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**APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPTS OF AGRO-TOURISM,
AGRICULTURAL DIVERSIFICATION AND FOOD AND NUTRITION
FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CARIBBEAN COMMUNITIES
WITH REFERENCE TO STANDARDS AND PRIORITY SETTING**

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APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPTS OF AGRO-TOURISM, AGRICULTURAL DIVERSIFICATION AND FOOD AND NUTRITION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CARIBBEAN COMMUNITIES WITH REFERENCE TO STANDARDS AND PRIORITY SETTING

Introduction

There is a renewed call for a new approach to development with emphasis on community empowerment or participation, with the belief that more sustainable activities will be undertaken in those communities. Much of that call, however, is coming not from within the communities, but primarily from advocates of change who may have little to do with those communities. What then will the new approach bring apart from a change in who are the decision-makers? And how do we ensure that the change that is called for will, in fact, bring added benefits to the communities themselves?

To be sure, there are some successful stories of a community approach to problem solving. However, there are also many more stories of project failures. Serious analytical work, therefore, needs to be done to determine the factors that promote a successful community-based approach; when this approach should be used; and the methodology that should be employed. In an attempt to determine these factors, a brief analysis will be made of some of the governing structures in the subregion and their possible impact on the proposed new approach. Some of the earlier efforts at stakeholder and community approach to projects will also be examined as well as the new development strategy that is prompting the call for this new paradigm.

The new paradigm focuses to a large extent on decision-making and community empowerment. With few exceptions, it is short on the promotion of tangible activities that are based on the resource inventory of the communities. This is not surprising, since, as noted before, the advocates of community empowerment may have very little connection with the communities and, in most cases, are unfamiliar with the resource base. Hence, a theoretical case is made, suggesting more style than substance.

Another obvious shortcoming of this new paradigm is its continued over-dependence on assistance from the outside to build communities. Externally funded projects, seminars and meetings outside of the communities and foreign technical assistance continue to dominate these projects. While, of course, all communities have basic common needs such as water, health, education and electricity, there is sufficient diversity within communities to allow for tailoring of activities and programmes such that their differences become assets.

It is in that context, that agro-tourism activities, standards, agricultural diversification, food and nutrition and priority setting have been chosen as aspects and activities for promoting community development, drawing on the various strengths of communities, rural or urban.

Decision-making structure

By and large, the English speaking countries of the Caribbean have centralized decision-making structures within a variation of the Westminster model commonly referred to as the Whitehall model. The one exception in the English-speaking Caribbean is the United States Virgin Islands with its truncated version of the American system. This difference is significant, as we will see, in both decision-making and implementation of public policy. There are other forms of government in the subregion where there are clear separations and distinctions between legislative and executive powers with the two bodies comprised of different persons who, however, are most often elected to both houses.

In the Whitehall model of government some effort at devolution is attempted with the introduction of local government agencies, either county councils, city councils or village councils. With the exception of the capital city, most of those councils tend to be dysfunctional, depending on central government for subventions and decision-making on programmes. The nature of the Whitehall model with the supremacy of Cabinet and the division in all-powerful ministries does not allow for serious devolution.

In the United States Virgin Islands, with a senatorial form of government and a clear separation between the executive and legislative branches, there is room for the bargaining process to take place, as well as consensus building at both levels of determination and implementation of policies. This translates into greater involvement at all levels of society, including at the community level. For example, if a major activity is to be undertaken in any community, public hearings are mandated, following which decisions are made based on the outcome of these public hearings. At these hearings, members of a community are given the opportunity to make inputs and contribute to policy and implementation.

Early community structures

In general, most rural communities in the subregion were established along two major activities – agriculture and fishing. In the case of agriculture, communities were established by the subsistence farmers either around the plantation or from a series of very small plots of land or holdings. Separated from mainstream activities, these communities did not enjoy the benefits of technology transfer or of research and development for product improvement, since much of the effort and financing of governments went into the export crop. With regard to fishing activities, these have been the slowest to achieve any significant technological advancement. This has been due mainly to the lack of interest in the sector, especially since the potential for export appeared to be limited. Artesanal fishermen and small farmers, therefore, continue to be among the poorest persons in the subregion.

