SETTING OUR SIGHTS ON FOOD SECURITY

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Already feeling the pinch with increased food prices consumers have been listening with keen interest to the current budget debate. The issue of how we are going to feed ourselves has come into sharp focus, with the Minister of Agriculture pointing to some simple, practical means for us to start. All of us need to play a role in assuring our own food security. Food Security has been an on again and off again priority for Jamaica over the past thirty years, however we have not yet tackled it in a focused, sustainable or co-ordinated way. Yet food insecurity can impact health, crime, education to name a few... and may be a “low hanging fruit” for targeted intervention.

Food Sovereignty

As long as there continues to be seasonal gluts and scarcity of produce, our food security is at risk. Factors such as soil productivity, irrigation, pests & diseases, yields, storage, distribution and marketing have been fingered as contributing to food (in) security, however practically all of these can benefit from adopting modern technologies available in industrialized countries. The question is that of balancing the risks. Food Sovereignty, a term coined to indicate “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems,” is one with some appeal. This concept addresses in some way the concern that has been nagging many small farmers in developing countries. It is an undeniable fact that large food corporations can produce food more competitively than the small, developing countries. Added to this, in developed nations agriculture is heavily subsidized. Developing nations therefore face stiff competition from imported foodstuff. As dependence on imported foods increase, there are concomitant problems. These include the marginalization of the local small farmers, reduction of agricultural activities in the developing countries as well as increased health maladies. Attempts are being made by countries worldwide to have WTO change the rules regarding food trade - to allow developing countries to protect their agriculture with subsidies as developed countries do. The compromise being proposed relates to special measures to protect a list of “sensitive products”. The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) offers some prospects for ACP countries. However, from all accounts, it appears that the notion of “reciprocity” is a bit off mark. Some say the EPA will facilitate the importation of cheap
subsided European agricultural imports to our countries, which inevitably do not have the resources to do the same for our farmers or indeed to fulfil the rigorous quality standards required. We must recognize though that protecting local produce, irrespective of how limited a list, has the potential of driving up food prices to consumers. So concurrently with this push, is the call for government support to small farmers to improve their productivity. The concept of Food sovereignty while laudable, can only work in an enabling environment. Countries such as Jamaica, in its Agricultural Development Plans, must deal with provision of meaningful support for the farming sector. It seems that the Ministry of Agriculture is on track, as access to needed funds, improved technologies, water and inputs appear to be priority areas being tackled.

KOW

The All ACP Agricultural Commodities Programme (AAACP) offers opportunities for improving the “fate” of Caribbean commodities in the marketplace. Although the funding available under this EU initiative may be a “drop in the bucket”, farmers, processors, traders and the like in Caribbean countries are united in the commodities identified that make our region so special. At a recent Kick Off Workshop (KOW) held in Montego Bay, it was made clear that gone are the days when farmers are resigned to a hard life of eking out a living. Farmers, it was said, want to be able to drive nice cars and live in decent houses….and why not? With technological advances as well as diversification options, farming has become more attractive. The KOW noted the excitement that is being offered in Agro-tourism …and the fact that we really have been merely scratching the surface, sniffing at possibilities - but not grasping with confidence the absolutely fantastic possibilities that abound…this while Central and Latin America bask in this lucrative niche.

Agro-Tourism

It has the potential to showcase our world- renowned Jerk Seasoning - its birthplace, people, processing operations, This hybrid tourism has the potential of revitalizing the tourism product with tours of plantations, villages, homes and herbal gardens alike, demonstrating the traditional methods as well as the modern employed in bringing to market products which are wholesome and flavourful. Recognizing the prestigious place that selected Jamaican commodities occupy - e.g. coffee, pimento (allspice), ginger, provide attractive avenues for optimizing the agro-tourism product. Agro-tourism can also incorporate heritage and cultural aspects in representing agricultural practices employed. Our “ital” cuisine, our “ridims” and our “bushes” appreciated by persons all over the world, can play a role in agro tourism, increasing opportunities for
jobs without the drudgery. Health and wellness centres, spas and rejuvenating getaways are but a few options that can incorporate the country’s natural resources, traditional knowledge and creative marketing to extend the viability of tourism in Jamaica. As a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Jamaica has an obligation to comply with the guiding articles, as such, mechanisms must be in place so that communities that contribute to agro-tourism (and other such products) benefit. An appropriate Intellectual Property Rights regime is therefore a prerequisite.

