(RE-)MAKING THE CASE FOR LAND REFORM IN JAMAICA

Tony Weis

Social and Economic Studies; Mar 2004; 53, 1; ABI/INFORM Global
pg. 35

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to highlight the potential for charting a new trajectory for agriculture in Jamaica amidst the current crisis of both the plantation and small farm sectors. It approaches this task by combining theoretical arguments drawn from various germane literatures with critical insights from qualitative interviews with small farmers, government officials, and representatives of non-governmental organizations, building a multi-layered case for land reform. The re-politicization of land reform is framed as the foundational policy change needed to create a more competitive, socially just, and ecologically sustainable model of agricultural production in Jamaica.

Introduction

Agriculture in Jamaica is on a precipice, with both plantations and small farmers facing intense competitive pressures linked to the speeding integration of the global food economy and its highly uneven regulation.¹ Threats to preferential trade agreements are exposing the uncompetitiveness of Jamaica's sugar and banana plantations while small farmers, the historic 'backbone' of Jamaican society, face a forbidding future, with the burden of their spatial inheritance magnified by a withering state, negative social and political attitudes towards agriculture, and a wave of import competition wrought by liberalization.

Liberalization intensified in Jamaica in the 1990s as part of the process of structural adjustment and with the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and could deepen through

¹ The terminology of 'small farmers' and 'peasants' is used interchangeably, according to the context, to describe small-scale producers whose livelihood and culture are rooted in farming. The terminology of small farmers is the norm in the Caribbean today, while the language of peasants predominates in the historical and theoretical literature.
ongoing negotiations for the WTO and for the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). The impact of liberalization on Jamaica's agricultural sector is seen vividly in the soaring agricultural trade deficit; from a near balance in 1990, its agro-exports now equal only three-fifths of agro-imports, and this threatens to worsen with the erosion of preferential export markets. Put bluntly, this new global context threatens to make agricultural production in Jamaica – as it is currently constituted – obsolete, especially given the steadily decreasing investment in agriculture by both the structurally adjusted state and the private sector.

Jamaica's agricultural sector has for some time been drifting without any clear development strategies, the closest thing being the government's fixation on maintaining preferential markets during the 1990s and its continuing efforts to prop up the sugar industry for re-privatization. However, preferential trade arrangements for bananas are doomed and for sugar are highly uncertain, and the prospect of a large-scale infusion of private capital into sugar appears highly implausible. Meanwhile, small farmers persist on marginal lands through grit and determination but little in the way of material support, while most young people are rejecting farming altogether.

Despite these ominous trends, this paper assumes that the demise of agriculture is not inevitable. Rather, it sees agriculture as a sector that can and must be reinvigorated, and points to the centrality of land reform in this effort amidst contemporary political, economic, and social realities.

Approach

The approach here is guided by Hoogvelt's claim that "the task of the critical social scientist is to uncover 'plausible' alternative futures" (1997:11), and Thomas' insistence that after years of deconstructing neoliberal policy-making in the Caribbean, "there is a pressing need once more to embark on sustained scholarship focusing more on reconstructing and devising alternative models of political economy for the region and less on deconstruction (2000:500)." Central to this task, as Witter and Lindsay (1996:xxv) insist, is the need to identify "politically feasible ways of connecting the poor and the powerless to land and other productive resources."
The essential argument of this paper is that while Jamaica's old plantation landscape is quickly becoming obsolete in the global food economy, there is an urgent need to reconsider the contemporary relevance of land reform, and by exploring the possibilities it is hoped this paper can help stimulate debate on the matter. The paper begins by describing the unevenness of the Jamaican landscape before reviewing the outcomes and prospects of trade liberalization, first for the plantation sector and then for small farmers in domestic markets. The heart of the paper is a multi-layered case for land reform, with the potential productivity, equity, and ecological benefits developed by weaving together an array of arguments drawn from different literatures – from development economics to agroecology – with insights from key participants in the government and in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and from small farmers situated on the periphery of a large banana estate.\(^2\) The final section outlines the essential considerations and supporting policies that will demand attention in order for land reform to be successful, emphasizing that while land reform is an essential foundation for Jamaica's agrarian transformation, it is not an end in itself.

The Uneven Landscape

In order to assess the case for land reform it is necessary to first appreciate the enduring unevenness of the plantation landscape. The Jamaican peasantry was "born struggling for land" at the margins of the plantation landscape (Beckford and Witter 1991:41), and most small farmers remain heavily constrained by colonialism's inheritance. As Campbell put it, "the stamp of enslavement can be seen all over the Jamaican countryside" (1994:1).

Following Emancipation, plantations acted as a colossal constraint on peasant development,\(^3\) repeatedly blocking peasants'
access to land, forcing many to seek wage labour, limiting access to capital and credit, inhibiting the innovation of appropriate technology, and dominating state expenditure. So while unemployment and the underutilization of prime lands have been endemic problems in Jamaica, the peasantry has had to relentlessly endeavour against "an institutional setting...biased toward its stagnation" (Beckford 1972a:23). Sadly, as Robotham noted, land distribution was only ever conceived in narrow ways: "The approach which has usually been adopted...is to ask how much land, etc. is available to turn over to the peasants without damaging the 'rights' of upper strata farmers and planters. Or...what is a 'feasible land norm' to aim at given 'present constraints'?" (1977:56).

Nearly 170 years after Emancipation, Jamaica's landed inequities remain staggering, with roughly 4 percent of landholders controlling 65 percent of all the agricultural land in estates and pastures that dominate the fertile alluvial plains. The remaining 96 percent of landholders (including the 7 percent classed as landless) control only 35 percent of the agricultural land in small, hillside farms that average 0.83 hectares (ha) (SIOJ 1998). These inequities are magnified by the widespread insecurity of tenure,^4^ differential land quality, and unequal access to irrigation and infrastructure.

At present, roughly 270,000 ha of land are cultivated in Jamaica (SIOJ 1998), of which sugar controls 40,000 ha of the highest quality farmland (roughly half in large estates) while 83,000 ha is devoted to pasture (MoA 2000). The phenomenon of idle land

---

^4^ Jamaica contains more than 600,000 land parcels of different sizes, and the majority of landowners do not have registered titles. Surveying costs, legal fees, and the length of the titling process make the process of obtaining titles prohibitive, despite the recently designed Land Administration and Management Program.

---

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
amidst land hunger is another striking feature of rural Jamaica: between 1968-96, the area of land cultivated fell by 26 percent (from 365,000 ha), meaning that more than 90,000 ha now sits idle (SIOJ 1998). A Rural and Agricultural Development Authority (RADA) official described this plainly: "as we move around the countryside, we see land formerly in production now in waste" (Gleaner 2000b). Amidst the inequity and fallow, the government is by far the largest single landowner.

Hemmed in by the plantation landscape, many small farmers have been forced to clear and cultivate excessively steep, unstable, and highly erodible slopes; 80 percent of Jamaica is hilly limestone or is mountainous with slopes over 15 degrees, and over half the island has slopes in excess of 20 degrees. This terrain has made small farmers both the principal agents and victims of mounting deforestation, soil erosion, and water conservation problems. In addition to endangering the island’s significant biodiversity, deforestation increases surface runoff, heightening vulnerability to floods, slope failure, and dangerous landslides during rainy seasons; exposes thin soils to erosion (a problem compounded by the erosional impacts of fire and the slow formation of soils on steeply sloped lands); decreases aquifer recharge sites and hence underground water levels; and affects changes in the hydrological cycle, contributing to longer and harsher drought periods (Weis 2000a; UNEP 1999; NRCA 1997; Eyre 1996).

