

Rural Development vs Bauxite development

Comments on the Draft National Development Plan 2030

By George Meikle, January 2009

Agriculture as a strategy

Rural development, if we are serious about such development, is based on agricultural development, not on mining. Agricultural development is, for most countries, the basis for improvement in the material welfare of a large segment of their rural population. The problem of rural development in Jamaica is that government policies over the last 60 years favoured industrialization instead of agriculture resulting in higher unemployment and increased poverty. Bauxite mining and alumina processing as industrialization, tends to be relatively capital intensive and as such, job creation proceeds at a slow pace with a relatively fixed absorption of people. Meanwhile the rural labour force is expanding with increasing unemployment resulting in the rapid acceleration of rural/urban drift.

Rural development through the expansion of agriculture is the theme of “The George Beckford Papers”, selected by Dr. Kari Levitt, UWI for publication in 2000. Dr. Beckford is regarded as the foremost agriculture researcher in Jamaica’s history. His book “Persistent Poverty”, Oxford, University Press (1972) is the pre-eminent reader on agricultural economics in the Caribbean. Astoundingly it is not among the published bibliography of the National Development Plan, which limits the plan severely. Below is a summary of his approach to rural development.

Land Reform

According to Professor Beckford the key to rural economic development is land reform This is the answer to expanding rural employment and the development of rural communities “which reduces the push to driving people into town where people are reduced to a life of scuffling, crime and violence under wretched conditions in urban slums – for the most part unemployed”. According to Dr. Beckford who is supported by other Jamaican economists, land reform is accomplished by reducing the ownership of large idle tracts (usually by foreigners or land held over from the plantation system) in order to increase the land available to rural families for farming either as owners or lessees for agricultural purposes. Further, according to Beckford, although output per man is decreased, by this strategy output per acre is increased and material improvement is guaranteed by the many small farmers who are so empowered. As land is in limited supply, it must be seen as a priority resource, along with water, in serving the nation as a whole but especially in rural agriculture and ultimately rural development.

Community dislocation

According to Cline in his study of Brazil land use, “land reform which includes the breaking up of large land holdings, will significantly increase output (per acre) along with other appropriate policies. The goal is to reduce excessive concentration of land ownership to stimulate longer-term rural development.” Jamaica’s policy of favouring bauxite mining does exactly the opposite of what should be done as a policy to improve rural development. According to Dr. Beckford the “social cohesiveness” of the rural community has been (will further be) eroded by the “modernization” that comes with the capitalist development (read the bauxite industry). There are many examples of broken

communities in Jamaica, fragmented and destroyed by land-banking of large tracts and the resettlement of its people. According to Beckford, “the government must foster a culture of psychological independence as an important conditioning of the will of the people (to stay on the farm) to exercise control over their own resources”. In the drive to develop the bauxite industry, as reflected in the National Development programme, we are doing a grave disservice to the people of rural Jamaica and the goal of rural development. This critical short-coming has gone unrecognized in the Plan. Witness the many dislocations created by the bauxite industry across the island and the consequent increase in rural poverty as well as migration and continuing rural/urban drift. This policy of favouring the bauxite industry results in the destruction of arable farm lands and the haphazard removal and resettlement of whole communities. Other negative impacts include destruction of the environment, the contamination of water supplies and aquifers, destruction of nearby homes due to acidic residue from the production of alumina, all of which represent a non-recoverable assault on the environment and the health and well-being of rural Jamaicans.

According to Beckford, skills training and manpower planning must respond to fit, not the established order of things, but to meet the objectives for social and economic mobility for rural Jamaica.

Goals for Rural Development

One of the goals for rural development, should be indentifying the many micro-climates in Jamaica and the crops which can grow and thrive there, thereby reducing our dependence on imports. Developing and implementing incentives for organic fruit orchards and branded organic vegetables for export requires focusing on the natural climates in Jamaica which should be part of our agricultural strategies. As indicated by David Phillips of National Meats, farm integration with marketing cooperatives, with processing/distributors as well as downstream branded agri-businesses should result in a national network of agricultural producers (viz farms) which will improve rural employment and lend support to achieve our National Plans by 2030. The important thing is to start by reducing the emphasis on non-renewable bauxite and mining in general and replacing that with a vision of transforming rural Jamaica into one of the key productive sectors in the economy using international models of success (e.g. Israel and Cuba) as well as local models – Green in St. Ann as organic small farmer/exporter, Trade Winds as farmer/processor/distributor, Walkerswood as processor/brander/exporter. (In 30 years, bauxite will be a near depleted resource at current rates of extraction.) In the process of rural development, the Parish Development Committees must be informed and consulted as to long term government strategies (e.g. bauxite vs land reform) in order to get the input of the people as to their priorities, modified of course by government input based on research. This is the basis for real collective participation as land is a limited resource and the primary basis for planning one’s economic livelihood in rural economies.

