policy that delivers a productive agricultural sector.”

In today’s global economy, the small island states of the ECCU are confronted with many challenges, not the least of which are those facing the agricultural sector. Factors such as the lack of skilled human resource, inadequate transportation, weak information and intelligence systems and deficient and uncoordinated risk management measures all continue to plague the development of agriculture in the region. Immediate action must be taken, if the governments and people of the ECCU are to secure for future generations, a viable economic union that ensures economic prosperity and food security. Director General of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), Dr. Chelston Brathwaite emphasized this reality when at a 2003 Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute meeting he noted that a prosperous agricultural sector is a prerequisite for poverty alleviation, promotion of rural prosperity and sustained economic growth. If we are to be successful in achieving these goals as outlined by Dr. Brathwaite, a multi faceted approach has to be taken for enhancing the sustainable growth and development of agriculture within the ECCU, particularly in light of the current global financial crisis. Most importantly, agriculture must be valued for what it is: the bedrock of our society and the cornerstone of our economy.

Over the years, the impact of new global trading agreements, health and food safety standards and marketing technologies have made the traditional educational systems obsolete and non applicable to modern agriculture. This has in part, contributed to the uncompetitiveness

of the region's agricultural sector and its inability to adopt new and innovative techniques. To overcome these challenges, and be successful in the future, developing the brainpower of the people of the region will be even more important than developing the natural resources. For this reason, education and training must take centre stage in any credible agricultural policy formation. Regional governments must partner with the private sector and international organizations and significantly increase the number of scholarships provided in a diversity of agriculture fields. This way, our people will be well equipped to be the technocrats, policy makers and managers who will bring new ideas to the fore and implement this new policy that will ensure a productive agricultural sector. Such a scholarship scheme must shift its focus from just "traditional agriculture" and provide our people with opportunities in engineering, marketing, agri-business and human ecology. The development of skills in agri-business and marketing are bound to foster a new culture of creativity and entrepreneurship amongst our young people. This wide ranging scholarship scheme should also be complemented by an effective marketing campaign so that our youth are made aware of the benefits to be derived from a career in agriculture at a very early stage. The educational curriculum in schools must also cater to the new developments in agriculture. All the advancements that have been made in health and food safety systems, as well as marketing technologies must be incorporated. This will change the perception of agriculture in the eyes of our young people, as they would recognize just how far the impact and influence of agriculture extends. Once agriculture is presented in a new light and our people are able to experience the dynamism of the field, then we are likely to see an influx of young and robust people into the workforce, who are bound to increase the productivity of our human resource.

Secondly, any regional agricultural policy which seeks to ensure food security and deliver a productive agricultural sector must address the critical issue of transportation. In the past, lack of reliable transport services have hindered the production and marketing of the region's agricultural products, thus reducing its competitiveness and the quantity of produce that actually gets to the market place for consumption. Additionally, it must be remembered that some goods such as sugar and rice are bulky while produce such as fresh fruits, vegetables and meats are highly perishable. Our farmers therefore need responsive and cost effective transportation services if they are to remain competitive in the world market and ensure that the foods they produce are accessible to the people. Governments should work assiduously to improve the road network throughout the islands, particularly in the rural areas that are known for their rugged terrain and where many farming plots are located. This would significantly improve the lines of transportation and communication, ensuring timely delivery of goods to the market for sale. It is also recommended that ECCU governments offer a special vehicle loan package to farmers for the purchase of new or used farm vehicles. This would bring much needed relief to the pockets and bankbooks of many farmers in the region who find it difficult to invest in the capital that is so dearly needed to advance their business. There should also be a significant upgrade in port facilities which would include purchasing warehouses well equipped with modern storage equipment and technology to preserve goods. A key component of this transportation mechanism must be the development of a modernize freight service which can be established through collaboration between ECCU governments and private sector partners. The upgrade of transportation facilities from all these angles would ensure that there are no disruptions in the transportation of goods and that the process remains free flowing as it should be.

Crucial to the concept of ensuring food security in a 21st century global economy is the strengthening of information and intelligence systems and the incorporation of technology into the process of food production. ECCU governments should obtain assistance from international organizations and countries that are well advanced in agricultural technological development such as Taiwan, Japan and Germany, to assist them with harnessing the potential of biotechnology. Such technology can mitigate the physical limitations of expanded food production, by helping to develop more resistant plant breeds, thus striking at the heart of food insecurity. Additionally, governments must make communication technology more readily available to farmers so that they can communicate with each other on a consistent basis. The use of video conferencing coupled with the internet's uncanny ability to create new networks and generate synergies, can sharpen awareness amongst our farmers and technocrats in the region, thus allowing for increased access to resources and promoting a forum for the exchange of information and ideas that can advance agricultural development.

Finally, one of the major constraints facing the agricultural sector is the existence of deficient and uncoordinated risk management measures. Farmers in the region are usually negatively impacted by pests and diseases and natural hazards such as droughts. Moreover, due to their geographical location, ECCU territories are extremely vulnerable to hurricanes that on many occasions have resulted in millions of dollars in losses due to large scale crop damage. The governments of the ECCU therefore have a major role to play, in helping farmers mitigate against unstable weather conditions and the control of pests, crop and livestock diseases. Our governments must no longer continue to rely on costly reconstruction and post-disaster external assistance but must begin to build capacity for risk reduction and preparedness. Such emergency preparedness must be strengthened through the provision of early warning information and data.

A regional agricultural insurance scheme should also be established to cushion the negative impact that natural hazards, particularly hurricanes, usually have on farmers. Normally, when disaster strikes and farmers lose most of their crops, they are not inclined to restart cultivation. However, once they are afforded some measure of coverage and protection, they will be encouraged to continue their production, ensuring that our people have a sustained supply of food. Additionally, more water catchment areas ought to be created so that crops could be well irrigated during periods of drought. It is also recommended that a mitigation strategy based on Hazard Analysis and Critical Mitigation Point (HACMP) be developed. This will help farmers assess the level of risk in order to reduce vulnerability to hazards. This would also entail ECCU governments allocating greater funding to regional education and research institutions such as the University of the West Indies and the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute, to conduct research for developing effective mitigation strategies and procedures. These measures would ensure that crop production is sustained and most importantly, impress upon our governments the need to be more proactive, rather than reactive.

The challenge of formulating a policy that ensures food security and delivers a productive agriculture sector is not an easy one to surmount but it certainly does remain an achievable task. However, vision must lead the way. We must continue to build effective institutions, develop new technologies and invest in knowledge. To commit to anything less, will place us on a path of abject poverty and food insecurity. Let us not repeat past policy mistakes, but instead develop best practices for the future. With political will, determination and an enlightened strategic and tactical approach to reforming our agricultural sector, our goals are certainly within reach!