

Journal of Rural and Community Development

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Citation:

Isaac, W., Joseph, M., Ganpat, W., Wilson, M., & Brathwaite, R. (2012).
The Caribbean's windward islands banana industry: A heritage of
dependency. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 7(2), 98-
117.

Publisher:

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.



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The Caribbean's Windward Islands Banana Industry: A Heritage of Dependency

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Abstract

While the era of Harry Belafonte's Banana Boat Song (day-o) has faded into the annals of history, the challenges facing the small banana farmer in the Windward Islands of Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines still loom in an entrenched 'culture of dependency'. Throughout the years, banana farming for export in the Windward Islands has been encumbered by contradictory political economies and value systems, products of an Afro-Caribbean slave heritage. On the one hand, small farmers and other members of Windward Island populations have valued protected markets from former colonisers as an entitlement, while on the other hand they are steeped in a historical dependence on powerful actors located far from the farm gate. This paper explores the cultural, historical, political economic and environmental effects of the Windward Island banana industry's responses to several threats from the outside, and focuses on farmers' need to retain their market for bananas and the strategies pursued. Is the end near for the Windward Islands banana industry in the face of shifting relations of dependency, or will the new form of engagement, the Fairtrade market, reset the historical balance? Is it really "daylight come and me wan go home" for farmers, or will the industry once more reinvent itself and soldier onwards?

Keywords: Challenges, Afro-Caribbean slave heritage, Dependency, banana, Fairtrade

1.0 Introduction

Banana is the fourth most important staple crop in the world, and is by volume the most heavily traded fruit on world markets (Wiley, 1998). Several million people throughout the developing world depend on banana production and trade for their livelihoods (NERA, 2003). Moberg and Striffler (2003) noted that this tropical fruit has transformed Central America, the Caribbean and South America more than any other commodity. Furthermore, the expansion of the industry and the concomitant increased exposure of producers to the world economy “entailed profound ecological, demographic, cultural, and political changes” (Moberg and Striffler, 2003, p. 1). Its importance as a health food has dramatically increased in recent years, increasing demand particularly in Europe to the extent that the banana has become the centre of a major global trade dispute. Some anecdotal accounts seek to place the United States and the European Union as the chief protagonists, the World Trade Organisation as the referee, and the producers and banana workers of the Caribbean and Latin America as the major casualties¹. In reality however, the Latin American and Caribbean industries may be on opposite sides, the latter often proxy antagonists in what is really a dispute between the US/Latin America and the EU (CRS, 2001; WTO, 2008).

For many years banana represented the largest single contributor to the gross domestic product (GDP) of the Caribbean’s Windward Islands (Mlachila et al, 2008). Because the industry has been so intimately entwined in virtually all aspects of life on the islands for so long, there is the perception that there is now a heritage of dependency in this regard. This paper seeks to examine the validity of this perception.

In order to do this, two criteria must be met: (a) a definition of the term dependency and (b) an examination of the development of the industry against the backdrop of the socio-economic development history of the Islands. The former is rather straightforward. Payne (1984) citing Brewster (1973) defined economic dependence as:

a lack of capacity to manipulate the operative elements of an economic system. Such a situation is characterised by an absence of interdependence between the economic functions of a system. This lack of interdependence implies that the system has no internal dynamic which could enable it to function as an independent, autonomous entity (p. 4-5).

With this definition, the question is: do the conditions of the Windward Islands satisfy the definition?

1.1 The Long Road Travelled by the Windward Island Banana Industry

The banana industry, at least from the perspective of the Windward Islands, is in crisis (Mlachila et al., 2008). The crisis however did not begin in 1995. Beckford (1967) had already indicated that based on the costs of production alone, the

¹ Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, made this claim this during his feature address at the International Banana Conference held in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, June 2004.

Windward Islands were at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to the South and Central American producers. He also noted that yields from the Central American producers were at least four times higher than their Windward Islands counterparts (Beckford, 1967). By all indications, the regional industry survived only because of their preferential market arrangements with their European customers (Moberg et al., 2003; Reynolds, 2003). Given the accelerated moves towards the global free market economy mandated by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the clock was already ticking for this regime. By the time the U.S. and Latin American producers engaged the European Union in 1995 over their preferential regimes, the writing was on the wall for the Windward Islands producers.

To further complicate the situation, there appears to be some measure of intrigue by some of the players. Moberg et al. (2003) had pointed out that within the milieu of the banana industry, similar themes, processes, conflicts and actors would reappear from one banana producing region to the next. The United Fruit Company, one of the major protagonists in the banana disputes (under the Chiquita brand) was actually instrumental in organising the banana export industry in the Windward Islands (Clegg, 2000). However, it is reported (Clegg, 2000) that during this same period the company was also attempting to undermine the Jamaica Banana Producers Association in regards to the Jamaican industry. The company acquired Elders and Fyffes in 1910, a major European fruit distributor, which in partnership with the Windward Islands Banana Development and Exporting Company, acquired Geest Banana, the exclusive shipper for Windward Islands banana. This sort of high level intrigue orchestrated by outside markets and decision makers in the Windward Islands' banana industry, to some, recalls colonial relations of the past. Consequently, there is now an atmosphere of inherent distrust, betrayal, even bitterness. This toxic atmosphere can and does tend to blind the aggrieved actors to the economic milieu in which they operate and distracts them from making the hard decisions necessary.

While it would be easy to cynically dismiss the situation as a classic example of lack of foresight and inaction by the countries concerned, the story of the Windward Islands banana industry is much more complex, and one with significant historical context. As Beckford (1972) argued, from the perspective of underdevelopment, that "...it is necessary to probe beyond the observation that underdevelopment derives from shortages of capital and skills and from the use of backward techniques. In order to find out why these conditions exist (and persist) one must explore the social and economic environment" (p. xxiii).

