

# What is government's role in agricultural development?

What is government's role in the agricultural industry? It has been said time and time again that government's role is to provide a regulatory and service framework and an enabling environment within which the private sector can do business. Assuming that agriculture is considered to be a business by the powers that be, just how successful have successive governments been in carrying out this role?

Land is a key element of the enabling environment of the agricultural industry. We have been hearing since time immemorial about the need to have a Land Use Policy which is strictly adhered to. The latest utterances have been in the Physical Development Plan laid in Parliament at the end of 2007, the National Strategic Plan 2006 to 2025 and the Throne Speech of 2008 which stated that a 2/3 majority in both Houses of Parliament would be required for change of use of agricultural land. All these documents place emphasis on safeguarding agricultural land and state that only in exceptional circumstances would non-agricultural development be permitted on these lands. It seems to me that these "exceptional circumstances" are becoming less and less exceptional day by day, and I find it difficult to understand what the policy is.

It is quite clear that there is enough non-arable land in Barbados to satisfy our housing needs, yet government is acquiring areas of very fertile lands on a number of plantations to construct housing developments. This is a dangerous practice which will stymie agricultural development since farming operations will now have to comply with the whims and fancies of the residents of these developments who have in fact encroached on farmlands. The Physical Development Plan, in dealing with the conversion of redundant plantation yards quite clearly states that the nature and extent of the new activities must not negatively impact agricultural activities in proximity. Bearing in mind the above, can we say that government has fulfilled its role in the agricultural industry? I think not.

The first objective of the Ministry of Agriculture as listed in the Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure 2010-11 is to "facilitate access to the domestic and export markets for agricultural output" while one of its sub-programmes entitled "Measures to Stimulate Increased Livestock Production", is conducted at an annual cost of over \$ 2million. This figure includes the operational cost of Greenland Agricultural Station which houses a herd of goats, supposedly for research and development purposes. In the 1990s the local goat population was seriously reduced by an outbreak of CAE disease and new improved stock was imported by Ministry of Agriculture for research, multiplication and distribution to farmers.

The Barbados Country Report on the State of Animal Genetic Resources prepared in 2005 (<ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/a1250e/annexes/.../Barbados.pdf>) states that the Greenland Station will continue to be a multiplier unit for supplying goats to the general public and will continue to facilitate the CAE programme. Furthermore the artificial insemination programme at Greenland will commence as a routine activity with this service being offered to goat farmers who participate in a satisfactory manner in the CAE programme. Since reports on such projects are usually difficult to access, one must ask "how many farmers have benefited from this programme; how many improved animals (bucks and does) have been distributed to farmers; has the insemination programme commenced and if so how many farmers are beneficiaries of this programme?"

One fact which is well known to farmers though, is the competition which goat farmers suffer each year when Greenland station jumps into the goat milk market for the months which coincide with the farmers' highest production, and sells this milk at an unrealistically low price. The question is: is it government's role to compete with farmers? Wouldn't it make more sense for the Greenland milk to be

used in developing related value added products, the market for which is not yet saturated?  
Furthermore, if the project is not fulfilling its mandate, shouldn't the herd be sold and the project concluded?

Another major constraint to further development of the agricultural industry is praedial larceny . There is a Praedial Larceny Act but its enforcement must be seriously questioned. Farmers are encouraged by government to establish security measures on their farms, and in fact rebates are offered for the purchase of this equipment. Isn't it laughable that having acquired this equipment and identified the perpetrators of praedial larceny via the equipment, farmers are told that the evidence obtained by this method is not admissible in court? Shouldn't it be government's role to put in place the necessary legislation to rectify this situation? Instead, we continue to hear talk year after year with no action.

Having established that a sustainable agricultural industry is vital to Barbados, not only in terms of food sovereignty but also in terms of environmental protection, why is so little attention paid to the issues raised above?

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