

Managing Land Resources Through Youth Skills Development: The Gilbert Agricultural and Rural Development Centre (GARDC)

ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA

Introduction

In advocating attention to the environmental implications of sustainable development, there is a tendency to place emphasis on the degradation and adverse effects on societies' natural and physical resources. **As** important **as** this may be, neglect of the relations between the social factors and the productive use of natural resources can give rise to preservation and conservation of the environment at the risk of not satisfying human needs.

One of the most basic of human needs is the ability to earn one's livelihood in a dignified and self-fulfilling manner. However, it is increasingly apparent that a great majority of persons in the younger age groups of developing societies are facing the stark reality that not only are high levels of unemployment endemic in their societies, but also the educational systems have failed to provide skills and competencies by which they might be considered employable.

Moreover, traditional sectors, such as agriculture, are declining in their contribution to the economic growth and where limited opportunities for employment do exist, the demand is for technical and managerial know-how and experience.

The demands of sustainable human development must therefore be addressed in relation to questions of imparting skills, particularly for the large proportion of unemployed youths, in ways that make it possible to realise their potential and contribute meaningfully to the future of society.

In its attention to environmentally sound management of land resources, the **SIDSPOA** explicitly linked the need for new and improved technologies in agriculture to the opportunities for absorbing labour and employment creation, with a view to reducing poverty. By outstanding leadership and commitment to farming as a commercially viable option for a sustainable livelihood, the work at the Gilbert

Agricultural and Rural Development Centre (GARDC) has become a model experiment in vocational and technical education.

This brief account of the Centre's philosophy, organisation and management could usefully facilitate its adaptation and application to small societies in the Caribbean and beyond.

Background

The multi-island state of Antigua and Barbuda comprises three small islands situated in what is known as the Leeward Islands of the Lesser Antilles. With 18% arable land and another 16% comprising of forest and woodland, agricultural production was centred traditionally on sugar-cane, livestock and cotton. The latter was to earn a world-wide reputation as "sea-island" cotton, partly due to the relatively dry climate and low rainfall of Antigua.

From the mid 1960's, changes in the structure of the economy have resulted in the industry restaurant services and commerce becoming larger contributors to GDP than agriculture. In a population of about sixty-five thousand in 1995, of which forty thousand are estimated to be in the active labour force, 80% is employed in commerce and services, including hotels, restaurants and related activities.

Although, unemployment at a national average of 7%, is considered to be relatively low, in comparison with other Caribbean societies, the level for young adults, both male and female, in the nineteen to twenty-nine age group, is considerably higher and accounts for 44% of the total unemployed. The rural areas as expected, are reported to have higher levels of unemployment than the urban business centres. The situation of youth unemployment is even more disturbing when account is taken of the two thousand adolescents, who leave school annually, with few likely to find jobs. They are invariably unemployable, with few skills or job placement certificates.

In this context of no systematic and clearly thought-out national human resource development policy for youth, particularly rural youth, the GARDC was formed in 1989. It was an initiative aimed at giving young people, between sixteen and thirty years of age, practical knowledge and skills of agriculture as well as demonstrating and promoting to the wider society, that farming could be a worthy and successful occupation.

GARDC was established as a joint project of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas and a Young Farmers Training Project of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), which operated in the Caribbean between 1980 and 1995. Donor assistance from CIDA in the

YFTP trained young people in three Caribbean SIDS - Antigua and Barbuda, St. Lucia and Tortola of the British Virgin Islands.

The project agreement required that the host organisation assume responsibilities for operations and the training of young farmers after some years of CIDA's funding. Over time financial support for the continuation of training activities would be reduced and it was expected that the host organisation would take on full financial responsibility.

In the case of Antigua and Barbuda, the Caribbean Conference of the Methodist Church demonstrated a commitment to the joint venture by making land and classroom facilities available in the initial stage of the partnership. This was maintained at the takeover stage when donor support was terminated. As a result, Antigua and Barbuda was the only site where the take-over was successful after a three-year period of CIDA funding.

The Centre's Organisation and Structure

Registered as a charity under the Laws of Antigua and Barbuda, the Centre is stated as having a four-fold purpose:

- (1) To develop the skills of men and women between the ages of sixteen to thirty years, to be

able to establish and operate viable farms or other agricultural enterprises at a universally acceptable standard of living.

- (2) To up-skill the men and women between the ages of sixteen to thirty years, to be able to function as self-employed trade persons on viable small farms or other agricultural enterprises.
- (3) To encourage the formation and development of groups, companies or other types of associations among graduates of the Centre.
- (4) To present agriculture to young people as a viable alternative to drugs, stealing, other crimes and any demeaning occupations, such as, prostitution.