The story began in the 15th century, when Columbus, representing the Spanish monarchy discovered the New World (Williams, 1964). This discovery initiated centuries of bitter international rivalry over colonial possessions (the cockpit of Europe) which from the start represented wealth or its potential (Williams, 1964). The major nations (Spain and Portugal) were soon joined by the other major seafaring nations (Britain and France), with even Denmark and Holland entering the fray (Williams, 1964, 1970).

The bitter rivalries between these colonising powers, rather than the aspirations of the emerging colonial societies would soon determine the fates of the colonies (Williams, 1964). To facilitate the exploitation of the new territories, trade mechanisms were needed. There were two general schools of thought within the context of the colonising power—unregulated free trade and monopolies (Williams, 1964). Although the former would eventually win out, for a time the

latter prevailed, especially in the earlier periods (Williams, 1964). In the current context the issues today may be viewed as echoes of those battles of yesteryear (Williams, 1964, 1970). These echoes are discernible even today as the battles being fought on the battlefield of international trade with the major protagonists now being the US (the ascendant power) on one side and Europe on the other: the ‘dollar banana’ vs the ACP banana, ‘free market (dictated by oligopolistic US interests) vs preferential markets, American hegemony vs European protectionism (Raynolds, 2003). The significance of the monopolies lay in the fact that they allowed certain interest groups to establish hegemony in the colonies, an issue that was to have serious implications for the new emerging nations (Acosta & Casimir, 1985; Marshall, 1985; Sleeman, 1985; Williams, 1964).

The early economies of the islands were defined first by slavery then by the plantation system following the emancipation of slaves (Marshall, 1985). The British colonies until at least 1776 were of two basic types: (a) the self-sufficient and diversified economy of small farmers as in Canada and (b) the colony which has facilities for the production of staple articles on a large scale for an export market (Williams, 1964). The West Indian colonies were of the latter. In addition, being colonies of warring European powers meant that they were caught up in their rivalries, therefore their fates were decided by “home governments whose positions and policies did not necessarily reflect those of the colonies” (Williams, 1964). Therefore by colonial design, the islands were locked into the sphere of metropolitan commerce from the inception. They were merely offshore centres of agricultural commodity production in the service of the metropolises (Beckford, 1972; Marshall, 1985; Sleeman, 1985; Williams, 1964). Even today, in the context of the banana industry, Raynolds (2003) commented ironically that “England’s colonies in the Caribbean won their independence, but their economies still hinge on the smallholder banana industry established by the British” (p. 28). Subsequent socio-economic/political developments may therefore be viewed as internal adjustments to the changing externalities (over which they had no control) with which the colonies had to cope. Thus the seeds of dependency were being sown.

The first major commodity was sugar. From the era of slavery to emancipation in 1838 sugar held sway (Marshall, 1985). Within a few years post emancipation, cracks were appearing in the sugar economy, and by 1847 there was a general depression (Marshall, 1985). But even before this, in some territories there were ominous signs. In St. Lucia, the plantocracy had already declared bankruptcy by the 1830’s (Acosta et al., 1985). Only through clever social manoeuvring was that class able to survive (Acosta et al., 1985). The development of the *métayage* (sharecropper) system in order to maximize output on plantation lands, contribute to the imperial economy and provide some measure of self-sufficiency (Acosta et al., 1985). The second blow to West Indian sugar came in 1884, followed by another in 1905, brought about primarily by competition from subsidised European beet sugar (Sleeman, 1985).

The sugar crisis of 1884 was effectively the death knell of that industry in the Windward Islands. The social dislocations (especially regarding the emancipated ex-slaves) would precipitate crises in the islands (Acosta et al., 1985; Gomes 1985; Marshall 1985). Each island would adopt its own means of coping, but always within the wider scope of the maintaining the hegemony of the ruling classes (planters and merchants/agents) (Marshall 1985; Payne 1984).

Beckford (1972) posited that in the context of lesser developed countries, the concept of the 'plantation' encompassed not only the physical land-space but perhaps more importantly, the internal patterns of economic, social and political organisation. The institutional environments of these societies, he argued, resulted directly from the influence of the plantations. While this view may appear too ideological by today's monetarist standards, what is undeniable is that through control of the factors of production (land, labour and ultimately capital) the plantocracy defined the structure and functions of institutions in their respective islands (Acosta et al., 1985; Marshall, 1985; Sleeman, 1985).

With the failure of sugar in the mid-nineteenth century, many plantations were abandoned (Acosta et al., 1985) and the Windward Islands turned to banana as the primary income earner.

Banana production in the Windward Islands did not immediately supplant sugar-cane, however; both crops were produced in parallel for a long time (Acosta et al., 1985). It was only when sugar-cane became totally unviable after the Second World War did the switch occur (Mlachila et al., 2008).

Prior to the rise of banana the multiple-cropping system practiced by the peasants in the Windward Islands allowed for both subsistence and income generation through export crops (cocoa, spices, logwood, arrowroot, and limes) (Acosta et al., 1985). This diversification of production imbued peasant production system with an inherent flexibility and resilience that withstood the prolonged economic crisis precipitated by the serial depressions in the sugar industry. The adoption of banana production provided the peasants with another, more stable income stream.

The decline and eventually demise of the sugar industry in the Windward Islands highlighted the inherent structural vulnerabilities of the existing plantation systems. Without exception, the geography of the islands is dominated by mountainous terrain unsuitable for sugar cane. Arable land was very limited; as such, expansion of cropping lands was severely constrained (Marshall 1985). In comparison, where commercial sugar production required large scale sugar-cane cultivation on flat or rolling lands, perhaps best represented by the plantations, banana cultivation could be and was already practiced even on marginal lands at a peasant level.