**Nutraceuticals and Cosmeceuticals**

Moving up the value chain is the order of the day, and with diversification being promoted, it is an ideal time to investigate options that can possibly garner niche, high value markets.

Global trends indicate that the size of the multi-billion dollar nutraceuticals and cosmeceutical industry is continuing to increase with the growing popularity and usage of herbal and natural extracts. Health conscious consumers are taking more responsibility for their own health and well-being and are amenable to the use of extracts and preparations from medicinal plants. Local entrepreneurs have already taken advantage of a lucrative local market in preparations derived from roots and herbs, with claims ranging from being anti-hypertensive to increasing libido.

Our traditional commodities also have potential for contributing to the nutraceuticals industry. For example, there are numerous products that can be derived sugarcane - both food and non-food. Bagasse for example, is a resource that is being used for energy, however cost-benefit analyses need to be conducted to ascertain whether phytosterols such as beta-sitosterol and polycosanols which are used to treat a variety of health conditions, ranging from prostate enlargement to managing cholesterol levels and preventing heart disease provide more attractive returns. Another of our commodities - banana is a highly regarded fruit. Rich in nutrients and micro-nutrients, banana skin has also been said to have anti-inflammatory activity. It would be worthwhile to investigate banana as a functional food, nutraceuticals…and even cosmeceuticals. This would benefit from a partnership between industry, public sector and academia in conducting intensive research and development activities.

**Health Trends**

Heart Disease, stroke, cancer and Diabetes are the main causes of death in Jamaica today. The role of diet in the management of non-communicable diseases such as
Diabetes and Hypertension has been well documented, with several en vogue diet plans now available for a healthier populace. One of the recent meal planning tools involve the determination of what is known as the “Glycemic Index” of the food. This (GI) is a scale that ranks carbohydrate-rich foods by how much they raise blood glucose levels compared to glucose or white bread. Carbohydrates are known to break down in the body to sugar (glucose) during digestion and provide energy. After eating, blood glucose level rises and the speed at which the food is able to increase the blood glucose level in the body is known as the “glycemic response”. Essentially, the glycemic response can be influenced by many factors, including the quantity of food consumed, the variety, the mode of processing and preparation. The GI of imported foodstuff has been catalogued for reference but there is limited information on our local foods. Foods with GI less than 55 are deemed to be good “good carbs” while those with a GI index exceeding 70, “bad carbs”. Studies carried out at the University of the West Indies have indicated that boiled Sweet Potato has a low GI (45) as compared to other tubers and furthermore that the way in which food is prepared can affect the GI. Additional work is needed on the spectrum of Jamaican foods to guide our Nutritionists and Dieticians as well as food processors. As with trans fats, the GI may well be a requirement on the labels of processed foods being exported in the future. Trans fats are believed to pose a higher risk of heart disease than saturated fats, which were once believed to be the worst kind of fats. While it is true that saturated fats -- found in butter, cheese and beef, for example -- raise total cholesterol levels, trans fats not only raise total cholesterol levels, they also deplete good cholesterol (High Density Lipoprotein - HDL), which helps protect against heart disease.

Most trans fats consumed today are manufactured in a factory making them more saturated, thereby having a higher melting point. This process makes the fat more attractive for baking, and extends their shelf-life. As such, trans fats are often found in products such as cookies, crackers, icing, potato chips, margarine and microwave popcorn.

The fact that we are in a knowledge-based era augurs well for us as information that can impact our health and well being is readily available. The rate at which new information is unfolding is such that consumers are well advised to eat a variety of foods, using the basic Food Pyramid as a guide - i.e. lots of fruits and vegetables, less oils, fats, and red meats.

Nutrition, health, agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, employment – all components relating to food security. Not an easy road to travel…but one which we must.

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