The mission of GARDC is:

To increase the number of young skilled persons in making a viable living in the agricultural sector in Antigua, Barbuda, and other Leeward Islands, and the Windward Islands through the regional mechanism of the Methodist Church and the Caribbean Conference of Churches.

The translation of the mission into programme areas has been focused on:

- (a) Small scale commercial farming.
- (b) Agri-business.
- (c) Special topics in agriculture and rural development.

Overall policy direction for the Centre rests with a nine member management committee, whose chairperson is an official of the Methodist Church, with representation drawn from the government's training department and the private sector. The director of the Centre is a member of the management committee. In addition to the director, a small core staff of an administrative assistant, a small business adviser, training co-ordinator and two field assistants is responsible for the day to day operations at GARDC. The team of some thirteen tutors represents a wide range of technical expertise, including agronomy, rabbit production, rural extension education, livestock and poultry, forestry and agri-business. An impressive roster of resource persons, known to be accomplished in agriculture, farming enterprises and food processing complements the range of indigenous expertise and experience from which GARDC continues to benefit in mounting human resource development and training programmes.

As a basis for course instruction and as a means of demonstrating small-scale

productive agriculture, the Centre operates a five acre (approximately two ha) farm with poultry, bee-keeping and small stock units. Income generated from these operations contribute to financing courses for which trainees are unable to cover the economic cost. From co-operative relations with departments of Government and local NGOs, technical support is given in kind.

Management of the Centre has projected that the production units will operate at a level to offset a proportion of the cost of running the Centre as it moves towards having trainees bear a realistic part of the costs. To keep the costs of tutors at a minimum, the Centre has refrained from maintaining a full-time, permanent teaching staff. As a result, tutors are employed on a course-by-course contractual basis. While this ensures that recurrent and overhead costs are low, it also enables the Centre access to practitioners and a precise targeting of the most appropriate expertise for custom-designed and demand-driven training.

Successes and Achievements

The case of GARDC can be cited as a remarkable success of an agricultural training pilot project, which started ten years ago with five young men and has now become recognised in the Caribbean Leeward and Windward Islands as a full-time training facility. The Centre

has trained more than fifteen hundred young adults with vocational and practical skills by which to earn a sustainable livelihood. Quite noteworthy is the fact that **52%** of the trainees are women, which coincides with a **52%** proportion of young women, ages twenty to thirty-four, in the national population.

It is evident that the organisation and management of the Centre is exemplary, having given substantive attention to appropriate organisational principles, despite the small size of the core staff. This has meant maintaining a clear focus on an efficient division of labour directed at precise functions and responsibilities so that planned targets and objectives are met. In this regard, the Centre **functions** around four units with specific responsibilities for:

- (1) Administration, which included the Centre director, administrative assistant, small business adviser and training co-ordinator.
- (2) Farm Business Unit with an Administrative Assistant, Small Business Adviser and Training Co-ordinator.
- (3) Training Unit comprising of the administrative assistant, small business adviser, training co-ordinator and Centre director.
- (4) Centre Development Unit, which is mainly the director in the role of mobilising resources,

designing development projects and projecting future directions for the Centre.

A unique feature of the Centre lies in its origins as a religion-affiliated organisation based on Methodist Christian principles. Emphasis is placed not only on the spiritual well-being of trainees but also their economic and social welfare. In this sense, an holistic approach is adopted in which training is rightly regarded as, one component of, rather than equated with, human resource development. By this approach, moral values to ensure ethically sound business practices are combined in training courses with requisite expertise for successful commercial farming enterprises.



Fig. 1 • Bee-keeping operation • as an income generating activity

Bee-Keeping Activities

The achievements in the training of beekeeping have resulted in the Centre being recognised as the official training arm of the national Bee-keepers'

Association. A Canadian donor agency has made available a volunteer trainer to facilitate maintaining a certifiable level of bee-keeping with the potential for **GARDC** to be a centre for rearing of "queen bees" which can be supplied for farmers. Enormous economic scope exists elsewhere in the Caribbean and worldwide for the rearing of "bees" to replace the depleted populations affected by the devastating effects of "Africanised" species of bees. The demand for honey as a natural product has **high** economic returns for small and medium-scale enterprises (see Fig. 1). The scaling-up of the bee-keeping unit into a small enterprise with spin-off secondary manufacturing of toiletries, hand lotions and soaps, is the subject of a feasibility assessment.

The contribution by **GARDC** to the agricultural sector in Antigua and Barbuda has been quite pronounced in the area of training young farmers, and more recently women, so as to bridge the gaps between "the number of experienced older farmers and the new, younger agricultural entrepreneur" as well as between "the levels of technologies of women farmers and their male counterparts."