A significant feature in this change therefore, was the inclusion of, albeit reluctantly, a nascent peasantry into the economic infrastructure (Acosta et al., 1985). This movement was not fully countenanced by the planter societies and it has been argued (Acosta et al., 1985) that the *métayage* system was enacted as a counter to it. This attempt to marginalise the emerging indigenous economic model would have serious consequences later on.

The peasants first produced food crops (ground provisions, etc.) but soon were engaged in the production of cash crops (cocoa, arrowroot, spices, banana and logwood) for export (Marshall, 1985), thereby diversifying the economies of the islands. Here was economic transformation taking place from a grass-root level, emancipation in the truest sense (Marshall, 1985). In the context of 'dependence' as defined earlier, this development may be construed as a movement towards independence. This is in stark contrast to the commonly held belief that the livelihoods of people of the Windward Islands have been dependent upon a culture of single cropping, especially sugarcane and banana. The system of monocropping was originally a construct of the plantation economy (Beckford, 1972), the persistence of which can be seen today with the development of the tourism

industry as the replacement for the banana industry as in Grenada during the 1980s and more recently St. Lucia. In any event, the colonial authorities, intent on maintaining the status quo of the plantocracy, even in the face of impending collapse, committed themselves to the rationalisation of the plantation sector effectively checking the expansion of the peasantry, domestic agriculture and ultimately the necessary economic transformation (Payne, 1984).

1.2 The Beginning

The watershed event for the Windward Islands banana industry was the realisation of demand for the fresh fruit in the US, Canada and ultimately the UK. With the development of the export market, peasants could now actively participate in the economy of the islands. As British colonies, the Windward Islands exploited its trade relations to ship banana to these countries. At the outset, however, the banana industry evolved in a protected environment, benefiting from British support (Clissold, 2001). Even with this support however, it was not until the early 1920's that the banana export trade burgeoned in the Windward Islands. This growth has been attributed to the involvement of the Swift Banana Company (a subsidiary of the North American United Fruit Co.) in St. Lucia (Clegg, 2000).

This private sector interest led to the start of serious banana cultivation in 1923, when a nursery of Gros Michel banana was developed on the island (Clegg, 2000). Clegg also argues that, from the early 20th century until relatively recently, the banana industry in the Windward Islands was controlled by public as well as private actors. Indeed, after North American companies set their sights on more profitable ventures in Central and South America, the British government sponsored the emergence of the Windward Islands as a major supplier of European banana (Raynolds, 2003). This goal was achieved by creating, with the help of a powerful state-backed banana growers' association, a decentralised banana industry, focusing peasant production towards the export sector (Raynolds, 2003). To reinforce its intention, a major British food company (Geest Banana) was granted exclusive banana exporting rights (Raynolds, 2003). The British considered the agreements fair in regards to terms of trade, prices and needed technical assistance. This move was not as much altruistic as it would appear; rather it was just as much mercantilist in its nature. The British were fearful of the hegemonic ambitions of the American companies (in particular, the United Fruit Company that had acquired Fyffes, the largest European banana distributor) (Moberg et al., 2003). In addition, relatively high prices (hence high profit margins) were to be obtained on the home markets, and, British interests were to be protected (Mlachila et al., 2008).

Banana exports from St. Lucia increased dramatically from a shipment of five-hundred bunches in 1925 to over 46,200 bunches in 1926, a rise that was due to an opening of the more accessible US and Canadian markets. All this was before the advent the so-called 'dollar bananas' (named because they are associated with the US dollar as opposed to European currencies, and the role of American multinationals in the development of the industry in South and Central American countries) later to become the bane of Windward Islands banana.

The industry faced its first major challenge by 1927. Banana production and trade fell drastically and faced collapse as a result of pests and diseases (banana weevil borer [*Cosmopolites sordidus*] and Panama disease [*Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cubense*]) (Clegg, 2000). This event should have highlighted a vexing area of vulnerability in the

Windward Islands banana production system: the lack of resources, technical and financial on the part of peasant farmers, to deal with these eventualities. The lesson was apparently ignored as would be seen later. Fortunately, the climate for banana exports from the Windward Islands began to improve in the early 1930s. At this time, the Canadian National Steamship Company, authorised by the colonial government until 1931, began to ship banana under a trade agreement between Canada and the West Indies. Panama disease continued to be a serious problem however, and by 1938, sigatoka (or leaf spot disease [*Mycosphaerella musicola*]), which was reported in Trinidad in 1934, spread to all the Windward Islands except St. Lucia, where effective quarantine measures had been implemented.

The contemporary Windward Islands banana industry entered a new era of development after World War II (Grossman, 1993). After losing banana shipments from the islands due to enemy action, the Americans turned their attention closer to home for supplies (Grossman, 1998). Given this news and sensing a potential threat, the British became more proactive regarding their colonial interests. This was motivated by a combination of economic pressures, i.e. balance-of-payments problems in the homeland, *and*, it was claimed, humanitarian concerns for peasant welfare in the Windward Islands (Grossman, 1998). After all, the prevailing philosophy was the “imperial political economy” as articulated by Lord Olivier viz: “do we prefer to have cheaper sugar or to preserve our oldest colonies, which regard themselves as part of our community” (Acosta et al., 1985, pp.41-42). But as alluded to earlier, profit, not altruism, was more likely the significant motivating force. Since the nineteenth century, the West Indian plantations had become integrated into the world capitalist system through the emergence of international monopoly corporations (Sleeman, 1985). The plantation system was being reorganised along corporate lines especially with the injection of metropolitan capital (Sleeman, 1985). Most importantly, the re-organisation was in the hands of the metropolitan corporate sector (Sleeman, 1985), which in the context of the Windward Islands meant the British corporate sector. This would have serious implications for the structures and functioning of the institutions within the industry.

