

Caribbean Agrotourism Policy Setting Workshop
Strengthening the Regional Agrifood Sector
To Service Tourism Demand a
And Promoting Authentic Tourism Offerings in Rural Communities
Radisson Hotel, Barbados, October 9, 2019
Keynote by Ambassador H. Elizabeth Thompson to

PROTOCOL – Honourable Indar Weir, Minister of Agriculture and Food Security.

IICA

CTA

EU

ACP

Please let me thank IICA and the other co-sponsors for the kind invitation to join all of you at this workshop. I must confess to being a little amazed that they would invite a lawyer and energy specialist, who has worked a bit in sustainability, to deliver the address at a workshop on food security but, as you can see from my girth, I am well acquainted with matters relating to food.

In any event, who in their right mind, at the onset of the chilly days that are the harbingers of fall and winter in New York where I live, would refuse an invitation to come to Barbados, to be at home, to get a hug and kiss from their 95 year old mother, to experience the pleasure of Browne's Beach, the feel of sand between the toes, the turquoise expanse and the gentle touch of the water? And of course, who would refuse to come and have a conversation with you on weighty matters such as those contemplated by your topic?

I am immensely grateful and not a little bit flattered, that Dr Harvey felt I may be able to add some value to your conversation. I hope she is right. If she is wrong, then you are at liberty to hold her responsible and deal with her as you deem appropriate. As for me, I will just duck out before you find the rotted fruit with which to pelt me. Let me also indicate that while I have been allocated 45 minutes, I have no intention of trespassing on your patience for so long a period, since I believe that my role is merely to set the scene and framework for your discussions and in the context of a workshop and not a university lecture, I do not need so long a time at the microphone.

What I will attempt to do today, is speak from my experience as someone who works in the broad area of sustainability, intersperse some reflections on agriculture and then attempt to draw the broader connections that show if we are serious about our development strategy, agriculture must play a pivotal role.

Agrarian society gave way to industrial society about 300 years ago and since then the human family has had a fascination with energy and engineering. Let's face it, producing cucumbers and sweet peppers isn't the same as manufacturing a Lamborghini, or even a Suzuki. But it is in our part of the world, that the issue of agriculture really gets interesting. For it is in these Caribbean isles and former slave societies that the history of 500 years ago complicates and distorts our relationship with the land and by extension, with agriculture.

The relationship of the broad base of slaves and later, agricultural workers with the land was love-hate. We knew, understood the cycles of nature and produced from it, but it was the cause of our enslavement or indentureship. A powerful reminder of our social and economic alienation, it was the most tangible proof that we owned nothing and did not ourselves have access to the factors of production which generated wealth. We were in reality one of those wealth generating factors.

In a society where the majority were landless, the concept of the chattel house evolved, thereby further demonstrating our disconnection from land ownership. And in the context of agricultural production, access to large parcels of land, have been a prerequisite to investments in agriculture. Those who were forced into agriculture and for whom it became a potent symbol of

their poverty, wanted another life for their children. Education removed their children from the fields with beasts of burden, created opportunities for clean hands, working in the shade, and the more genteel forms of living which were closed to our forefathers. Given this torturous history, who in their right minds would have chosen agriculture as the career of preference for their children?

And here I pause to explain that I have taken this historical tour as my point of departure because vestiges of this attitude continue to inform Caribbean society - our interest in and view of agriculture and its acceptability as a career for young people in relatively well educated societies, our choice of sectors in which to invest, as a lever for social and economic mobility, the respect and value afforded farmers and for the value and linkages of agriculture to tourism and other important economic sectors.

I want to posit the view that that our acceptance of agriculture as pivotal to our region's mid and long term planning and development, is central to reconciling ourselves to our past and to recognising the potential and role of agriculture in modern Caribbean society and economy. Strengthening the agrifood sector therefore really starts with policies to promote interest in agriculture and strengthening the sector itself. It demands regional policy interventions that help our young people to see that agriculture can give them a decent standard of living. It also requires the facilitation of aspiring farmers who are landless.

The first policy intervention or approach which I would want to recommend is the expanded teaching of agriculture in schools, at the primary level and in our elite secondary schools. This will enhance interest in and understanding of, not merely crops but the gamut of agricultural practice and opportunities. As it is, too many people fall into agriculture as a last resort rather than as a deliberate choice. This exposure within the school system will not only boost interest and should help to foster a critical mass of people engaged in various aspects of agriculture. A precursor to strengthening the regional agrifood sector is strengthening the agricultural sector.

Traditionally, in the Caribbean, we have produced and perpetuated the production of primary agricultural and fisheries products – sugar and cocoa, but not chocolates; fresh caught fish, but not fish fingers, burgers or fish patties; coconuts green and dry, but not coconut flour, a little coconut milk,

but not bottled or boxed coconut water. We pour a little coconut oil in the centre of our heads for various ailments (well our grandparents did) or applied it to our skin, but we do not export the exotic skin creams and soaps containing coconut oil that attract high prices; our zaboca/avocados or pears when we cannot eat enough, drop and rot, but are not pressed into oils for food or skin. When we have eaten too many mangoes the flies take the rest, but we do not export dried fruit.