For the most part, activities in these communities have remained almost the same over some 50 years. Those built around the cash crops have remained unchanged -

growing the same crops. In addition, with poor soil conservation and agronomic practices soil fertility has diminished, making it more and more difficult to improve production and achieve an acceptable standard of living. The fishing communities have not fared much better as dwindling fish stocks through over fishing, indiscriminate use of equipment and pollution have made the returns from artesanal fishing less and less attractive. In fact, despite its low incomes, one is more likely to find a young person entering the agricultural industry than entering into fishing.

Modern community structures

Increased urbanization has followed economic development in the subregion and a consequent change in community structures. The more affluent persons have moved from the city or village centres and have established themselves on the outskirts of these centres. At the same time, governments have built low cost housing units, also on the outskirts of the city and/or village centres, in an effort to reduce congestion in the city, as well as to make prime property available for commercial activities. The communities which are formed easily divide into the rich and poor and are in marked contrast to each other. It is the latter type of community, together with the other long-established rural communities and the villages, that dominate the seashore of the Caribbean islands that are the focus of this paper on community development and empowerment.

Community empowerment – the concept

Early community empowerment approaches

Efforts of the Agricultural Extension Services dating back to the mid-1900s in most of the Caribbean islands to highlight the need for proper soil and water conservation practices to farmers, could be considered an early approach to community empowerment. These efforts were in response to indiscriminate cultivation of crops on hillsides, improper agronomic practices and rampant cutting down of trees for firewood and charcoal. Extension officers had the responsibility to educate the communities on the effects of hillside cultivation on the environment and also introduce such systems as terracing and contouring, new methods of charcoal making and generally educate the communities on methods of increasing agricultural productivity.

Extension officers were expected to reside in the communities and interact with the entire farm family. Unfortunately, they were not adequately trained for these tasks, since their training was primarily in agricultural production. In addition, most officers, more accustomed to an urban environment, never adjusted to the rural way of life. Those who were committed to providing assistance in the communities to which they were assigned often found the tasks overwhelming. Some officers focused on sport and cultural activities, as well as establishing friendly societies and cooperatives, to the neglect of the wider issue of management of community resources and productive activities.

In order to encourage farming activities, farmers were given subsidies for undertaking soil and water conservation measures, often amounting to as much as 75 per cent of the cost of the undertaking. When the subsidies ended the programmes also ceased and projects were not sustained. For example, 30 years ago in Saint Lucia's southwestern district, an irrigation canal was constructed to bring water from a distance of approximately four miles to members of a Carib community. Within five years the canal went into total disrepair once government funding had ended. The primary objective of the project, however, was to increase agricultural yield. This was proposed to be achieved by planting cash crops, especially sweet potatoes and peanuts, that would provide a steady income to the farmers moving their production from one, to two or three crops per year. The farmers abandoned the programme's objectives and, instead, planted tree crops such as coconut and breadfruit, effectively putting an end to the programme.

There were several underlying reasons for the ultimate demise of the project. One, most agricultural extension officers had been trained in production techniques and not project management or community relations. Also, the aims of the project may not have been clearly enunciated and the preparatory work prior to the introduction of the incentives had not been done. In addition, politicians took credit for the incentives and it became a means of acquiring votes. There was, too, a perception by community members, that the project was one way of relieving the high unemployment situation associated with rural communities. Lastly, there was little or no collaboration in design or implementation of the project among the various agencies involved, so that on many occasions the farmers could not sell their cash crops after a good yield.

Later efforts at community empowerment

The creation of a post of Community Development Officer within the Public Service, to work with groups in the communities represented improved efforts in community empowerment. However, this office was housed within a Ministry of Community Development, one that is usually associated with Sports and Youth Affairs and not perceived as having a high profile in the government hierarchy. This meant that much of the effort of the officer was expended on the development of sports and the establishment of centers for recreation and cultural activities. There was still an uncoordinated approach to community activities, with ministries of agriculture, education and planning working in isolation of each other. The work of other community and civic-minded groups, such as the Lions Club or the Rotary, must also be mentioned, but these groups focus more on one-off projects with little scope for sustainability.