Since the abolition of slavery, the plantocracy had seen its power increasingly eroded. The continued acquisition of lands by ex-slaves meant a diminishing labour force and many plantations were already in dire circumstances with the steady decline of sugar (Acosta et al., 1985; Marshall, 1985). But while the new peasants were creating and organising their own society in opposition to the plantocracy, the external relations of the islands were still being monopolised by the plantocracy through ties with the colonial government (Acosta et al., 1985). The dominance and perpetuation of the plantation system were ensured by the politics of the British Empire (Acosta et al., 1985). This socio-economic dichotomy would be manifested at a political level in the early part of the twentieth century (Acosta et al., 1985).

With emancipation, the plantation owner society in the West Indies, in collaboration with the British authorities, had worked assiduously to prevent the ex-slaves from acquiring land for their own production (Acosta et al., 1985; Marshall, 1985; Sleeman, 1985). With the acquisition of land the ex-slaves would become self-sufficient and this meant labour shortages on the plantations leading to collapse (Marshall, 1985). The authorities proclaimed the noble ideal of ensuring that the ex-slaves did not have “a relapse into barbarism and the savage state”. In reality however, the intention was that they should continue to work for wages on the

estates “not uncertainly or capriciously, but steadily and continuously” (Marshall, 1985, p. 13). Towards this end both private and public interests worked together to ensure the survival of the plantation system (Marshall, 1985).

The first avenue of land acquisition open to the emancipated slaves, like their runaway predecessors, was squatting, invariably on marginal lands (Acosta et al., 1985; Marshall, 1985). The protracted depression in the sugar industry, however, served to precipitate unanticipated structural and socio-economic changes. Plantation owners had grudgingly started to rent or actually sell surplus lands to ex-slaves in order to remain solvent during the prolonged depression in the sugar industry, but as before, these lands were usually marginal (Acosta et al., 1985; Marshall, 1985). This was so prevalent that by 1861 there were more than 10,000 freeholders in the Windward Islands (Marshall, 1985). This would have a profound effect on the socio-economic fabric of Windward Islands society. The multiple-cropping systems started by the maroons (runaway slaves) had maximised land utilisation on poor lands, sustained a subsistence lifestyle and even produced some surplus for cash sale (Acosta et al., 1985; Marshall, 1985). With the adoption of banana as the main economic crop, this large number of banana growers in the Windward Islands now had to practise mono-cropping on the same marginal lands.

There were other perhaps unforeseen and significant consequences to this development. As noted by Acosta et al. (1985), the switch to banana resulted in fundamental changes in the islands’ social structure as all strata of society now competed for a share of the economic wealth of the crop. In their attempt to stabilise the economics (read plantation sector), the British also apparently ignored the socio-political dimensions of the islands’ development. According to Acosta et al. (1985),

In fact, the substitution of sugar for bananas as the country’s main export crop introduced profound modifications in its whole social organisation. While cultivation of cane and its transformation into sugar involved relatively limited agricultural areas, located within the reach of the sugar mills, cultivation of banana spread all over the country and embraced most of the rural population in one single set of social and economic practices (p. 50).

This was the second ‘re-peasantisation’ of these islands (Mintz, 1985, 1989). This time it meant that small banana growers relinquished some of their autonomy for access to export markets.

Whereas prior to banana the peasants strove to achieve economic independence from the plantocracy, the two groups were again to confront each other in this new milieu (Acosta et al., 1985; Marshall, 1985). There were both social and political ramifications to this scenario (Acosta et al., 1985; Marshall, 1985).

Prior to WW II, the socio-economic/political dynamics of the Windward Islands’ societies came to the fore during a period of labour unrest in the British Caribbean (1934-39), drawing attention to both economic inequalities and the expectations of Caribbean peoples. Consequently, the British government set up the Moyne Commission to identify the factors affecting the livelihoods of industrial and agricultural workers in the colonies. The approach was instructive.

Noting how the number of strikes and riots were affecting the banana industry, the colonial government attempted to revive the sector with both scientific assistance and protective legislation. They based their technical efforts on the Lacatan and

Robusta cultivars of the banana, both relatively resistant to Panama disease, but as noted by Moberg et al. (2003) these varieties required higher levels of technical inputs, putting further strains on poor farmers. The British also established a preferential market for the Windward Islands by increasing the tariff on banana imported from non-Commonwealth countries and establishing a quota system to further limit their volume.

In response to the perception that high costs of production and lack of capital hindered small-scale farmers, market protections came to be seen as essential for the Windward Islands' banana industry. This created a situation such that other crops planted by the ex-slaves were neglected by authorities. By creating conditions that were 'favourable' to banana cultivation and marketing (technical assistance, assured markets, guaranteed prices) at the expense of other crops, the British were in effect 'seducing' the farming communities into an economic model that would have far reaching consequences later on.

With colonial assistance, shipments of banana (now mostly from Dominica) resumed in 1949. Stability of the industry was regained in 1952, when Geest Industries (West Indies) Limited signed a ten-year contract for the regular shipment of Windward Island bananas to Britain under the same protectionist measures (Momsen, 1969). This combination of colonial interventions and associated developments resulted in the socio-economic development of the islands now being inextricably linked to the health of the banana industry. The new era of dependency had begun.

The banana industry grew rapidly in the 1950's but again experienced setbacks in the 1960's and 1970's due to low banana prices, rising costs of inputs, occasional hurricanes, pests, droughts and a volcanic eruption (Grossman, 1998). The resilience of the industry and its producers was evidenced by the significant boom in the late 1980s, which occurred in response to higher banana-producer prices. Production increased to 274,000 tonnes in 1992, accounting for nearly 20% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the three major banana exporting countries (Dominica, St. Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines) and 30-35% of their total labour force.