Deforestation, erosion, downstream sedimentation, and desiccation have produced watershed degradation of crisis proportions: 19 of Jamaica’s 26 Watershed Management Units are classed as critical (defined as “very degraded and in need of urgent remedial work“) (NRCA 1997), and 100 perennial rivers have ceased to flow year-round over the past half-century (Eyre 1996). This translates into declining agricultural productivity and reduced irrigation potential, as well as reduced water access for households, industries, and the tourist sector, while sedimentation increases the cost of water infrastructure and treatment and damages vulnerable offshore reefs and fish habitat.

In short, the deep inequities of Jamaica’s agricultural landscape continue to levy serious social and ecological costs.
The Current Crisis of Agriculture in Jamaica

*Endangered Exports*

As noted, Jamaica's widening agro-trade deficit threatens to worsen with looming changes to preferential export markets. The transitional phase-out period for the Lomé Agreement was negotiated in Cotonou in 2000, and upheld by the WTO at the Doha Ministerial in 2001, giving ACP nations a short transition period to become competitive, which was subsequently shortened further by the EU's 'Everything But Arms' initiative for duty-free imports from the world's poorest nations. As Jamaica's Minister of Agriculture noted with reference to sugar, the changes imply that "we do not have time on our hands...those in the industry must realize that the time of reckoning is at hand" (Gleaner 2000a).

Jamaica's sugar industry remains characterized by under-investment, heavy indebtedness, out-dated factories, high production costs, inefficient field productivity (low quality and inadequate cane tonnage, leading to a low sugar per hectare ratio), and poor working conditions and labour relations, causing widespread absenteeism and poor motivation. The lack of investment has led to inadequate input usage, replanting, and rotations (causing nutrient exhaustion and high pathogen loads), while aged and out-dated equipment and rising security expenses contribute to inefficiencies and increasing costs (MoA 2000; Harrison 1998ab). The industry's problems were reflected in its increasing failure to meet both existing quotas and domestic demand by the late 1990s, and most estates continue to incur serious losses and are heavily dependent on the government for survival. Added to these tangible costs, as noted long ago, is the fact that plantation control of the best agricultural lands represents a large implicit subsidization by small farmers (Thomas 1969; Beckford 1965).

But to understand the full extent of sugar's infirmity it must be viewed in the context of changing market conditions. For many years, Jamaica has sold its sugar through different forms of price and quota protection that have brought roughly three times the world market price. The majority goes to Europe at a price of US$613/tonne (late 1990s prices), and the remainder to the US at US$521/tonne (US Sugar Protocol) and US$466/tonne (US quota
sales), in contrast to a world market price of around US$200/tonne (MoA 2000).

Trade liberalization will bring a shock to the global price of sugar in the coming years. Given the vast extent of preferential agreements (through which most sugar is traded), markets are very distorted – the price most producing nations receive has been artificially inflated while the world market price has been artificially deflated. As a reflection of this distortion, the average sugar production costs globally were roughly double the average world market price during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, liberalization promises to increase the world market price of sugar (which ranges as low as US$0.09-0.12/lb), but not to anywhere near the preferential prices Jamaica has received since some major producers (e.g. Brazil, Australia) can compete at currently deflated market prices and since industrial substitutes will continue to put downward pressure on prices.

The Planning Institute of Jamaica forecasts a 20-35 percent price decline in sugar by 2010, by which point all forms of price support could be abolished (Gleaner 2001c). In other words, as an OECD report stated, the liberalization of sugar “will inevitably reduce a domestic industry’s revenues as ‘the cake’ shrinks” (2000:69). The prospect of a significantly shrinking cake is an unsavoury one for Jamaica’s sugar industry, especially given the paltry crumbs on which plantation and factory workers currently subsist.

Various projections have been made as to how Jamaica’s high cost sugar industry could become competitive, all of which look daunting in the context of preferential prices, much less amidst the projected falling ones. In this context, the fact that the government continues to brace sugar with the lion’s share of the agricultural budget relates to the social and economic costs its collapse would

5 The sugar production of Jamaica and CARICOM is miniscule on the world market, such that they have virtually no impact on global pricing. For instance, Jamaica’s sugar exports are less than 3 percent of Brazil’s.

6 After acquiring the Sugar Company of Jamaica from a state of bankruptcy, the Jamaican government made major investments between 1998 and 2001 to re-establish sugar production on idle lands, upgrade factories, and increase credit, extension, and irrigation support to cane farmers, as well as providing a large debt guarantee in 2001 that kept the industry solvent.
have in the short term. The "terrible dilemma" underpinning sugar's culture of inertia and welfarism is described well by Harrison: "those living in its confines are trapped in perpetual poverty with few opportunities for real development; yet its overthrow, with the potential for true emancipation in the longer term, necessitates the loss of a survival wage and even greater suffering for rural people" (1998a:14). But the magnitude of change forecast is so great that the competitive restructuring and successful divestment of Jamaica's sugar industry can only be seen as highly improbable, with continued public investment akin to "flogging a dead horse" (Gleaner 2000c). Fortunately, the "economic paralysis" engendered by sugar's cyclical decline and resuscitation "may be resolved with final crisis" (Harrison 1998b:247), giving rise to hopeful and transformative opportunities.

Jamaica's banana production has also been jeopardized by changing global trade regulation, though its implications are more regionalized to eastern Jamaica. The EU-ACP banana regime was challenged at the WTO from the mid-1990s onwards, and investment and production in Jamaican bananas subsequently shrunk. WTO rulings twice forced the EU to rewrite its banana import system, improving the position of Latin American bananas (and the US-based corporations controlling most of them) in EU markets. At Cotonou, the EU maintained a transitional quota system for ACP bananas until 2006, after which time they will lose their quotas but keep duty-free access against a yet-to-be determined flat-rate tariff for other producers — a changing environment which will undoubtedly reduce the prices earned by Jamaica's banana exporters.

Throughout all of the legal wrestling over bananas at the WTO, the government of Jamaica refused to concede that ACP preferences were doomed. After such hopes proved futile, it turned to the task of trying to facilitate a giant leap in efficiency (with financial support from the EU), at the same time as the Ministry of Agriculture had conceded that without preferences, "regardless of the [expected] improvements in production and productivity...it will be difficult for us to compete in either price or volume" given the "fierce competition in the EU market...expected from low cost, higher quality fruit from Latin America and some African countries" (MoA 2000).
Central American banana exporters have an average yield of 22 tonnes/acre, in contrast to Jamaica’s 7.5 tonnes/acre, and can produce bigger, brighter, and more uniform bananas. This enormous productivity gap is reflected in the extreme cost uncompetitiveness of Jamaican bananas; an 18 kg box of bananas costs US$5.50 to produce in Central America, on average, versus US$10 on Jamaica’s largest and most productive estates. The obvious implication is that competitiveness in a post-preferences era demands Jamaican producers “dramatically reduce costs” (MoA 2000).

Although there have been recent investments to modernize the sector, the fundamental competitive disadvantage for Jamaica’s banana exports remains wages, which account for roughly half of the total production costs and which, though meagre, are significantly greater than those paid in Central America, where migrant labour on short-term contracts is commonly exploited. Thus, wages are the obvious target for Jamaica’s banana plantations, and the Ministry of Agriculture stated that the export competitiveness will require “upgrade[ing] farm operations in the estate sector levels equivalent to those of the best Central American growers” (MoA 2000). In other words, what is presented as a way forward for Jamaica’s banana industry is really a step backwards into an even more exploitative estate past, as the oppressively low wages and highly toxic working environments characteristic of Central American banana estates are hardly a model worthy of emulation.