Women's Training Programmes

A recent achievement that has received considerable praise from donor agencies is an Agriculture Enterprise Develop-

ment Course for Women, jointly supported as a collaborative venture between the Kellogg Foundation of the USA, the UN World Food Programme and the Methodist Church. The target group of the course is unemployed and seasonally employed women. The first two training sessions enrolled forty women of whom thirty six graduated.

Although it is too early in the project to see any long term outcomes, to date, seven of the women have formed partnerships; three are having loans processed; six will be receiving international grants; ten are awaiting lands to be cleared; one has been employed as a tractor driver; one is assisting the Centre in the development of utilising bee-products and establishing her own enterprise in this area. In addition, she will be hired to assist in the training of other women.

The enterprises selected by the women include:

- (1) Poultry layer operations.
- (2) Bee-keeping.
- (3) Crop production (with special emphasis on herbs and spices).
- (4) Sheep and goat operations.
- (5) Tractor services.

The women themselves have experienced changes in how they view

their own existence **within** their families and in the outside world. With the many skills acquired from the course, several women with increased confidence and the ability to take action, displayed strong determination and acquired lands for their enterprises by showing up daily at the Agricultural Extension Division until they received their plots.

Each of these women will have access to a revolving loan fund which was funded by the W. F. Kellogg Foundation. This fund is being managed by a local Cooperative Credit Union.

A maximum of EC\$5,000.00 (US-\$1,850.00) can be loaned to the women. The loan agreement requests that the grantee put up 25%, GARDC 25% and the Credit union 50%, at a rate of 12% interest on a declining balance. In the case where the grantee cannot afford the 25%, then GARDC will provide the full 50%. Once the grantee begins payments, the Credit Union will reimburse the loan fund for the 25% that the grantee was unable to pay.

All of the women will be required to join the Credit Union and begin saving while on the course. Many have now set goals for themselves and are hopeful for a better future as women, mothers and providers.

Programme Leadership and Networking

Two major factors contributed to the success which this joint venture programme was able to achieve in a relatively short period. Firstly, from the inception there was sound technical and managerial expertise. The donor assistance was made available for training stipends of the young adults, equipment and a consultant, by whom overall management and training were provided. The consultant chosen was both a highly respected member of the local community and had specialised training in agriculture which had earned her an outstanding reputation as an Agricultural Officer of the Government of Antigua and Barbuda. In her service with the government, considerable time had been devoted to establishing research and extension linkages with the farming community in Antigua and Barbuda.

A second contributing factor and closely related to the former, was the established networking and team approach adopted in the organisation, planning and execution of training courses. The history of good working relations with Ministry of Agriculture personnel made it possible for a pool of expertise to be drawn upon on a volunteer basis for the training courses. This allowed instructors and participants to have recourse for follow-up, technical support after a specific training session.

Another dimension of the networking capability by the Centre's leadership was the extensive technical co-operation measures adopted from the start-up stage of the project. A number of collaborating agencies became involved in training courses. In addition to the Ministry of Agriculture and other Government Departments, local private sector enterprises and local offices of regional and international agencies participated. Early recognition of the need to diversify the donor-support-base of the organisation led to the development of relations with such organisations as the Florida Agriculture Volunteers for the Caribbean (FAVA/CA); Global Missions of the United Methodist Church; Canadian Development Organisation (CUSO); US Peace Corps; the Organisation of American States (OAS) and W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

Constraints and Opportunities

From both the external and internal environments shaping social, economic and political relations, globally and within the Caribbean, GARDC will be forced to face many challenges. The constraints to financial viability are pronounced on account of the decline in the levels of official development assistance, available to CARICOM countries, generally classified as middle income developing economies.

Recognising these challenges, GARDC is consciously attempting to transform itself to overcome or mitigate the constraints by meeting the global trends and changes occurring in the Caribbean region.

Government policy in Antigua and Barbuda appears to be supportive of the tendency to use the NGO sector as a partner with government, the private sector and civil society as a whole, to meet the needs of rural communities in respect to human resource development, poverty alleviation and gender equity. GARDC's reputation and tangible outputs among rural youth have placed it in a position to lead in the facilitation of the mechanisms and networking required.

The Methodist Church as provider of the major assets of land and training facilities will need to be strongly supportive of the role that GARDC can play as a centre for rural transformation. Access to more of the sixty-five acre estate on which the centre is located is **being** considered. The prospects for eco-tourism will be explored and the provision of residential facilities and an expansion of classrooms will enable a dual purpose for visitor accommodation as well as residential, fee-paying courses, aimed at a clientele that can afford full economic costs of training.

As a centre for rural transformation, it is intended that handicraft products will

be made, maintenance and servicing of small farm machinery and use of by-products from bee-keeping, along with teaching of handicraft skills and preparation of landscaping equipment, would be undertaken.