1.2 Banana Industry: A Windward Island Perspective

The situation in which the banana industry finds itself today has not gone unnoticed. One banana farmer (interviewed by Isaac and Wilson, 19 Jan. 2010) made a connection between decisions made in Caribbean history by foreign powers, which led to the elimination of protected markets, and present-day threats to the industry by the World Trade Organisation (WTO):

In the 1700s, foreign industrial interests in the West Indies lobbied for the Sugar Duties Equalisation Act, which eliminated duties for West Indian sugar....This is very similar to what has happened with the WTO centuries later! Similar economic instruments were used,...[which] decimated the West Indian sugar industry and eliminated our preferential treatment.

Another banana farmer (interviewed in the same period) lamented:

They removed tariff. No protection. [We are in] competition with them big farmers up there....Prices [for bananas] have not yet gone down, but, you know, eventually [they] will!

Like other agro-exports in developing countries, the banana industry in the Windwards has recently been threatened by changing market relations happening far away and led by unknown powerful actors. While the industry has been characterised by a continued dependency on foreign markets and policymakers for a period that spans five decades, the current situation now threatens the very survival of the banana industry and the livelihood of banana farmers. Mirroring the farmers themselves, local policymakers seek to explain the present situation in terms of a moral calamity: the loss of a 'brotherly' relationship with outside powers, which had been based on something more than just cold market logic:

Our banana pains continue to intensify the prognosis appears to be very bleak. The recent WTO ruling has left us dazed and helpless. The concept of every man being his brother's keeper has been shattered. Can we survive? Would our cries go unheeded? What about neighbours? Are they deaf or uncaring? I know it now. Money and greed have been elevated to the status of a religion and care and concern are now regarded a vice. Our future is now on a life support system. However, I am confident that our resourcefulness and faith will see us through.²

The EU trade preference for banana has in the past afforded the Caribbean ACP countries significant income transfers ((Mlachila et al., 2008). From the perspective of people on the ground, therefore, the continued erosion of the Windward Islands' preferential market with Britain is symptomatic of the erosion of some higher ideals, a cultural understanding of 'just' trade and social relations that have developed with this region over time.

By design, the islands were locked into the sphere of metropolitan commerce from the inception; they were captive economies, merely offshore centres of production (Beckford, 1972; Williams, 1964). The developments, socio-economic/political may be seen as adjustments made by the various societies to deal with that reality (Acosta et al., 1985; Beckford, 1972). Perhaps the most telling but unspoken (though often alluded to by Beckford (1972) among others) feature of the socio-economic development of the Windward Islands is the failure in the first instance, of the former colonial masters, then the power blocs (US and EU) to recognise and treat with the essential dialectic of colonial and post-colonial economies. Hence little or no cognizance was paid to counter-plantation systems as a means to engage the entire population from a grass-root level with a view of building an indigenous focused economic model (Acosta et al., 1985). Therefore this moral economy of entitlements and non-market logic stems from historical relationships between colonizer and colonized, tacit understandings that beset the industry—on both sides of the Atlantic—from its very beginnings (Beckford, 1972; Williams, 1964, 1970).

² Hon. Allen Alpian, Minister of Foreign Affairs, St. Vincent and The Grenadines, Caribbean Banana Exporter Association, 2010.

1.3 Present Economic and Ecological Pressures on Banana Farmers' Livelihoods

It is evident that the banana industry in the Windward Islands has been saddled by a tremendous amount of baggage. This baggage in essence was essentially unrelated to the crop itself but was a product of the socio-political dynamics of the Islands' societies and only served to constrain the competitiveness of the industry in the face of purpose developed competition.

Bananas sell in the European Union (the second largest market for the fruit) at around €800-900 per tonne, almost double the world price (Vanzetti et al., 2004). Although more than four million tonnes were sold in 2003, consumption has been limited by the high prices (Vanzetti et al., 2004). This price regime ostensibly was initiated to protect preferences granted to former colonies; implicit assistance (Mlachila et al., 2008). While the levels of this assistance could have been significant [8% of GDP for the period 1977-2005 in Windward Islands, excluding Grenada and double official development assistance (ODA)] they have declined noticeably (Mlachila et al., 2008). What was clear about the implicit assistance was that in addition to all the support already provided to banana growers, there was this most compelling message conveyed to farmers: there are significant, tangible benefits exclusive to banana production. In spite of this implicit altruism, European mercantilist interests however, cannot be discounted, and Vanzetti et al. (2004) argued that most likely the European distributors have and continue to benefit the most from the protection and artificially inflated prices of banana in Europe. While the industry may appear to be market driven, given that only a small volume of banana production takes place within the EU (NERA, 2003), with its oligopolistic nature there appears to be some measure of manipulation occurring. Bananas sell in the EU at almost double the world price, creating a situation where overall consumption is actually limited by the high prices (UNCTAD, 2004). This may be of some benefit to the Windward Islands producers with their higher production costs, but to the lower-costs Latin American industry, it appears (and maybe rightly so) to be profiteering at their expense.

Ideally, the banana export market should have allowed for a continuation of the cultural underpinnings of Afro-Caribbean subsistence patterns, as small-scale cultivation for household and community coexists with production for the market (see Mintz, 1989). The reality, however, was different. Political, technical and marketing support, guaranteed markets and implicit assistance for banana, all conspired to undermine the fundamental logic of the peasant system. Given present economic and ecological pressures (explained below), small farmers in the Windward Islands have had no choice but to mirror their Afro-Caribbean predecessors, continuing to diversify against the odds. Farmers interviewed (Isaac & Wilson, 19 Jan. 2010) contended that banana cultivation, as it is presently supported by government initiatives, give producers access to inputs which they may use for other crops, such as yams and cassava. In addition to banana, one farmer grew pineapples, potatoes, peanuts, tannia and tree crops, proudly claiming that his father taught him to 'never plant just one crop.' This strategy for production recalls Michael Lipton's well-known thesis that rather than being profit maximizers, 'peasants' are 'optimizers,' balancing profits and yields with risks (Lipton, 1968).