The drive to compete with cheaper production abroad by cutting wages reflects the infamous global ‘race to the bottom’,7 when the changing circumstances demand more profound rethinking. But despite restructuring efforts, Jamaica’s banana plantations appear to be in a terminal descent, as export volumes and earnings have fallen by half since the mid-1990s.

*Domestic Production and the Flood of Cheap Food*

The deepening integration of the global food economy in the 1990s proceeded in a highly uneven way, as the aggressive push towards

---

7 The notion of ‘the race to the bottom’ encapsulates the pressure on states to reduce labour and environmental standards in order to compete in a world of extreme capital mobility, causing these standards to gravitate toward the lowest common denominator.
liberalization was not concurrent with an equally strong commitment to undo the competitive imbalance resulting from huge international disparities in agro-subsidies. The WTO’s Agreement on Agriculture made modest commitments to subsidy reductions, but rich country agricultural sectors still receive subsidies totalling nearly US$1 billion a day (5 times the amount spent on overseas development assistance), and this unevenness shows no signs of abating (Weis 2003). This basic unevenness is the necessary context for understanding Jamaica’s rising food imports and agro-trade deficit in the 1990s.

Jamaica has long imported grains and livestock, but these import patterns have risen significantly. Per capita meat consumption in Jamaica increased by roughly 50 percent between 1980-2000, and rising imports have not only contributed to a dietary shift but are also displacing some domestic production, particularly beef and dairy. Trade liberalization has also had growing impact on fresh produce markets. Prior to 1990, fruit and vegetable imports to Jamaica were negligible, and the sub-sector brought a significant trade surplus, but following liberalization the sub-sector is now in deficit and imports have devastated the domestic production of some crops such as Irish potatoes, onions, and red peas. Although import volumes are still relatively small for other directly competitive produce, such as peas and beans, carrots, cabbage, sweet corn, tomatoes, and sweet pepper, imports are making inroads which – given the speed with which Irish potato, onion, and red pea production was affected – should be seen as a serious threat (Weis 2001).

Fortunately, at the same time as global market integration is intensifying competition for Jamaica’s small farmers it is also destabilizing the plantation sector, and the next section argues why agency must be understood and seized in promoting land reform during this historic opening.

Opportunity in Crisis: Envisioning New Production Possibilities

In the world of today, the survival of the farmer everywhere will turn on the capacity to produce in a fashion that enables him or her to compete with the rest of the world.

– Prime Minister P.J. Patterson, at the Denbigh Agricultural Show 2000
I know evertin' goin' to crashing like bananas and cane...if
government so smart, lets do someting different to turn tings
around.

— small farmer in Escher, St. Mary

Agriculture in Jamaica will never die completely — the island is too
bountiful and poverty too widespread for production not to
continue haphazardly. But, as Patterson's remark suggests, the
future of small farming in Jamaica is tied to an increasingly global
context in which future survival is contingent upon improved
competitiveness. And in order for farming to provide dignified,
stable livelihoods, the foundation for a healthy rural economy, and
an improved trade balance amidst these new pressures, there is a
need for structural change, which Jamaica's Minister of Agriculture
seemed to acknowledge when he warned that only a "revolution"
and "total re-organization" can save the sector from being "written
off" by globalization (Gleaner 2001b).

The Ministry of Agriculture (2000) recently noted that the
struggle of Jamaica's small farmers to compete against rising
imports is compounded by "several endemic problems related to
the sector," which have been consistently described in government
documents since independence: the small scale of most farms; poor
roads and transportation; the lack of access to labour-saving
technology; the dependence on rain-fed agriculture (and ensuing
gluts); the inaccessibility of credit (linked partly to insecure tenure);
and praedial larceny (farm theft). Unfortunately, despite this
regular identification, there has also been a remarkably persistent
tendency to frame these problems in isolation and ignore their
connection to the landscape.

Yet as Thomas argued, "it is difficult to overcome such
enduring constraints through piecemeal, ad hoc approaches. The
roots of the problem have to be tackled in a surgical way"
(1996:271). The basis of this surgery must be land reform, as these
problems are all rooted in, or exacerbated by, the persistence of the
plantation landscape. Put simply, land reform is the essential
"precondition for successful rural development...where
landlessness, non-viable farm sizes and uncertain property rights
prevail," and "no agriculture-based rural development effort can
succeed in reducing rural poverty without first addressing this
question" (de Janvry and Sadoulet 1996:123).
For land reform to gain political currency in Jamaica, advocacy to this end must be set within a broader effort to emphasize the contemporary economic and social imperatives of agriculture, because the sector as a whole has become — since structural adjustment began — increasingly marginal to economic planning in Jamaica (apart from the propping up of sugar during times of crisis, which, as noted, relates to fears about the short-term fallout the industry's collapse would have). Agriculture had been a relative priority of Michael Manley's government in the 1970s (Manley even named himself Minister of Agriculture), and the state was seen to have an important role in small-farm oriented marketing (the Agricultural Marketing Corporation), credit, research, and training programs, as well as in promoting some land distribution to the poor (Project Land Lease). But with International Monetary Fund and World Bank policy prescriptions, the state's participation in agriculture was progressively rolled back, with most small farm oriented programmes cut in the 1980s and state market intervention curtailed in the 1990s (initiating the flood of cheap food imports discussed), and Jamaica's economic future was largely staked on the expansion of tourism, export-processing manufactures, and financial services (remittances and drug revenues also grew to have a major role in the economy during these decades) (Weis 2004).

Yet despite agriculture's declining contribution to Jamaica's GDP (under 8 percent), export earnings (11 percent), and employment (22 percent), the sector remains critical to the national economy and social fabric, and advocacy for land reform must emphasize why the political marginality of the sector is misguided. For instance, agriculture has an important role to play in improving Jamaica's growing trade imbalance and what the Ministry of Agriculture acknowledged is a "significant level of food insecurity" (MoA 2000), which is particularly worrying given Jamaica's enormous debt commitments and unrelenting balance of payments shortfalls. Agriculture is also an essential sponge for labour (as the largest direct source of employment) in a society plagued by persistently high unemployment and widespread poverty, and where the decline of the rural economy is ultimately entwined with the overcrowding, social malaise, and volatility of Kingston, as well
as with the rural aesthetics that are vital to the nation's large tourism industry (Weis 2004).

Such imperatives have not, however, translated into rising pressure for change 'on the ground', especially given the aging demographics of small farming, and the reasons for this warrant attention. Clearly, there are cultural forces beyond economics — from the spread of cable TV to the scale of migration and the remittance economy — that are contributing to the widespread rejection of agriculture by youth, and many older farmers lament that young people don't want to get their hands dirty, are unwilling to work hard, and are preoccupied with finding sources of 'quick money'. However, some farmers believe that young people are not rejecting agriculture per se, but rather are rejecting a decreasingly viable form of it, and insist that engaging youth in agriculture is more an economic than a cultural issue. As one farmer explained plainly: "who wants to put in the work, when you na get nuting outta it?" Another noted that if there are profits to be made, there will be interest: "So long as you getting positive results, people will do dat ting ya know, dey love de cash. So if dey gettin' de cash off de product, dey will go all out, I guarantee dat...It can work man!"