Recent efforts at community empowerment

The proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the region brought new impetus to the concept of community development. Many of these organizations, however, have to struggle to gain acceptance for the concept of community

empowerment. As well, with NGOs being funded primarily through foreign assistance, a large part of their programmes are usually supplemental to government programmes and are sometimes in direct opposition to these and other programmes. There is, therefore, considerable work to be done, not only to get governments to accept the concept of community empowerment, but also to direct resources to that approach in a sustained and coherent manner, building on the efforts of some more progressive groups within the community.

Community empowerment – the activities

Once the concept of empowerment has been accepted, it becomes imperative that the activities initiated in communities include not only the cooperation of all groups, but they should also be linked to resource management. Activities must visibly transform lives, should provide long-term employment, must be supported by the national policy and be consistent with the natural environment, for sustainability.

One example of activity-based community empowerment is that of a project in the Colonarie Watershed of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The watershed area comprises of 120 households with the majority of the population being poor, landless and young, with basic primary education. It is reported that all stakeholders, including members of the local community, were involved in the watershed management project from the planning to implementation stages. In order to ensure full participation, 155 interviews were conducted with local households and the two State agencies operating in the area. A management plan for the area was developed that was reportedly based on the responses to the questionnaires and discussions held with all stakeholders. Several studies were conducted under the programme and included:

- (a) Inventory of the biophysical resources;
- (b) Past and current land use;
- (c) Resource capability, limitation and sustainability;
- (d) Existing environmental conditions; and
- (e) In-depth analysis of the social and economic status.

The objectives of the project were primarily:

- (a) Protection of the environment.
- (b) Rehabilitation of the catchment area.
- (c) Reclamation of approximately 48.5 hectares on the hillside areas.

- (d) Protection and management of the remaining natural forest in the upper basin.
- (e) Establishment and subsequent management of forest plantation throughout the catchment area.
- (f) Implementation of sound soil and water conservation practices in erosion prone areas, including application of agro-forestry techniques.
- (g) Training of national resource management personnel in watershed inventory methods and management techniques.

A five-year management plan was proposed for the project and, according to the project coordinator, the following objectives were achieved:

- (a) Re-establishment of the forest reserve boundaries.
- (b) Ongoing education to communities and schools, providing information on the importance of integrated watershed management.
- (c) Participation in ongoing workshops with all relevant agencies on the integrated approach to manage and protect the water resources.
- (d) Accomplishment of 55 per cent of the area identified for rehabilitation in the five-year plan.
- (e) The establishment of a demonstration plot.

Notwithstanding the above success, a number of recommendations were made by the project coordinator, including the continued coordination of public sector activities, identification of needs and interests of communities, empowerment of members, mobilization of human resources and education and awareness programmes. Also suggested was possible action that persons could take to ensure sustainability of the programme, supported by government.

Findings of the project:

Based on a later assessment of the programme, a number of conclusions were arrived at, as follows:

- (a) In small States watershed areas are the most vulnerable, yet little attention is paid to its management.
- (b) Water resource management cannot be divorced from natural resource development and conservation programmes

- (c) It is difficult to effectively enforce legislation on human behaviours, especially those that have negative impacts on the environment, especially in rural areas. In such situations, avoidance/compliance is motivated more by people participation and community empowerment through education and awareness than by mere policing.
- (d) The regulatory framework for an effective water resources management system must begin with the views and needs of the community.
- (e) Legislation on activities must be reflective of the community's consensus as well as their comprehension of all issues.

Agricultural diversification

Much has been written on this topic in the region and the literature is replete with examples and recommendations. However, to the extent that agriculture is seen primarily as an earner of foreign exchange, the diversification programmes have been simply focused on replacing one type of crop with another. For example, bananas replacing sugar cane, especially in the Windward Islands.

While this exchange takes place, the subregion imports a tremendous amount of protein sources in the form of legume crops, such as peas and beans. If these crops are grown locally the food import bill could be lowered. There would also be improved soil conditions and a reduction in the use of imported nitrogenous fertilizers.