Small farmers of the Windward Islands reap relatively low yields of banana. This is so, not only because they often diversify their farms with subsistence crops, but also because they lack capital inputs such as machinery. Moreover, the small size of banana

farms and their locations on steep and difficult terrain also limit output, especially since sloped lands and heavy rains make these farms highly susceptible to soil erosion (Campbell & Barker, 1997). As a result of colonial monopolies and continued patterns of land use in the post-colonial period, land scarcities on the islands have led to overuse, decreased soil fertility, considerable soil erosion and increased weed infestations, especially of the noxious weed, *Commelina diffusa* (watergrass). While this weed was once encouraged as a ground cover to reduce soil erosion (Edmunds 1968), it has now come to haunt farmers. Watergrass has been identified as the host of the reniformis nematode (*Rotylenchulus reniformis*), the root burrowing nematode (*Radopholus similis*) and the banana lesion nematode (*Pratylenchus goodeyi*), all of which significantly reduce banana production (Edmunds, 1971).

In addition to low levels of production, the inferior quality of banana shipped to the UK has also been a nagging problem in the industry. The challenge to rid UK-bound banana of bruises, crown rot or other cosmetic problems was always present. However, marketing became much more difficult after the rise of ‘dollar bananas’, which are more competitively priced and are of consistently higher quality. As the sovereign consumer in ‘developed’ economies has increased in importance, the British market demanded better quality banana, and Windward farmers were being forced to produce more competitively with their Latin American counterparts.

As argued previously, banana production in the Windward Islands is significantly different from that which reaps ‘dollar bananas’ in Latin America. Grown on plantations, banana produced by Chiquita and others use large amounts of pesticides, nematicides and soil fumigants to control diseases, with consequent harmful effects on the health of the workers. Latin American farms are large, highly mechanized and flat plantations managed by major multinational corporations who seek ‘flexible’ forms of capitalist production, such as the use of cheap peasant labour. Consequently, production costs for Latin American banana have been about half those of their Caribbean counterparts (Moberg, 2008). Given these pressures, many small banana farmers of the Windwards have lost confidence in the enterprise, resulting in a mass exodus of farmers from the industry.

1.4 The Global Battle for Banana: 1993 to the Present

Prior to the introduction of a Common Market Organisation (CMO) for banana on 1st July 1993, there existed in Europe a variety of import regimes,³ most of which still reflected the relationship between European powers and their colonies/former colonies. The French market was supplied principally from the overseas departments of Guadeloupe and Martinique, and the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) states of Cote d’Ivoire and the Cameroon. The Portuguese supply came mainly from Madeira, the Azores and the Algarve and Cape Verde. The UK granted preferential access to banana from the ACP states of Jamaica, the Windward Islands, Belize and Suriname. The Spanish market was served exclusively by the Canary Islands. Italy received its supplies from Somalia. Like Britain, most former colonial powers in Europe imposed a twenty percent tariff on imports of ‘dollar bananas’ from Latin America.

On 1st July 1993, Council Regulation of the European Economic Community (EEC) 404/935 was introduced, replacing the various national banana import regimes.

³ UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), the European Commission banana regime, GATT/WTO (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs/World Trade Organisation) challenges, and the evolving policy framework.

Under this scheme, three categories of banana imports were recognised: (1) traditional ACP banana, (2) non-traditional ACP banana and (3) third country banana. Imports of banana from the twelve traditional ACP countries were allowed duty-free access to the EEC; however, contrary to the preceding regime, ACP imports were based on fixed quotas for each country. Imports from non-traditional ACP suppliers and third country sources were also subject to quotas, but with tariffs.

The new scheme was unacceptable to US banana producers and in 1993 multinationals in five Latin American countries (Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Venezuela) made a formal complaint in the GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs) claiming that the European Commission (EC) banana regime infringed fundamental GATT principles. The issue was partly settled by the end of 1993, resulting in the Banana Framework Agreement (BFA). Four out of the five complaining parties agreed to cease any further action against the CMO (Common Market Organisation).

For several years, the WTO consistently upheld the US's position, corporate interests collaborating with the 'public' sector in Washington to fight against the EU's preference system (Clissold, 2001). But Washington's position in the debate was not always so powerful. Indeed, the recent trade war began as an *intra*-European conflict between former colonies (Britain, France and to a certain extent Spain) whose trade preferences conflicted with Germany and a few other European states. Since the latter did not have any moral obligations to former colonies, they preferred to import cheaper, blemish-free banana from Latin America (Clissold, 2001). With the expansion of the EU and later adoption of a Common Banana Marketing Regime (COMB), a dramatic shift occurred in how the banana trade was conceptualised by European lawmakers: from humanitarian concerns for smaller, more vulnerable producers, to strictly market and consumer-based interests.

In anticipation of a more liberalised market, the major multinationals involved in banana exports to Europe – Chiquita, Dole and Del Monte – embarked on a rapid expansion of production in Latin America, especially in Ecuador and Costa Rica. These two became the major exporters, both accounting for well over half of international trade. There was also expansion in Colombia, West Africa (Ivory Coast, Cameroon, and Ghana), Belize and the Dominican Republic. The COMB (Common Banana Marketing Regime) continued to offer protection to ACP exporters, which caused a glut in the market. Battles for market share ensued, ending in a trade dispute complaint to the WTO made on behalf of the three US multinationals and backed by the US government (under Clinton), an act which set the US and the EU against one another (Gonsalves, 2004). The so-called 'banana war' had begun, as did modifications to the banana regime, which would lead to the demise of 'just' terms of trade for ACP banana producers.