The landscape has an important role conditioning negative perceptions of agriculture, as one young farmer explained:

Me believe what a really cause it is de land maybe too steep, it ca'an plough...dey use fi see dem grandfadder, an fi dem fadder, like work an send dem go a school, but see de farming dat dem do a small farming, real small, so dey never live in a good house, dey never have food on de table, an dey never eat a proper meal. So dem believe say de same ting, if dey do de farming, same ting a gonna happen. So dey would rather go do someting else, or don't do nuting at all.

His view is that land reform is essential to attracting youth to agriculture, as it is "only if who a do de farming here now can do it a right way, wit land dat tractor can plough, we can influence young people fi come inna it. But otherwise, it gonna breed more poverty, an more crime, an more violence." This quote also reflects how, while land reform raises a series of hopeful prospects, the status quo will only kindle Jamaica's smouldering social tensions.
Building the Case for Land Reform

Land reform is often framed in an ideological way, and thus might be quickly dismissed given the hegemony of neoliberal economic thinking and the scale of its leverage (i.e. debt) in Jamaica. This implies that the political feasibility of the case for land reform at present requires a tactical effort to ‘de-ideologize’ it, and the attempt here is to build this case through series of inter-linked arguments that could resonate in different ways across the political spectrum.

The Productivity Argument

The productivity gains of small- and medium-sized farming units are widely acknowledged by agricultural economists on both the left and right. Beyond a small unit size, economies of scale do not exist in agriculture, and an inverse relationship between farm size and output per unit area has consistently been demonstrated around the world, despite the fact that large farms typically control the best land and have the best access to irrigation (Deininger andBinswager 2002; Rosset 1999; Binswager and Deininger 1997; Berry 1997, 1984; Lipton 1993; Thiesenhusen 1991; Cornia 1985; Feder 1985; Carter 1984; Berry and Cline 1979). Cultural ecologists have also shown small landholding to be extremely efficient in diverse settings (Netting 1993).

Rao (1990) found this inverse relationship between farm size and productivity in Jamaica during the 1970s and early 1980s, reporting that small farms (defined as 0-25 acres) had 75 percent greater gross yields than farms over 100 acres despite possessing poorer land (unfortunately there is not more recent analysis on this for Jamaica, but it is very suggestive and points to the importance of further research in this area). As well, the locus of agricultural innovation in Jamaica has historically come from small farmers rather than plantations (Beckford 1986, 1972ab; Mintz 1985), a critical advantage as Jamaica seeks to find new competitive niches in the global food economy.

8 This tactical imperative does not deny the possibility that the pursuit of land reform could ultimately contribute to the overturning of neoliberal economic dogma and to the reconstruction of radical politics and a pro-poor policy agenda in Jamaica.
Small farms are more productive than large ones for a number of reasons. Large farms typically employ monocultures and leave bare ground between planted rows, while smaller farms tend to make use of this space through more intensive cropping patterns. While large farms may appear to be more productive than small, diverse farms because they have greater yields, this is a deceptive measure of farm productivity. When the measure is output per unit area rather than yield, small farms out-produce large ones (i.e. the sum of the output from intercropped farms tends to be greater than the sum of the same crops grown in monocultures), as well as having greater yield stability (Pretty 2002, 1997; Rosset 1999; Gleissman 1997; Altieri 1995).

Labour intensity also tends to drop off quickly with expanding farm size, and small farmers have greater incentive to work on their own farm than do workers on large, alienating estates (Berry 1997; de Janvry and Sadoulet 1996; Feder 1985). Monotonous and backbreaking work, low pay, and associations with slavery together make absenteeism, labour strife, and subtle forms of subversion common on Jamaican plantations (Harrison 1998ab), and the Ministry of Agriculture conceded that “low worker morale” and “low worker productivity” are major barriers to the competitiveness of sugar and bananas (MoA 2000). The heavy social-psychological inheritance of plantations would seem to be an intractable barrier to improving the motivation of estate workers.

Small farmers widely acknowledge that “farming on de flat” would be much easier and more efficient than on hillsides, primarily because it allows for gruelling (or expensive, with hired labour) manual land preparation to be replaced by tractor tillage. A very strong farmer in his early 40s explained the rigours of farming his steeply sloping 5 acre plot:

It hard fi use your hand ya know, an your body strength, it really hard. Chop a land wit a cutlass, fork it, it never easy ya know, you hafi have nerves ya know. An you hafi cut dis trench, an bend down your back, it hard. An cut down plantain an carry dem up a yard dere from way down de gully dere.

He noted wistfully that “me wan a piece on de level, where me can like hire a tractor, an den you plough it up, you go fast an plant, you can put in a lotta crop you know.”
The Equity and Rural Development Argument

From a hillside high above the banana estate, one farmer described the inequity of the view with a frustrated laugh: "de big man keep dat flat land, but sell dis [steeply sloping] land to a next man who na have de time or dedication to farm it, so him lease it to de poorer class a people like we fi him spare change...dem a lef off all a dem rough parts an give nigger man!" While the land issue may be depoliticized at the present moment — a far cry from its history as a focal point of social struggle in Jamaica — it remains central to the prospect of building a more socially just society as well as a healthier democracy. As it is, the real and perceived marginality of poor farmers reflects the historically exclusionary and decaying state of political participation in Jamaica.

The economic gains from an equalizing land reform run deeper than the productivity gains and the generation of more (and more dignified) off-farm employment discussed above. Small-holding land regimes provide a more stable foundation for local off-farm economic development, as they tend to be more reliant on local resources and suppliers and produce more for local markets, and thus have higher multiplier effects (Rosset 1999). Beckford's (1972ab) emphasis on the development role of improved income equality, which expands the size of domestic markets, savings, and investment, resonates in more recent development economics literature where studies have shown that "high initial levels of inequality are statistically linked to poor aggregate economic performance" (Carter and Barham 1996:1133).

There have been some very compelling precedents that illustrate the economic benefits of land reform. The land reforms undertaken in the 1950s in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are the most commonly cited examples of how land reform can fuel significant gains in agricultural output, coupled with socioeconomic gains in income distribution and rural welfare, and lay the groundwork for vibrant rural off-farm economies. While there

In contrast to the way their trade-based economic growth has been used to justify neoliberal economic restructuring, rural development in these countries was first based on agricultural production geared towards - and protected in - internal markets. In addition to stabilizing domestic markets in the interests of small farmers, Japan, Taiwan, and Korea also each supported farmers through credit and extension.
is much historical specificity to the East Asian 'take offs', there is no ignoring how sharply their agricultural landscapes differ from those in most Latin American and Caribbean nations, and how this contributed to radically different development trajectories between the regions (Carter and Coles 1998; Carter and Barham 1996).

The impact of land distribution on rural development can also be seen within Jamaica. St. Elizabeth, Jamaica's most agriculturally productive parish (its so-called 'Food Basket'), is also the wealthiest parish on the island on a per capita basis. With a smaller plantation legacy and a more even distribution of land, small farmers there have succeeded despite an extremely dry climate, innovating a mulch technique to keep the earth cool and retain the moisture from irrigation that in many cases has to be trucked in. The small farmers of St. Elizabeth supply roughly one-quarter of Jamaica's domestic agricultural production, and are a testament to what can be accomplished in a more equitable landscape.