In addition, a section of the population may not be receiving the recommended protein allowances in their diets, especially rural school age children. There is an attempt, in several countries, to alleviate the problem by the operation of a school-feeding programme. However, the protein content may be low since, for example, high starch meals like macaroni pie, a pasta dish with milk and cheese, instead of pigeon peas, a local legume, remain a staple on most menus.

The situation can be corrected if measures to make food and nutrition a central part of agricultural policy are instituted. With the available land in the rural areas, production of legume crops would increase, agro-processing would be introduced and linkages with the other sectors of economic activity would be established. In that scenario, foreign exchange might increase as linkages with the tourism industry are established through the introduction of local cuisine on a larger scale within the tourism sector.

Agro-tourism and development

Traditionally, community improvement efforts have been based on social and cultural activities. Every year, for example, the Creole speaking countries of the region stage a festival in October that is heavily marketed and promoted and where the traditional and indigenous way of life is highlighted. In the United States Virgin Islands and also in the French Antilles, agricultural and food fairs are annual events of great significance. These fairs are advertised and the latest techniques of agricultural and food production and products are displayed and explained. The entire population, young and old, participate and the hotel chefs are encouraged to display their culinary arts. In Martinique, some of the old sugar mills and great houses from the plantations have been restored, and one such house, the Whim Great House, is now a national museum in St. Croix.

In Canada, the United States of America, Chile, Argentina, France and other developed countries, the wine growing regions attract millions of visitors a year. One has the opportunity to sample the various wines, learn the history of the vineyard, learn something about the process used in each vineyard, and buy some products at farm-gate prices. In Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries, aquaculture is incorporated into paddy rice cultivation and sport fishing has developed on these farms.

It is interesting to note that the examples cited above register a very large number of tourists who are interested in the museums that highlight the past, botanical gardens and ecology-based activities.

In the Caribbean, we are now noting a new effort at mobilizing the resources of the rural communities to promote development. It is within this paradigm that such terms as agro-tourism and eco-tourism are gaining prominence. The development and promotion of agro-tourism as a means of promoting community development is largely dependent on the concept of agriculture in the Caribbean. If agricultural activity is viewed as providing food, nutrition and recreation to the population, then it might be considered as a vehicle for agro-tourism. If, however, agricultural activities are mainly for the production of goods and services for export and earning of foreign exchange, then the prospects for agro-tourism are limited.

At present, the importance of agriculture is measured by its contribution to Gross Domestic product (GDP). Foreign exchange earnings is thus the main analytical tool used in policy considerations. If the focus of analysis were to change and take into consideration farm income as the measurement of the contribution of agriculture to the economy, policy directives could be very different. Emphasis would then be on the earning potential of the farm, the purchasing power of the farm family, with considerations of nutrition and health being taken into account. Such an approach would demonstrate the true contribution of agriculture to the economy and policies that truly integrate the various sectors would be promoted. Production and productivity would increase in the rural communities, thereby injecting much needed capital back into these communities.

Caribbean cuisine may also be a factor in the agro-tourism equation. It is not very often that indigenous produce and food products are used in the menus of regional five-star restaurants. The variety of dishes with such exotic names as “cassava pone”, “coconut tablet”, “tamarind balls”, “coocoo and callaloo” could be prepared for the enjoyment of visitors, who instead are faced with the foods to which they are accustomed to at home. On the rare occasions that indigenous dishes are made, the end product is usually a version of the local product that has been adjusted to the palate of the typical European or North American visitor. Our indigenous food tends to be considered “poor peoples’ food.” If we link indigenous agricultural produce with the culinary sciences, demand for indigenous products could be increased, creating a demand for produce and thereby, possibly, increasing the income earning potential of farming communities. Farms growing many of these fruits and vegetables could be turned into tourist sites where visitors could view the actual produce, as well as view methods of production and preparation. Also, if indigenous dishes regularly appear on restaurant and hotel menus, tourists might be curious as to the preparation, content and properties, especially if these are medicinal, aphrodisiac or even legendary in nature.