Challenges for Consolidation

The expansion of agricultural activities has been initiated to address the area of agro-forestry development. By this means, the cultivation of multi-purpose trees has been undertaken to provide windbreaks and mulching of soils as an aspect of introducing dry-land farming and for use in biological pest control. In this regard, propagation of the Neem Tree - *Azadirachta indica* has been made possible through support from the OAS and a project to distribute fifteen hundred Neem trees to farmers and surrounding villages is being implemented in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Environment and the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI).

To support the durability of the impact of training, GARDC has obtained support from another NGO, the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI), whose work, in the Soufriere Marine Management Area (SMMA) and with Seamount cultivation, has been analysed in this Report (2.1(1) and 2.3 (11)). This support has been

used for training of trainers workshops and promoting the development of farmers' groups, by persons who have participated in training courses at the Centre.

Financial viability will continue to constitute a major challenge to GARDC and however successful the current level of grant funding, it is clearly recognised that core funding of its operations must become increasingly self-financing. In this regard, infra-structural developments on the demonstration farm have been made to enlarge the productive capacity for improved pig rearing and an expanded herd of sheep. Prospects for income generation are being realised through agro-processing of hot peppers, beans, ochros and carrots as well as jams from pineapple and guava.

Sustainability of the Centre is also premised, as explicitly stated by the director on pooling resources with other organisations and developing innovative ways to expand financial capabilities and strengthen the organisational capacity of the Centre.

Lessons Learned

- The achievements of GARDC demonstrate that tangible and relevant outputs can be realised in relatively short periods of time, with rather limited resources, once

the planning and organisation of programme activities are clearly focused on addressing felt needs of a target population. For the purposes of the present Report, reference should be made to the significant manner in which, the initiatives by GARDC, address at least three of the Priority Areas in the S I B POA.

- The broad theme underlying the approach to sustainable development, as understood and practiced by GARDC is in the area of *human resource development*. Secondly, the emphasis on agriculture as a business and at the same time, a humanly-enriching occupation requires a management of land resources, that take account of environmental conservation and the use of agricultural practices that are environmentally friendly. The third Priority Area of the POA, addressed by GARDC, is that of institutional strengthening of *national institutions and administrative capacity*.

Specifically the following lessons are instructive:

- The understanding of human resource development must be wider than that of training, which of course, by addressing skills and attitudes is necessary but not

sufficient for the all round growth of the human person. For the latter, the dimension of moral values must be included so that a holistic approach is achieved and foundations laid for sustainable human development.

- The promotion of an adult learning environment is essential if knowledge being imparted is intended to address both competencies and behaviour of trainees. For young adults to assume responsibilities for life-long learning and to adopt an approach to continuous improvement as a guiding principle for occupational success and achievement, the environment in the classroom, on the farm or in counselling sessions should encourage their being regarded as adults not as children. This has been a characteristic feature of GARDC and has helped to address the challenging problems brought by trainees on account of the social and domestic circumstances of their everyday life.
- The success and sustainability of national institutions are more likely to endure when they respond by providing service for an agenda of genuinely felt needs, identified within the society's policies and informed by indigenous expertise and experience in project design and execution. The issues related to

youth skills development and promotion of vocational agricultural training are deeply rooted in concerns to address problems of youth unemployment in Antigua and Barbuda. The response to this challenge by GARDC has been in terms of the structural and behavioural implications.

As well as modern skills, access to land has long been identified as structural constraints to agricultural and rural development which are being addressed by GARDC. Moreover, market opportunities for skilled labour in farm machinery servicing and repairs, the care of lawns and landscaping in the tourism sector and high income residential communities, as well as agro-processing and fresh produce for hotels and restaurants, are being utilised. As a national institution, GARDC has made inter-sectoral linkages with a view to ensuring a cumulative impact by its initiatives and approach to sustainable development.

- Optimum and efficient use of national expertise and resources require the collaboration of regional and international development assistance, if global and external forces are to be addressed by small societies.

The inter-agency co-ordination and networking by the leadership of GARDC have demonstrated a regional

and international perspective. By this means, the scaling-up of local-level activities has benefited from a sharing of expertise with NGOs in Grenada and St. Lucia, as well as enabling GARDC to be a focal point for training in project preparation, organised by an international private sector foundation, so that access to donor assistance can be improved, in terms of both quality and efficiency. Long-term benefits to NGOs and CBOs can be expected to have multiplier effects in the agricultural and rural development sector, as well as in additional areas of the national economies of Caribbean SIDS and in support of South co-operation.

The case of GARDC, with successes that may be preliminary and fragile, certainly reinforces the need for such innovations to be given opportunities, suitable policy framework and additional resources so as to make even greater advances in furtherance of sustainable development.

Recommendations

A video documentary of the work of GARDC will be most instructive as a motivational tool for the work of similar agencies attempting to transform social negatives into positives in the Caribbean. It is recommended that donor support for such a venture be explored.