Finally, the equity argument also relates to the widespread problem of praedial larceny. In the short term, vibrant farming areas tend to be more imposing to thieves, as there is greater security in numbers (particularly if reforms allow housing on the land). In the longer term, there is a possibility that a more equitable landscape could help reverse the destructive atomization of social ethics in Jamaica that is nowhere more evident than in the acts of poor people raiding the fields of poor farmers. As Berry pointed out, "productive egalitarian communities are relatively free of violence, much of which has its origins in inequalities and the related poverty, dissatisfaction and jealousy" (1997:2).

The On-Farm Environmental Argument: Agroecological Efficiency

The field of agroecology emphasizes how agricultural systems must be understood not only in terms of inputs and food outputs, but also in terms of material flow within the system (i.e. the dynamics of nutrients, energy, and plant and animal populations). Industrialized monocultures break cyclical flows of biological resources, creating through-flow systems that are reliant on continual, often expensive external inputs. Agroecologists have shown that small farmers tend to be far better land stewards than large farmers, as they are much more likely to employ techniques,
such as crop rotations, cover-cropping, intercropping, agro-forestry, mulching, and the use of organic wastes for fertilizer, which do a better job of maintaining functional elements of natural ecosystems. The enhanced diversity allows small farms to better recycle energy and nutrients, and hence to make more efficient use of irrigation and fertilizer, and to biologically regulate soil fertility, pests, weeds, and disease cycles with a less intensive use of inputs than large farms (Pretty 2002, 1997; Gleissman 1997; Altieri 1995).

Another important environmental benefit of land reform relates to the fact that a smallholder regime on prime lands could reduce the forest colonizing pressure currently associated with small farming. Because small farms tend to be more ecologically efficient and productive per land area, and more labour intensive than highly capitalized monocultures, the overall amount of land necessary for agriculture would be reduced by the reform of plantation lands. As Thiesenhusen has argued, “the problem of tropical deforestation typically must “be solved far from the site of resource damage – in the major farming regions of the countries involved,” by breaking “the lock that large landlords have on the productive resources” (1991:8).

The Off-Farm Environmental Argument: Arresting Deforestation and Protecting Watersheds

As noted earlier, deforestation in Jamaica is causing very serious soil erosion, watershed destruction and desiccation, and biodiversity loss, with small farmers both agents and victims of soil and water problems. Not surprisingly, many farmers who work in hilly areas are concerned about soil erosion, as one described it: “lots a it [soil] get wash away because it steep. We lose lots of it, drain ‘way an go down in de gully.” Another farmer explained the erosional impacts of rain on exposed, sloping soils: “if you cultivating on a steep, each time you plough dat land an de rain fall, de soil is going to deteriorate...an all de topsoil, de nourishment goin’ down like dat.”

When farmers own their land, tree crops are planted widely not only to provide a form of a pension and an inheritance for children, but to “build de soil” as one farmer put it. However, where ownership levels are low and there is a sense that other land is there for the clearing, farmers tend to devote only limited time
and money to soil conservation measures like planting trees and terracing slopes. On leased land, especially where there is little security, occasional trenches are the most commonly used strategy to maintain the land’s short-term productivity and protect crops against flooding; in essence, it is cheaper to abandon land when it becomes less fertile and move on to other ‘fresh’ lands.

In general, there is a strong relationship between inequitable land tenure systems and environmental degradation in developing countries, and while the poor might be the direct agents of deforestation, inequitable distribution of the best land is the indirect but decisive force driving the poor to overexploit more marginal lands (Lohmann 1993; Thiesenhusen 1991), as is the case in Jamaica (Weis 2000a; Eyre 1996, 1987). An alternative to peasant-driven deforestation "would be to bring small-holders down from the hillsides and make them owners of the rich and under-utilized bottomland — land reform in the name of environmental preservation" (Thiesenhusen 1991:13). Equitable small landholding systems on prime land can reduce population movement to the agricultural frontier because their greater labour intensity make them a better ‘sponge’ for the rural poor than large-scale farms — or, even worse, as in Jamaica where large amounts of the good flat land sit idle.

The future of Jamaica’s irrigation possibilities must also be understood in the context of the island’s deforestation-desiccation problems and its urgent need for watershed protection and rehabilitation. As Jamaica’s National Irrigation Development Plan stated, the disruption of natural ecosystems can severely disrupt the hydrological cycle, reducing the infiltration and storage of water and increasing the runoff rates, in turn increasing vulnerability to flooding, soil erosion, and desiccation (GoJ et al. 1998). Thus, the irrigation argument for land reform (below) is entwined with the need to reduce pressure on forests from hillside cultivation, particularly on steep and marginal lands and critical watershed areas, and to reforest degraded areas, as these will be crucial to securing and improving future water yields.10

10 Because reforestation increases soil permeability and improves the water infiltration rate, it promises to decrease surface runoff and reduce the intensity
The Irrigation Argument

For small farmers to become more competitive they must have improved access to irrigation; in its absence, they will remain frustrated by the historic pattern of highly seasonal production, market gluts, and decreasing prices. Farmers widely identified water as a key environmental constraint on production, recognizing that irrigation is needed to stabilize production, access more lucrative out-of-season markets, and earn greater returns on ‘quick’ crops (i.e. those with shorter growth cycles). Many, in turn, connect this struggle for water to the landscape, as one farmer explained: “See up here on de steep, ya farm up here in de dry time it beat you. Too dry. Mosa we hafi wait ‘pon rainfall...a big problem dat mash we up is de drought – you ca’an plant... you ca’an do no big farming because you don’t have no water, jus hafi wait ‘pon de long crops.” Another farmer noted how, in contrast, “de man on de level land make it right round de clock cuz him have de water.”

A small number of farmers in the fieldwork region have access to irrigation, principally the ones who occupy flat, former estate land and can use gravity-fed streams from the hills. For these farmers, irrigation was identified as a critical advantage. One explained that “I learn early dat water a de key ting in farming,” because it allows you to “get it ready for de market faster, otherwise we only have dis season to plant an...fi jus come in with 500 pounds one time, dat na good business. You hafi keep your supply right tru.” Indeed, a survey of bulk food purchasers in Jamaica identified inconsistent supply as one of the most significant competitive problems of domestic production (Weis 2001), and the fact that “imports go way down...when local production is here,” as a RADA official pointed out, suggests that small farmers “can take back the market” from rising imports if production can become more consistent.

Government reports have repeatedly identified the vital role of irrigation in agricultural development. For instance, the Jamaica Five-Year Development Plan 1990-1995 called the lack of irrigation “a major constraint on Jamaica’s agricultural sector, with widespread

and frequency of flooding (and the seasonality of stream flows in general), and whereas flood flows from denuded areas often bring too much sediment, the smaller sediment loads from forested areas can be very beneficial for the flood plains.
dependence on rain-fed agriculture leading to erratic production and unreliable supplies to the marketplace" (PIOJ 1990b:66), while a more recent agricultural production plan stated that "for the Jamaican farmer to become efficient and competitive, reliance on rainfall must be reduced to a minimum" (MoA 2000). In interviews, RADA officials also described irrigation as one of the key priorities to enhance agriculture's competitiveness. Yet despite this official attention, irrigation is never linked to the call for land reform as it should be.