With such policies and returns from investment, the gap that exists between urban and rural communities in terms of the existence of reliable electricity and water supplies, efficient health and education services may be significantly reduced. As the quality of life improves within the rural sector, there could be a return to rural community living until some balance is achieved. An example of this is demonstrated in Saint Lucia when small farmers experienced increased purchasing power during the height of the “banana boom years”. Electricity, pipe-borne water and other such amenities were also introduced in previously isolated villages during that time, virtually transforming them into townships. Unfortunately, because of increasing globalisation and the need for further product transformation the momentum was not maintained. Economic activity has significantly decreased. Likewise the purchasing power of citizens of once fairly prosperous communities is threatened with problems similar to the urban neglect of the inner city.

Food and nutrition

While it may be argued that hunger and poverty are not widespread within the Caribbean subregion, there is no doubt that proper nutrition remains a serious problem. It is not uncommon to see children with aerated soft drinks in their bags, even coming from rural areas where there is an abundance of fruits for making juices. In the urban setting, the fast food chains have become the symbol of development. Health problems, such as diabetes and high blood pressure, are fast reaching epidemic proportions among the population. The barrage of imported meat and meat substitutes, poor sanitation practices associated with the many roadside grills and stalls contribute very little to proper health and nutrition in the Caribbean.

A national policy on food and nutrition would assist in the development of the agricultural sector, encourage good nutrition habits, improve health and provide employment in communities. Home economics and food preparation should be introduced, especially in schools in rural areas, with emphasis on the use of locally grown produce. School feeding programmes could provide meals produced from indigenous produce to primary school children in both rural and urban areas. Such a programme could be beneficial in beginning the change process from a taste for imported, processed foods to an increased appreciation for local, indigenous products. Such a programme would also create a demand for both primary and processed products, thus stimulating agro-processing activities.

Standards

A fundamental error that was made in introducing banana as an export crop in the subregion was a lack of concern for and the promotion of standards and quality assurance programmes. While the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other international regulating bodies did not exist at the time, it had already been proven that quality assurance and standards were necessary instruments for maintaining market share for products. However, the need to supply the market to meet quota arrangements overshadowed the need for quality, to the long-term detriment of the industry.

In the new approach to community empowerment and development, these aspects have to be introduced at an early stage so that the products grown or manufactured could be competitive. Without this competitive edge, activities would not be sustained and interest would wane very quickly when problems of market access are encountered. Besides ensuring a better chance of survival for industries, quality assurance programmes create a sense of pride in the producer and manufacturer that allows them not only to use the product, but to exhibit it with pride to others as their handiwork. Such efforts can mobilise community support, not unlike the “Best Village Competition” or the “Rose Festivals” in the various islands of the Caribbean. A proud community is a key ingredient for sustainable development.

The role of technology

One of the most common mistakes in developing countries is to attempt to introduce new technologies, that usually have no connection to existing activities, into a community. New technologies are more accepted when it can be demonstrated that there is some relationship with existing practices and the new technology is a way of improving on these traditional practices. It is equally important that there be a thorough knowledge of the historical and cultural nature of the community before attempts at introducing new technology are made. The introduction of new technology alone, however, cannot bring about the necessary transformation of the agricultural sector to create vital linkages with the tourism sector. In addition to policy initiatives, the cultural activities of communities must constitute an integral part of the transformation. While

policy tends to direct the type of technology adopted, cultural traditions should be considered. Technology, therefore, should be both relevant and replicable.

With different policy considerations, various means of preparing locally grown fruits and vegetables, such as breadfruit, dasheen, cassava and yams, may have been developed. It is unfortunate that new foods were introduced into the subregion that hindered the development of a vibrant agro-processing sector. At the same time, the culture that was developed continues to shape local tastes and thought processes. If scientists in the subregion are to engage in the development of useful technologies, more funds need to be allocated to their development or have to be allocated to indigenous research and development. The results of these projects and their products can then be showcased and linkages established with other sectors that can participate and enhance the activities. For example, the floricultural concerns in the Santa Cruz valley of North Trinidad could be transformed into showcase sites.