Most recently, in December 2009, the EC and the Latin American producers agreed on a deal to end litigations via a yearly reduction of the tariff, from the present €176/ton to €114/ton in 2017, giving some producers of 'dollar bananas' even greater reductions in tariffs to €75/ton (Silva, 2010). These measures will, according to Silva (2010), have drastic consequences for the smaller banana farmers:

For the Windward Islands' producers, whose smaller non-plantation farms, higher wages and difficult topography constitute a significant cost disadvantage, this market opening in Europe constitutes a formidable

challenge, given that many producers are facing financial difficulties even at current prices (p. 1).

Lower prices of banana on the global market have resulted in an unprecedented decline in banana exports from the Windward Islands. Thousands of banana farmers in the region have been affected by calls to open the so-called ‘free’ market. Indeed, it has been reported that exports in 2003 were less than a quarter of the 1990 high of 277,441 tonnes. Accordingly, earnings in 2003 were only 30% of those a decade earlier. Of the 24,100 registered growers in 1993, there are less than 5,000 left today.

The casualties of this ‘banana war’ have been the banana farmer and the banana worker, who are caught in the battle between ‘free’ versus ‘fair’ terms of trade. Individual countries in the Windward Islands have, in part, followed the neoliberal path, moving towards commercialisation of the industry (Gonsalves, 2004). Yet state-level protections are still on the agenda. St. Lucia privatised the industry, while St. Vincent and the Grenadines commercialised it with greater state control. Most governments paid off debts of the banana producers’ associations, the key intermediaries between the producers and the foreign companies buying the banana. The Windward Island Banana Development and Exporting Company (WIBDECO) (now renamed WINFRESH) was established in 1993 as a marketing agent and part-owner of the shipping service to ensure more benefits to farmers from various links in the chain. Inputs have been subsidised in some countries, and farmers’ incomes have been made exempt from income tax and other concessions have been granted to the farmers. Some international assistance has also been given, especially that of the Fairtrade Organisation of Britain.

Despite continued challenges posed by the latest banana regime, which has virtually eliminated all protection of ACP countries, entry of Caribbean states and the Fair Trade Organisation into the banana industry has opened the way towards new forms of entitlement for banana farmers. Quality-assurance requirements such as EUREPGAP (a European institution that certifies high standard agricultural products, such as organic) are slowly being met and farmers and workers have increased productivity and quality (Gonsalves, 2004). In what could be described as a new “day-o” for farmers, the industry has found a niche market in Fairtrade, which has been viewed as a possible solution to the crisis in the Windward Island banana industry. But does Fairtrade ensure entitlements without continuing the historical dependency that Windward Island farmers have faced since the days of slavery?

1.5 Fairtrade to the Rescue?

From the introduction of the New Banana Regime (NBR) in 1993 to the ever-more neoliberal agenda for banana of the present, farmers in the Windward Islands have expressed their dissent. Acting on long-held values and ideas embedded in the colonial histories of these societies, small-scale banana farmers have sought to maintain their small-farming heritage, characterised by at least some autonomy and entitlements to foreign markets. After the introduction of the NBR, members of the banana community in St. Lucia, for example, voiced what can only be called moral outrage, protesting and organising into the ‘Banana Salvation Committee’ to fight against state actors who upheld foreign neoliberal interests (Slocum, 2006).

In order to overcome some of the economic challenges of banana farming in the Windward Islands, thousands of farmers have recently entered into the Fairtrade

market (Myers, 2004). From the rhetoric of the Fairtrade Organisation (FTO), which emerged in the Europe in the 1990s as part of the ethical shift in consumerism, one would think this market has given farmers back the just dues they lost from their former colonial ties, and more:

Fairtrade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South.

Fairtrade organizations, backed by consumers, are actively engaged in supporting producers, raising awareness and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade. Fairtrade products are produced and traded in accordance with these principles – wherever possible verified by credible, independent assurance systems (European Fairtrade Association, 2006).

Some farmers in the Windward Islands have described Fairtrade as ‘a shining light pointing us to ... [a means of] surviv[al] ... in the agricultural export sector.’ In fact, Fairtrade claims to have been the saviour of Dominican farmers and ‘of [Dominican] agriculture and the whole economy’ (Fairtrade Organization, 2004). It is undisputable that Fairtrade offers a more humane alternative to existing international trade networks, assisting small-scale and other disadvantaged producers in developing countries to improve their quality of life by providing a more profitable and stable trade relationship. As one researcher put it:

By demystifying global relations of exchange and challenging market competitiveness based solely on price, the Fairtrade movement creates a progressive opening for bridging the widening North/South divide and wresting control of the agro-food system away from oligopolistic transnational corporations, infamous for their socially and environmentally destructive business practices (Raynolds, 2000, p. 297).

Improved standards, which reflect both environmental and ethical concerns, are now implemented by EUREPGAP, Tesco Nature Choice and Global Gap. These certification bodies have been recently introduced in the islands by the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO) to improve food safety, health and environmental practices. They are being welcomed in some circles given the wake of an industry that has contributed to highly polluted lands and rivers and the extinction or near extinction of species of butterflies, grasshoppers and birds (Fairtrade Organisation, 2004). In fact, Moberg (2008) cites Fairtrade as a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. But do the interests of Fairtrade in conforming to these standards align with farmers’ interests? How much do new forms of entitlement provided by Fairtrade break from a past of dependency?