Of Jamaica's 270,000 ha of cultivated land, one-third (90,811 ha) has good irrigation potential, though only 9 percent (25,214 ha) is currently irrigated by the National Irrigation Commission (NIC), while another 9,000 ha requires rehabilitation. Most of the NIC's supplies are devoted to sugar (76 percent), followed by bananas (8 percent) and pasture (6 percent), with only 4 percent going to vegetable cultivation (GoJ et al. 1998). While some estates and small farmers have independent sources of irrigation from local surface sources or springs, and many small farmers make use of their own domestic water supplies and stored precipitation for small amounts (for which there are no statistics), the coastal plains obviously have by far the best access and established irrigation infrastructure, as well as the best topography to maximize its benefits.

Thus, it is clear that land reform would dramatically enhance the irrigation potential and hence competitiveness of small farmers and domestic production. It could also reduce farmers' vulnerability to crop theft by abetting vegetable cultivation, which is less vulnerable to thieves.

*The Infrastructure and Technology Argument*

Other critical constraints regularly identified by small farmers relate to the labour intensity, poor infrastructure and limited transportation options associated with the hilly terrain. Farmers recognize that steep lands reduce the efficiency of labour and their ability to employ various labour-saving technologies, most importantly mechanized tillage, which would help speed planting (and, when coupled with irrigation, increase the volume of crops planted annually). The connection between slope, tillage, scale, and efficiency in vegetable production and the rising competition from
imports is best captured by one farmer’s remark that “dem have a tractor an you have you likkle fork...a fork ca’an compete wit no tractor.”

Another farmer made an important connection between accessing flat land and making small farming more competitive, noting that “de time dat you take to farm one acre up here, you farm 5 acres down dere,” pointing to the estate below him, so that “ya would find dat you able fi sell your food cheaper too ya know, food would be much cheaper, of course. But when you hafi take your fork an turn one acre ‘pon de hill to plant carrot, one acre a land might take you nearly a year to turn over now to plant carrot, an you hafi sell it at a cheap rate, you tink of it very – it very hard.” With flat land, he insisted, “it don’t hafi be hard.” An NGO representative echoed these sentiments, suggesting that “I don’t think you can do much in the way of reasonably productive farming without tractor use, its just too energy consuming...too much work, takes too much time, and doesn’t yield enough production.”

In the fieldwork region, farmers have more than hypothesized arguments about the gains from moving from the hillside to ‘the level’ — there is also empirical evidence from a few notable successes of small farmers who have done so. One of these, a partnership with access to 8 acres of flat land and 10 acres of hillside land adjoining it, insisted that they can make more than twice as much from the flat land than they can from the hillside land, “because you can put in quick crops an get out every 3 months, but up ’pon de hill, can get out only one per year,” and because on “de flat...you can run a tractor ‘pon here, move quicker...but dere [the hillside] only manpower.”

The perceived advantage of flatter land also relates to improved road access. In some areas, poor roads and isolation limit farmers’ marketing flexibility, as the number of higglers declines. As one farmer explained: “some time de vehicle man won’t come because him say road is bad...an den it difficult to go out, we hafi bring it out ‘pon our head a two mile to bring it to where a truck comin’... to head it so far, it difficult.” Thus, even if a more structured approach to marketing does not occur (discussed below), better roads would at least mean the presence of more higglers, which in turn is seen by farmers to reduce some of the leverage higglers have at the farm-gate. Abysmal roads in much of Jamaica’s
rugged interior, coupled with the lack of appropriate transport containers, also have obvious implications for how produce will look and last in the market, which are key concerns described by bulk food purchasers (Weis 2001).

As with irrigation, terrain-related problems of arduous labour, infrastructure, and transport are widely acknowledged in government reports, but the most obvious way they could be improved continues to be ignored. Land reform would allow farmers to use tractors in preparing land, make farm work more efficient and potentially attractive, and give small farmers access to a far superior and more easily maintained network of roads, which would in turn improve the range of marketing options and reduce the toll transport takes on the appearance of produce.

Enabling Agrarian Reform

Land reform is an essential foundation for Jamaica to have an agricultural future, but it is not a magic pill. As an NGO representative noted, "you can't have land reform and expect production is going to happen if you don't support it." This section identifies some of the most significant issues that must be considered for any prospective land reform to be successful in Jamaica. Some of these are both possible and necessary to improve the competitiveness of small farmers within the extant landscape, but the intent in framing them this way is to re-emphasize the centrality of land distribution as the overarching productive constraint on the viability of agriculture, and that failure to recognize this will make other efforts piecemeal. Many of these issues have voluminous literatures and can only be sketched here, but this will hopefully point towards necessary debates surrounding implementation, which must ultimately be well planned and vigorously pursued; as Berry (1997:12) argued, "if success [with land reform] does not come quickly it will not come at all."

Land Tenure Arrangements

A land reform program in Jamaica should not attempt to formulate new labour relations between small producers, but rather should build on the prevailing individual or family farm model. To
envision production cooperatives or communal landholdings at this juncture would represent an implausible degree of social engineering, and a denial of the way that land has been historically conceived, the contemporary atomization of social ethics, and the extent to which traditional forms of cooperative labour (e.g. day for day, morning sport) have broken down in rural Jamaica.

The desire for freehold ownership is very strong in Jamaica, and the nature of tenure plays a pivotal role in farmers' willingness to invest in increasing productivity (e.g. irrigation equipment) and employ soil conservation methods (e.g. planting tree crops). As well, the development economics literature that illustrates the productivity gains of small farms generally favours private land ownership. However, land reform with private ownership is complicated by the fact that competitive land markets do not tend to resolve distribution in the interests of equity (Carter and Coles 1998; Carter and Barham 1996; de Janvry and Sadoulet 1996). One farmer, though noting his preference for freehold rather than lease, described the essential problem: "mosa dem small man who'da want piece a land fi farm, dem na have money fi buy it."

In order to provide access to land for the poor while ensuring security for farmers and productive occupancy, state lands should not be sold but leased on a long-term, renewable basis with inter-generational rights that would support on-site residence (which many farmers see as being essential to defend against praedial thieves). A land policy should be established prohibiting the sale of privately-held estates in large blocks and to encourage their being broken up into viable small farming units. In the case of either lease or sale, there must be strict land ceilings as occurred in the East Asian land reforms, as well as policies designed to prevent land speculation, the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses, and concentration over time. In interviews, farmers generally pointed to a minimum scale of 5 acres, but in the interests of equity and productivity it would probably not be much higher.

Avoiding Patronage and Selecting Participants

Given the intensity of the political divide in Jamaica (now more historical than ideological), it is highly unlikely that any state-sponsored land distribution efforts in Jamaica would not reflect, or
would not be seen as reflecting patron-client relations. The PNP's Project Land Lease, oriented towards small farmers and landless people, suffered this problem in the 1970s, as did the JLP's land divestment practices in the 1980s, as party faithful (in this case, those higher up the socio-economic ladder) were given favoured access to large tracts of land. More recently, the PNP's Operation Pride, which had been designed to provide small parcels of land and housing to the poor and regularize squatter arrangements, was mired in huge cost over-runs and claims of rampant corruption. Interviews with small farmers also made evident a widespread perception of politically loaded agents distributing resources at the local level.

In short, land reform with the aim of solidifying political power rather than enhancing productivity and small farmers' opportunities is a real threat in Jamaica. A vicious spiral is at work: both parties lack an inclusive vision of society and real confidence in the poor majority, while the public (outside the orange and green loyalists) lack confidence in the state. Overcoming patronage and its perception, which could de-legitimize the entire process of land reform, would be critical and would demand careful planning.