Priority setting

The success of community activities will depend to a large extent on the acceptance and relevance of the activities by the community. To assist this process, priority setting exercises should be conducted before large-scale implementation of activities. Too often, programmes are embarked upon simply because they may be perceived as being beneficial to the community. Priority setting exercises, of which two were held in the region, should be an integral part of the community development process to ensure acceptance, capability, resource match – both human and environment - and increased prospects for sustainability and success.

Failures are not easily forgotten, especially in small and rural communities and their lingering memories often do much damage to later projects that could bring real benefits.

Paradigm shift in community development

The traditional “needs-oriented” path to assist with the development of communities is based on focusing on a community’s needs, deficiencies and problems. This approach of making resources available on the basis of needs has been proven to have a negative effect on the nature of a local community by emphasizing its deficiencies and ignoring its capacities and strengths. It also reinforces the perception that only outside experts can provide real help. Therefore, the relationships that count the most for local residents are no longer those inside the community. Rather, the most important relationships are those that involve the expert, the social worker, the health provider, the funder.

If community development and, by extension, nation building is to take place, focus must be on the assets of the community. Each community in the subregion boasts a

unique combination of assets upon which to build its future. A thorough map of those assets would begin with an inventory of the gifts, skills and capacities of the community's residents, together with the natural resources that are already present and which can be used in a sustainable manner.

Because most of the subregion consists of small island developing States (SIDS), whose primary economic activities are either tourism or agriculture, it is inevitable that there must and should be links to each other. A developed agro-tourism sector can provide the impetus needed to re-build communities, provide new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control and new possibilities for production. It is also the ideal vehicle with which to focus on a community's assets. There are examples of communities involved in activities that promote sustainable growth and development. The Caribs of Dominica live in a protected reservation which is a popular tourist destination. There, conservation of the environment and the traditional way of life using indigenous technologies are practised. The community is no longer marginalised and is achieving sustainable growth. There are challenges involved. We are living in a world that is more and more complex. People do need help acquiring technology, skills and information about how to attract enterprises. They need to know about environmental issues and how to use the resources that are available to them. It is only then that true empowerment can be achieved.

Is it possible then to answer the three questions posed before, namely:

- What have been the factors that promote community success?
- When is it more advantageous to employ that approach?
- What methodology is to be employed in the application of community empowerment?

The example of the Colonarie Watershed Programme suggests that first there is need for an integrated approach to the training of the persons who provide services to communities. Second is the need for the adoption of devolution as a priority for public policy decision-making and implementation in order to establish the administrative structures and frameworks for success. Thirdly, a sustained programme of community education and training must be undertaken to introduce concepts and ideas to stakeholders. Fourthly, public hearing must be an integral part of the planning process in order that new information can be brought to the fore and different points of view presented and sought. Fifthly, members of the community must be willing to undertake responsibility for their well-being.

The above suggests then, that the higher the level of education attained within a community, the better the prospects of community empowerment. The extent to which the proposed activities are seen by the community as bringing tangible benefits, either long-term employment or opportunities to the members, is also a major factor in community empowerment. Likewise, the project or programme should be non-political and presented or championed by a wide cross-section of community leaders.

It is clear also that technology in its traditional meaning alone cannot achieve this fundamental change that needs to be made. Policy, folklore tradition and cultural activities must be integral parts of that mix. In most cases it is the policy that drives or stymies the technology, and it is our cultural and folkloric traditions that drive policy.

Conclusion

Using an asset-based approach to community empowerment, the perennial problem of urban-rural divide would be greatly reduced as the amenities, such as electricity, water, education and health services, necessary to harness the resources of the rural communities, would be provided. With an improved quality of living usually associated with urban life, there could exist an almost equal balance of populations in the rural and urban areas.

The transformation of Caribbean communities will require some novel approaches to the political, technological and social aspects of the region. If not introduced soon, communities will decay and entire families, if not generations, would be lost to poverty, without hope of a better life, making the task all the more difficult for succeeding generations.

The paradigm shift must also be sufficiently understood, not only by the advocates, but also by the communities to understand their role and stake in the activities. Once achieved, the community becomes its own selling point, markets and manages itself and the resources available, and the activities become worthwhile to see and emulate.