Setting Priorities

In the planning process, women should not be viewed as a separate economic development/stakeholder group versus men as claimed in the National Plan. In contrast, the Plan must set meaningful priorities based on real distinctions namely:

- a) Urban versus rural agricultural development – both are different and require different solutions/strategies.
- b) Small and medium size businesses (SME's) versus large capital intensive enterprises. They are different and require different solutions.
- c) The preservation of the environment for growth in the farming sector and eco-tourism versus mining of non-renewable resources. These have vitally different outcomes and require different strategies.
- d) Education and training of adults targeted to jobs available in the present and future.
- e) General education and training of youth at all levels targeted to national goals for literacy, numeracy and IT capability.

If we address these issues as priorities, crime and violence will decline, female versus male disparities will be lessened and the problem of rural/urban unemployment will be reduced significantly.

Transformation of the Agricultural Sector – objectives and strategy

Page 211 of the Plan states that “transformation of the agricultural sector is a goal.....”which revitalizes rural communities etc” places the wrong emphasis as to the reason for agricultural transformation. Agricultural transformation is required in order to revitalize rural communities and provide more extensive employment and prevent rural/urban drift. The size of small land holdings should not be a limiting factor as suggested by the Plan. In the opinion of the planners, small means lower productivity per man but one should witness the St. Elizabeth model of intensive small farms which are highly productive on a productivity per acre basis. What is needed are more farms of this type which will deliver high productivity per utilized acre, and serve more farming families. This strategy is clearly in conflict with bauxite mining or the holding of large tracts of arable land. In this model, productivity is not necessarily based on capital intensiveness: one community tractor can service many small farms in a rural community.

Deficiencies in Agriculture

We agree, as the Plan states, that there are many deficiencies in rural development e.g. infrastructure, roads, irrigation, packing facilities, etc. Research and development must identify which crops can be produced organically/economically in which of Jamaica's micro climates, and which lend themselves to “higher value added”.

Small family holdings

According to George Beckford in “Persistent Poverty”, “the established post colonial order must be transformed by manpower training to fit our new (targeted)

objectives for rural development”. In this process, bauxite strategies should not take precedence over small family farm holdings and the skills training required to develop the family farm. In this regard, ownership as well as long-term leasing of arable land is the key to rural families remaining on the farm.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The government of the day is ultimately accountable for a land reform programme (leasing or ownership) that rural families require to preserve the environment and achieve the objective of rural development. The government must consciously prioritize the rural family/community development in our National Planning Programme over the limited development benefits derived from the transnational bauxite industry, which is in conflict with the health and well-being of rural Jamaicans. In the final analysis, the nation should choose to support the growth and independence of farm families to create their own destiny along with technology and other guidance provided by the government of the day.

Addendum

Impact of the large tract Plantation Sector on Rural Development in Jamaica

According to Beckford’s research, in 1960’s farms of 500 acres or more represented only 350 farmers or .2% of all farms. These farmers however controlled more than 45% of total farm acreage while farms under 5 acres (representing 114,000 farmers or 570,000 people) occupied only 12% of total farm acreage. By way of contrast, each household in the plantation sector earned income from an average of 2,217 acres.

Unless land reform which increases the number of farmers and farm families is implemented by government policy (even more important than technology improvement), average incomes will remain low, unemployment high and rural poverty will persist (Dr. George Beckford- “Persistent Poverty”, Oxford University Press, 1972). He believed that “new technology will have very little welfare effects in most situations unless gross inequalities in the distribution of land ownership is corrected”. His research concluded that “the experience of land reform in several countries where it has been introduced indicates that the long term effects of land reform are likely to be favourable in respect of expansion of production (output), capital accumulation, market expansion and income growth. As well, land reform can be expected to promote improvements in social welfare, by way of a favourable impact on the distribution of wealth and income: and through its capacity to generate employment. The sum total of these effects will be to stimulate long term economic growth of a kind that disperses benefits widely throughout societies which previously, were characterized by excessive concentration of land ownership”.

Rural development in Jamaica would also benefit from recognition that there are many microclimates in Jamaica as well as the potential benefit from intensive organic farming which is only feasible on small rural farms. To achieve the above, land reform would have to be on a national scale as a substantial share of the population depends on

farming for a livelihood. Achievement of this strategic reform if implemented along with other guidance, will result in an increase in farm incomes leading to improved rural development. “Jamaica is a land-short economy and therefore land is a critical rural resource as is water in rural development. My speculation is that given land of equal quality and a suitable package of modern inputs, productivity per acre of peasant cultivated land would exceed that on plantations (over 500 acres) by a significant margin.” Dr. George Beckford: “The George Beckford Papers” – selected by Prof. Kari Levitt, Canoe Press, 2000.

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