One potential step towards transparency would be the formation of firmly bi-partisan committees to oversee the process of distribution, given the unlikelihood that local party activists could be kept out of the fray altogether. This could involve the oversight of some of the highly professional bureaucrats within government ministries and experts from the University of West Indies. Berry provided a useful general warning: "It is widely accepted that the process must be executed efficiently if conflict is to be minimized; where there is a lack of clarity, credibility, or dispatch, conflict is likely to persist" (1997:23). If strong conditions were put in place tying leases to agricultural production, there is little reason to fear such a process would be over-subscribed, at least initially, given the current lack of enthusiasm to farm amongst young people in Jamaica.

**Youth and Agriculture**

Any discussion about re-vitalizing agriculture will be immaterial unless the demographics of farming become more youthful; the most recent agricultural census found that more than 45 percent of
farmers were over 50 years old (SIOJ 1998). However, as was argued earlier, with the legacy of slavery still etched in the landscape, it is impossible to suggest that changing cultural aspirations are more significant than the productive constraints associated with marginal lands. One NGO representative put this plainly: “It’s not about an unwillingness to get their hands dirty, it’s about money...they’re not afraid of work, they want to avoid unproductive labour,” arguing that for more youth to get excited about farming “the image of the farmer with a fork in his hand and a spade in the field there planting, that has to be totally taken away, wiped out.”

While the biggest change needed to get young people engaged in agriculture is for them to see evidence that it can be profitable, public education also has a role to play in confronting negative perceptions. There is no excuse for teaching Jamaican children to treat tourists with respect as part of the basic curriculum without according the same emphasis to the nobility of small farming, especially in light of the scale of praedial larceny. Public education also has a role to play in fostering awareness about the social, nutritional, and environmental implications of dietary choices, especially amongst children who are absorbing an onslaught of US corporate media that is contributing to a marked dietary shift towards imported goods from the grain-livestock complex, manifest most visibly in the proliferation of fast food chains.

Combating Praedial Larceny

Praedial larceny hovers incessantly over small farmers, causing significant losses, frustration, and discouragement. As noted, mitigating praedial larceny could be partly related to creating vibrant small farming areas, which provide greater collective security and allow a less vulnerable range of crops to be grown, as explained by an agricultural journalist: “thieves, no matter how well armed they may be, are very reluctant to prey on communities they know are vigilant” (Martin 2002). Targeted programs are also needed to apprehend those trading in stolen produce, though it is unlikely that current plans for sellers to carry point-of-purchase receipts will be very impactful when the government cannot afford the associated warden service.
A less martial hope is that improving the distribution of resources can reduce the extent of rural poverty, social atomization, and the breakdown of community, and replace the predatory ethos of some with more productive opportunities, the hope for which would grow further if rural communities can gain a broader stake in such things as agro-processing enterprises.

**Developing Competitive Export Niches**

Successful land reform is obviously a means to reducing food imports, but it can and must also be linked to building a more diverse base of new export niches; as Witter noted, “in the era of liberalization, Jamaica has to develop new exports (1998:65)”. One NGO representative explained the contemporary challenge to build new export markets well: “since we can never hope to compete on the commodities market with large producers of the same things,” there is a need to “look at our products as having something that is unique in space, quality, value, whatever, for a specific market segment.” This includes various fruits, vegetables, herbs, and ‘nutraceuticals’ (plants with medicinal properties), which are more labour intensive and have a higher value than bulky, extensively grown commodities.

As Watts (1996:240) suggested, rising ethical and/or health demands globally can create openings “for small farmers who can legitimately present themselves as the purveyors of natural produce or sustainable land use.” If Jamaica were to undertake a strong land reform, it would be better positioned to tap into the rising demand for growing organic markets, as well as possibly smaller markets for fairly traded goods. The development of new, high-value niche markets would be abetted by Jamaica’s cultural achievements, which have given it an inordinate international ‘mystique’ (Witter 1998). Such production could also be linked to demand from Jamaica’s and the region’s high end and ‘eco-friendly’ resorts.

Developing successful organic methods would reduce the toxicity of farmer’s working conditions and environments and add value at the farm-gate, valorizing the value of labour over purchased inputs. Though demand for imported seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides would decline, significant investment is needed for such a transition, particularly with respect to research, training, and
marketing infrastructure (e.g. refrigerated depots), and so far little public or private investment has been made in promoting organic methods.

**Linkages to the Tourism Sector**

With millions of additional mouths to feed brought to the island by tourism every year, Jamaica’s agricultural sector has a major built-in supplement to domestic demand. However, it is widely acknowledged that the agriculture-tourism link is far less developed than it could be, in part due to the need for enhanced consistency of production and price competitiveness, both of which — it has been argued — would be aided by land reform. Developing this linkage also relates to the need for more organized marketing arrangements (discussed below) and, as noted, could also be enhanced in certain segments by the cultivation of high quality organic production. By fostering new tastes in tourists this could, in turn, enhance the ability of Jamaica to carve competitive export niches in such things as high-value organic foods and unique agro-processed goods.

As noted, agriculture is centrally entwined with Jamaica’s ‘rural aesthetics’ that relate to its tourism product, and efforts to promote tourism-agriculture linkages must emphasize this connection to resort owners who sometimes act as though the sector can thrive in a social vacuum.

**Extension and Tillage**

Enhanced extension is critical for successful land reform, especially in the early stages as small farmers begin working with different conditions and landless workers become independent farmers. There must be a major effort at zoning ideal production areas for different crops, as much of Jamaica’s best land has only ever been in sugar, bananas, or pasture. A state-directed and regulated tractor pool would also be needed, because while tractors make ploughing far easier and cheaper than manually by fork, it is still a formidable expense for small farmers.

Unfortunately, key supportive institutions that would be vital in the transition towards an efficient smallholder system (e.g. extension, credit, and marketing) have been badly eroded by the
process of structural adjustment. As a reflection of the shortages of extension and access to inputs, recent government estimates suggest that as much as 30 percent of all agricultural production is lost to pests and disease (Gleaner 2001a). This high percentage, together with the rising chemical intensity of small farming, implies that the degree to which theorized agroecological benefits of smallholder regimes and a transition towards more organic methods could materialize — and hence possibilities of gaining a share of growing global markets for organic produce — would depend on future research, training, and extension efforts. Here, Pretty’s conception of “sustainable agriculture” as “a process of learning” rather than “a simple model or package to be imposed” provides a useful guideline (1997:249).

Although debt service consumes approximately two-thirds of the government budget, there is still room for appreciably increasing institutional supports if agriculture’s social importance was understood in a more holistic way. Currently, agriculture receives a pittance of the budget (one-twelfth of what is devoted to national security) and, as noted, the bulk of the remaining resources within agriculture continue to be devoted to rehabilitating sugar and bananas.

Access to Credit

Farmers’ ability to make necessary productive investments following land reform will hinge on policies to improve their access to capital. Interest rates soared following the commercialization of agricultural interest rates in 1990, and agricultural lending subsequently collapsed, reflected in the dramatic decline in the loan allocation of the Agricultural Credit Bank from US$45 million to US$5 million in the 1990s (PIOJ 2000).

Clearly, for agricultural investment to occur in Jamaica within a smallholder model, the World Bank’s insistence that the state not subsidize agricultural credit must be challenged (especially given the obvious hypocrisy of this logic vis-à-vis agricultural credit policies in rich countries). The risky nature of farming and the longer-term horizon on which agricultural investment takes place implies that, if cast to the market, agriculture is going to lose out to other investment, and that farmers generally cannot afford market
interest rates. Creative financing and credit schemes therefore will need to be explored, but this voluminous literature is beyond the realm of the present discussion.