With the recent tightening of EU supermarket controls over safety standards and regulations, however, particularly cogent in the aftermath of the ‘mad cow’ disease scare, many farmers in the banana industry have begun to question how ‘fair’ the FTO actually is for people like themselves. Farmers interviewed in St. Vincent and the Grenadines complained about ever-increasing rules for Fairtrade production,

including the need to eliminate herbicides (a very difficult task given the pervasiveness of watergrass) and the need to grow banana that have the right ‘look.’ Some mentioned the new, very meticulous aesthetic requirements of supermarkets, including the rejection of bananas that do not have the right curvature.

In contrast to the Fairtrade Organisation’s sanguine statements cited above, one interviewee correlated the FLO’s adoption of supermarket regulations to the Windward Islands’ earlier state of dependency:

Philosophically, Fairtrade is about making it easier for the farmers, but now the branding dimension has taken over the ethical or philosophical origins....Fairtrade has evolved as an organism of its own...to the point that trading, branding, rules and regulations are more important than what FT originally stood for....[It is] hard to see the difference between FT and what we had before....They [FT people from Europe] are bringing over institutions, rules...that have developed over centuries [in Europe], but that do not have that history here.

In the process of becoming an international NGO and brand, the Fairtrade Organisation has adopted policies that mirror other ‘macro actors’ (Callon & Latour, 1981) in the global economy. While claiming to represent the priorities of Third World producers, the Fairtrade Organisation must necessarily conform to larger globalising forces, exemplified by low supermarket quotas for banana, strict certification requirements and yearly audits. Moreover, the organisation has created a universal policy for the production and marketing of banana that defines the very possibilities and directions of the industry, many of which do not conform to the social and ecological realities of banana farming in the Windward Islands.

For instance, while Fairtrade emphasises the need for more sustainable, diversified production systems, the control of soil erosion and the use of fewer chemicals, it does not take into account the ‘culture of chemicals’ (interview with farmer; 20 January 2010) that besets the history of ‘modern’ thinking in the region. Although the use of certain nematicides is allowed, the use of herbicides is totally prohibited by the organisation. Because of the reduction in herbicide use, the weed *Commelina diffusa* (watergrass) has become a major threat to Fairtrade banana production, at least in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The watergrass is closely associated with nematodes and competes with banana for nutrients in the soil (Isaac, Brathwaite, Ganpat, & Bekele, 2007).⁴ Additionally, bio-fungicides, which are allowed by Fairtrade for the control of two diseases which have just recently begun to plague the islands (Moko [*Ralstonia solanacearum*] and Black sigatoka [*Mycosphaerella fijiensis*]), are not as effective as traditional chemical methods for control and have contributed to further cosmetic blemishes on banana as well as rejection. Another pressing issue for Windward Island banana farmers is the ‘cost-price’ squeeze that many small farmers in the ‘developing’ world continue to face: increasing costs for inputs and decreasing prices for outputs. Many of the inputs (chemicals and fertilizers) for which the banana industry is heavily dependent for its survival, have to be imported from countries such as the Dominican Republic and Europe.

⁴ Using participatory research methods, farmers together with researchers (ibid.) identified three cover crops that could reduce weed infestation and nematode damage and enhance soil fertility, thus providing a possible pesticide-free solution to some of the problems faced by low resource small banana farmers.

Farmers interviewed in St. Vincent are well aware that their production is ultimately dependent on the supermarkets and not the Fairtrade Organisation. As a representative of the Ministry of Agriculture in St. Vincent (who is also a banana farmer) related:

With recent ‘market adjustments,’ supermarkets [in the UK] are paying lower prices for Fairtrade banana, while the costs for farmers are increasing....Farmers are not stupid. They see the standards, rules [imposed on them]...they know about the supermarkets’ powers.

Despite this continued dependence, which, in the minds of some farmers at least, harps back to a colonial past, there are signs that farmers’ long-held and valued entitlements to the British market are still being respected, even by more powerful stakeholders than the Fairtrade Organisation. In what has been referred to as one of the most dramatic corporate interventions in any country’s economy since the eighteenth century (Vidal, 2007), in 2007 one of the major British supermarket chains (Sainsbury’s) went to the Windward Islands to try to assist in the survival of small-scale farming. The company announced that all the banana it would sell from that date on would be Fairtrade, and that one-hundred million tons alone would come from St. Lucia (ibid.). Presently, the supermarket is buying 80% of Dominica’s export banana and much from the other Windwards. Despite this kind of tangible support, which stems from the private sector this time, it is evident that the Windward Islands’ banana industry is still characterised by a heritage of dependency.

2.0 Conclusion

The Windward Islands’ banana industry will continue to face challenges in selling its banana on the global market. Small farmers will continue to struggle to overcome pests and disease problems, as well as to deal with new forms of regulation that seem to get more complicated by the year. There are new opportunities on the horizon, however. The Fairtrade option, for instance, may provide the ‘bread and butter’ foundation on which other initiatives can be developed.

Researchers and farmers alike have recognised the potential for diversification within the banana industry, such as the development of niche markets for unique varieties of banana (i.e. the small ‘lunch box’ banana, ‘*sucrier*’ or exotic varieties, or ‘*figue rose*,’ which is a pink flesh banana). Additionally, there is the possibility of processing banana into a variety of products such as baby foods, condiments, snack foods, etc. Agro-tourism is a potentially attractive option, and it may fit nicely with the Fairtrade system. Agro-tourism offers tourists the opportunity to be part of the banana production experience, which can, in itself, be a very powerful marketing tool for the industry, as visitors may become more proactive consumers upon returning to their home countries.

The Windward Islands’ banana industry stands on the threshold of dispelling the whole dependency culture. However, for this to happen, all stakeholders of the industry will have to be much more pro-active in order to secure their own future. Instead of dependency, the system would now be one of rewards for creative inputs. In this new paradigm, farmers could be singing “daylight come and we no want go home”.

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