Sargassum is viewed as a nuisance, but not as a nutrient for animal feed or for use in make-up and skin care products. We enjoy fish but miss the opportunity to sell it canned or smoked. In an era when international markets are calling for foods that are green, organic, whole, vegan, natural, non-GMO, everything that we do naturally in the Caribbean, we are unprepared and on the periphery. In a world where every next person is gluten intolerant, why are we not producing and exporting cassava, breadfruit and coconut flours? The waste in fish markets has multiple potential uses as fish fingers, fish meal for dog chows, and there is great scope for leathers from fish skins. I was entirely impressed with leather produced from dolphin skin and in my mind's eye saw a lovely pair of shoes with a matching handbag somewhere in my closet.

This raises the question of whether the difficulty in moving to value added agricultural products lies with a non-entrepreneurial, risk averse agricultural sector, populated by people who are happy to grow only the primary products? Or is the question one of access to capital and technology? Is funding available in the banking sector to allow farmers to transition to this next level of investment and production? What incentives, concessions, tax relief and rebates, regulatory and legislative structures or other mechanisms, is government providing to create the enabling environment for farmers to make these new steps? To support market transformation, there has to be a specific budgetary allocation that arises out of deliberate policy making which identifies and gives confidence and certainty in the level of support that government is prepared to offer those making investments in agriculture at this level.

In terms of a policy approach, I would suggest that government identify a range of tertiary as priority areas and give the necessary incentive packages and support to spur investment. This approach was adopted in the 1970s with

solar water heaters and the results stand for all to see. I know that this will appear to carry the whiff of subsidization. My response simply, is that many of the countries that rail against concessions and subsidization, have highly subsidised and protected agricultural sectors and goods. Caribbean SIDS, the small land masses of which allow little opportunity to create economies of scope or scale and where our agricultural production comes from microbusinesses, not even SMEs, have to carve out market share by going after the high value, tertiary, agricultural and specialist products and placing them in boutique type stores where prices are higher, since we know we cannot compete on mass production and volume.

While we seek innovative strategies and policy interventions, let us not forget, The Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas provides for the region to act in collaboration in pursuit of its broad economic goals. This means that to penetrate large, external markets, regional farmers, producers and manufacturers must be part of a single value chain which starts in one country and operates with cross-country partners to access the necessary resources. Hence, a Barbadian enterprise may grow product in Guyana where there are large land parcels and lower prices, and manufacture of the tertiary product may even be done in a third country. This is a critical approach to make agricultural businesses and their tertiary products more viable.

Our leaders already contemplated and laid out the structure for this collaboration in agriculture. Let me remind you that the Treaty says –

“The goal of the Community Agricultural Policy shall be:

- the fundamental transformation of the agricultural sector towards market- oriented, internationally competitive and environmentally sound production of agricultural products;
- improved income and employment opportunities, food and nutrition security, and poverty alleviation in the Community;
- the efficient cultivation and production of traditional and non-traditional primary agricultural products;
- increased production and diversification of processed agricultural products;
- an enlarged share of world markets for primary and processed agricultural products;”

The approach identified in the treaty for the achievement of the broad policy objectives include but are not limited to -

1. "the production, diversification, processing and marketing of agricultural products;
2. (b) the establishment of effective agricultural financing systems, including insurance, bearing in mind the special needs of artisanal fishers, small farmers, foresters and agro-processors;
3. (c) the establishment of linkages among the Member States with complementary natural resources, industries, agricultural skills and technical abilities;"

Ascribed to the Council of Ministers with portfolios of Trade and Economic Development, COTED are the responsibility to:

1. "(a) promote the development and oversee the operation of the CSME;
2. (b) evaluate, promote and establish measures to enhance production, quality control and marketing of industrial and agricultural commodities so as to ensure their international competitiveness;
3. (c) establish and promote measures to accelerate structural diversification of industrial and agricultural production on a sustainable and regionally- integrated basis;"

Against this background, we must ask ourselves why are we consistently weak on cooperation despite the existence of enabling tools? At a more fundamental level, how do we address the implementation challenge? Rather than our singular national approaches, is it not time to concede that the shared and harmonised approaches as contemplated by the Treaty and the CSME, might well yield better results? And are we satisfied that the architecture to realise and deliver on our objectives is adequate and appropriate for our needs?

Our region's roll out of agricultural policy, must seek to create practical and economic linkages with other sectors. For instance, how do we satisfy the demand for water by both the agricultural and tourism sectors in a region that is water scarce, water stressed, and climate challenged? Increasingly the countries of CARIFORUM are articulating intention and policy aimed at making

us more climate resilient by transitioning to renewable energy sources. We are also hearing far more engagement around the issue of technology driven agricultural production, to maximise scarce land space, optimise water availability, and increase crop yields. All of these represent policy shifts in the right direction.

We tend to think of a tourist's experience of the region as their experience when on island. My view of the tourist's experience within the individual. As a result, inherent in that experience would be a continuing love for and interest in Caribbean food and culture. Our culture and cuisine must not be seen as separate and distinct from the tourism product, but integral to providing a unique, immersive and memorable experience for the visitor.