*Co-ordinated Marketing Arrangements*

For land reform to be successful on a large scale there is a need for major improvements in the organization of marketing. The disorganization, inconsistency, and volatile pricing of higglers are an enormous bottleneck on small farm production. Many farmers feel ‘squeezed’ by higglers at the farm-gate in terms of price and are frustrated by the lack of volume that can regularly be taken. Thus, although the improved accessibility of small farms following land reform would increase competition between higglers, more significant marketing changes are required to absorb the anticipated production increases. On the other end, many purchasers complain about inconsistent quality and the lack of proper handling and packaging of local produce, suggesting that greater coordination and quality control would improve the competitiveness of local production against imports (Weis 2001).

Given the state’s budgetary constraints, regional marketing cooperatives may be the most feasible scale on which to coordinate production (Weis 2000b) but ideally a large-scale land reform would be accompanied by a state marketing organization like the Agricultural Marketing Corporation of the 1970s, which can inspire greater confidence in farmers and purchasers alike, and provide the capital and coordination needed to abet the growth of high-value export niches.

*Agro-Processing*

Vertical and horizontal consolidation has given a handful of massive transnational corporations (TNCs) dominant global positions in agro-inputs, agro-processing, distribution, and retailing. The concentration of agro-TNCs is like an “hourglass which controls the flow of sand from the top to the bottom,” with a small number of TNCs situated between many producers and even more consumers, a position that gives them “a disproportionate amount of influence on the quality, quantity, type, location of production, and price of the product at the production stage and
throughout the entire food system” (Heffernan 2000:66). This corporate control – compounded by selectively protected markets in rich countries for processed goods and shortages of productive investment by both the state and by local elites in many developing countries\textsuperscript{11} – has impeded the development of agro-input and agro-processing sectors in large parts of the developing world, and hence their ability to mitigate imbalances ensuing from rising costs of imported inputs and falling commodity prices.

Clearly, these dynamics associated with declining terms of trade must be considered in order to increase the gains from land reform, particularly since the production of agro-inputs (e.g. seeds, fertilizers, herbicides, farm implements, etc.) is minimal and the importation of both processed and semi-processed fruits and vegetables are rising in Jamaica. As Beckford (1986) suggested, we should have confidence in small farmers’ innovative capacities, and that they will develop appropriate technologies in time through their experience working with new resource endowments. Following from this, efforts must be made to ensure that the social process of innovation is self-sustaining rather than externally imposed (Pretty 1997).

The East Asian experience illuminates the symbiotic relationship land reform can have with small-scale rural industrialization when markets for infant industries are protected, as expanded supplies of outputs for processing and demands for inputs from farmers in the wake of land reform are widely seen to have spurred the innovative dynamics underlying the region’s industrial development. And because the competitive struggles of Jamaica’s agro-industry are partly a reflection of the productive constraints of the high cost and highly seasonal small farmers supplying it, improvements in agricultural production through land reform, such as improved seasonal balance and quality, would inevitably assist the supply side of agro-processing.

However, there is no escaping the problem of access to capital in the need for technological innovation, which points to the need for the state to support research and subsidize credit in this realm.

\textsuperscript{11} The deregulation of capital markets has contributed to the massive flight of capital by developing world elites and the shortage of productive investment in many places.
“Without subsidized credit,” as Witter (1998:84) argued, “it is doubtful whether agro-industrial projects can out-compete financial and commercial activities for investment funds.” Another possible route for capital generation in agro-processing is through the re-investment of surpluses by small farmer marketing cooperatives. While labour-based cooperatives may be unlikely at this juncture, cooperative associations between individual producers are conceivable in the realm of marketing, particularly as a means for small producers to secure bulk purchasing commitments or to develop cottage production industries that could help them resolve widespread problems with perishable goods spoiling. To succeed, training programs on the theory and practice of cooperatives would need to be designed.

Obviously, marketing cooperatives and micro-enterprises dealing in agro-processed goods could not compete with TNCs in terms of price, but they could tap into the growing high-value markets for fair trade and organic goods in rich countries. Even more so than with its fresh produce, agro-processing is an area where the allure of a national ‘brand’ could prove advantageous (e.g. Jamaican jerk sauce, canned ackee, tropical fruit juices, specialty coffee, various spices), with market penetration also potentially abetted by expatriate Caribbean communities and the volume of returning tourists.

Conclusion

In an age where market forces have seemingly triumphed as the supreme arbiter of development policies, especially in nations such as Jamaica so beset by debt and externally-designed policy prescriptions, much critical research has been effectively de-mobilized — that is, focused on critique and de-construction but detached from the struggle to articulate and implement alternatives. For critical researchers to become relevant again amidst this ‘market triumphalism’, Leys called for the politics of research to “become more explicit than ever before” (1996:196), and this spirit infuses the alternative vision for small farming put forth in this paper.

Agriculture in Jamaica is clearly poised at an historic juncture. As a wave of food imports floods domestic markets, the estate
sector moves from chronic ill-health to potentially fatal arrest (despite desperate injections of scarce state funds), the food deficit grows amidst rising balance of payments shortfalls, and rural poverty, unemployment, and urban migration persist while Kingston seethes with so many jobless people, the Jamaican government is confronted with some momentous decisions as it ponders the future of its agricultural sector and the fate of its farmers. While complacency portends a disastrous social and economic fallout, as this paper has argued, alternatives are possible and a program of small farmer-oriented land reform could increase domestic food production, develop new export niches, and lay the foundation for a dynamic new rural economy in Jamaica.

The government controls a great deal of estate land and has a critical responsibility to transform this fading institution. A program of land reform could most easily be initiated on Jamaica’s widespread idle farmlands — equal to 30 percent of the total area under cultivation (SIOJ 1998) — since addressing the ‘moral crime’ (Beckford 1972b) of idle land in the context of widespread land hunger would seem to have little economic or political costs for the government and many benefits. Success with such efforts could, in turn, fortify the necessary but more politically difficult confrontation of active plantation-pasture lands.

Small farmers repeatedly affirmed this sense of stifled possibility, as one noted: “All de best land in big man hand an dem na feed de nation, wit all dat good land — is we feed de nation!” One young farmer implored that “if we jus get our land...bwoy, me could do some farmin’...[and] inna Jamaica, tings would a be much better.” His eyes lit up when asked how much he thought about the possibilities of farming on the coastal plains:

Me tink ‘bout it nuff a de time you know, me tink if me could get a good piece a land an can run vegetables...bwoy, dat’s what me would a want man! Ya man, some’in like dat...cabbage, melon, or some’in...so you’d a see some’in outta farming, you would make some headway. On de coastal zone me look ‘pon de land an say bwoy, all dat land an some a it dey raise cow ‘pon, an cow gone down to nutin’, an banana dyin’, an de other land jus sit idle an dey na get nutin’ outta it, an same time de government can import so much vegetable, so much fruit, an de prime lands go to waste.
As an MP stated in a discussion, “the collapse of the sugar industry is imminent, and we’re going to have to start discussing the big issues again.” In the looming collapse of sugar and bananas, there is a critical window to unleash the latent competitiveness of small farmers from the productive constraints of the plantation landscape. On this precipice, opportunity must be understood and seized.

Sources


Planning Institute of Jamaica (PIOJ) (various years). Economic and Social Survey. Planning Institute of Jamaica: Kingston.