Every tourist, having tasted the region's foods, should be leaving the islands with a range of bottled sauces, preserves, and other goodies or products representing tertiary agricultural offerings. I imagine that in due course these will come to include a number of cannabis based products. The whole issue of whether the Caribbean will be promoting marijuana tourism, for medical or recreational use, or manufacturing the cannabis products, from confectionery, to teas to creams, now in high demand, is a debate that is still ongoing.

The global thrust for ethically sourced and wholesome products creates opportunity and markets for the region's goods and we must seek to penetrate those markets. I recognise that size affects our capacity to compete, but I reiterate the need for cross country collaborations and partnerships that allow us to boost production and create economies of scale. This raises the issue of opportunities for trade and whether we have fully exploited market opportunities made available through existing trade agreements, such as the EPA with the European Union. To capture the markets government will have to address the issue of equipping fish landing sites, markets, farms and processing plants to meet the requirements for HACAP and the phytosanitary rules that open the door to exportation of agrifoods.

I concede and am encouraged by something of a nascent industry in the value added agricultural goods of which I speak, more advanced in some islands than others, but there are few incentives to create momentum or adequacy of supply to service potential markets. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research to help guide development, production, and investment. Product and market

research are very much needed when there is not significant capital available. This is where more collaborations between entrepreneurs and researchers of the University of the West Indies that can guide investment decisions.

In this discussion, I want to place the Caribbean dinner table and what we serve to tourists in a wider social and economic context. Chronic noncommunicable diseases are linked to diet and are significant causes of morbidity and mortality. Caribbean nationals eat diets of highly processed foods and we have one of the highest incidences of NCDs in the world. We import between 60-80% of our food and the food import bill for CARICOM countries which stood at US \$2.08 billion in 2000, is expected to be between US \$8-10 billion by 2020. Clearly some adjustment needs to be made that moves the region back to more traditional diets of less processed foods for the sake of health and economy. This is a matter that can in part be addressed by policy.

This brings me to the matter of hotel and restaurant menus in the region, particularly in my own country. We have this notion that tourists want to eat what exactly what they have at home and what they are used to. This goes against all of the evidence of why Oistins, Gros Islet and numerous other communities of this type, have built a reputation and substantial profits selling local foods. I recall that as Minister of Environment, we had a community based programme called "De heart of Barbados." Tourists loved the way it brought them into communities in rural St Thomas, exposing them ordinary Barbadian daily life and cuisine. In addition to the gullies and tracks off the beaten path which could be explored, DHB allowed cookshops and rumshops, and farmers in the communities to make money.

What we were seeing then, more than 20 years ago, was evidence of the tourist who wanted a different type of holiday, a less controlled, packaged tourism product in favour of an authentic, immersive experience with the local community. This is part of the explanation for the popularity of AirBnB and similar accommodation. There is a market for this type of tourism and more important, is that it affords the average person and the farmer, a larger piece of the tourism pie. Food and agriculture are the platform on which such immersive experiences are built. And we must encourage these experiences and this market niche just as we have promoted more formal hotel plant.

Hotels and restaurants must serve more local foods, fruits and juices. Not only will this reduce our import bill and foreign exchange outflows, but create new revenue streams and markets for small shops, and opportunities to showcase the talents of chefs and mixologists to create menu offerings which are twists on traditional foods, to evolve a new Caribbean cuisine, promote it internationally, to establish a Caribbean food TV network and programming, all with a view to producing and agrifoods. This is where rural communities come in, as being perfectly well suited to catering to the tourist who does not want the typical hotel package, who wants to understand how the locals live, We must not undervalue or seek to crowd out this sector of the market. Let me also make the point that management of supply and farmers cooperatives can address hotel and restaurant complaints about inconsistency and inadequacy in supply from local farmers.

The focus of our tourism sectors is always to increase arrivals. We cannot also increase our food import bills. For national food security, for issues relative to sustainable consumption and production, the region must reduce its food import bill and find a way of growing more of the food consumed by our citizens and visitors. Sustainability and environmental stewardship are now powerful magnets for selling tourism and other products. Such policies and practices should be marketed as part of the Caribbean brand.

This is an important topic on which one could go in many directions. I will resist the urge to take up other threads having promised you I will not use the full allocation of my time and close on this point.

About two months ago I went to *Barbados On The Water* in Canada. On arrival, a mixologist handed me a drink, it was a pretty pinkish colour which he assured me was natural not a dye. It was at once tart, sweet, fruity and full of flavor. It had a little fresh black pepper that gave it a nice kick instead of alcohol, but what hit my palate was the cilantro. I had never conceived of putting cilantro in a drink, but it was exquisite. Looking back, I think this is the best drink I have ever tasted in my life. How I would love to be able to offer a bottle of that to ambassadors at the UN, watch them buy it and give to others as gifts. With that kind of creativity and skill in our region it is the responsibility of governments and the hotel and restaurant sector to ensure that the regional agricultural sector plays its fully pivotal role to our tourism and economies, taking them to the next level.