FOOD SECURITY IN THE CARIBBEAN – A POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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Among the several development issues facing Caribbean SIDS, food and nutrition security has emerged as a particularly important challenge given its role in affecting the health and well-being of all of its peoples. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), (2021), as much as 67.5 per cent of the subregion's population is currently living in moderate to severe food insecurity. This is related mainly to the cost of accessing food, as well as the quality of food accessed. This compares to a global average of 27.6 per cent.

The outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine in March 2022 has once again brought into sharp focus the precarious nature of food security for the Caribbean. This is because of the subregion's high dependence on food imports, particularly grains such as wheat and soya, and edible oils. According to the FAO (2021), the Caribbean imports between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of its basic food requirements, in order to meet its domestic food needs, as well as to feed a significant number of visitors for its highly dependent tourism sector.

Notwithstanding this issue, a more enduring challenge to Caribbean food security is the likely agro-ecological changes which are anticipated over the medium to long term as a consequence of global climate change. According to ECLAC (2011), climate change is projected to generate increased rainfall intensity, as well as drought conditions in the Caribbean over the next 50 years. These conditions are likely to limit the extent to which the subregion could deploy its usual response, by focusing on domestic agricultural production as a principal strategy for mitigating future food insecurity (Lang and Barling, 2012 cited by Clapp et al, 2021). For instance, increased rainfall intensity has the potential for more frequent flooding events, while more intense drought conditions can reduce crop growth. Both of these developments could ultimately reduce agricultural output of the subregion's largely rainfed agro-production systems. Evidence of this reality has already been demonstrated by Ganpat and Isaac (2015) who observed that increased frequency of extreme weather events has resulted in significant losses of agricultural production over the recent decade.

Given the reality of global climate change, Mohammadi et al (2022) now point to a wider complex of factors such as environment, health, trade, and innovation, which need to be incorporated into food policies to properly address the subregion's food and nutrition challenges. In the context of a broader set of factors being considered, this article explores policy considerations related to trade and investment, incomes, nutrition, and tourism variables. Apart from agricultural policy, each of these factors is succinctly examined below.

AGRICULTURAL POLICY:

Traditionally, agriculture has been an important subsector for many Caribbean economies. This reflects the colonial legacy of a plantation type agriculture in which former Caribbean colonies produced tropical agricultural commodities for export under preferential conditions to European metropolitan markets. Such exports have included - in various periods - sugar, tobacco, cocoa, coffee, citrus, cotton, rice and most recently bananas.

In recent decades, up to the early 1990s, the subregion's agricultural value-added as a share of GDP ranged from a high of 43.7 per cent for Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to 9.1 per cent for Barbados (FAO, 2022). Over the past two decades, however this share has steadily declined to 19.5 per cent and 4.4 per cent respectively for the same countries (Figure 1).

Although the subregion has enjoyed a positive contribution from its agricultural sector in the past, from the standpoint of food supplied from local sources, agriculture did not make as significant a contribution. This is because past agricultural policy emphasized the export of traditional commodities in order to supply preferential markets. At the same time, food imports continued to grow to meet the demands of an increasingly urbanized and wealthy population, as well as to provide for the subregion's rapidly expanding hospitality and related services industry. Ultimately, evolving consumer tastes and preferences proved to be detrimental to locally produced food crops, which were never supported to the same extent as agricultural exports (McElroy and De Albuquerque, 1990). In this context, any food security strategy must include local food production[1] with both public and private sector support to farmers and domestic food distributors in order to guarantee the subregion's domestic food supply. Such support could be in the form of enhanced technical capacity as well as production subsidies.

TRADE AND INVESTMENT POLICY:

The growth in food imports has also been facilitated by trade liberalization and investment policies adopted by the subregion. As noted by Pemberton and Harris, 1988 cited by Mohammadi et al (2022), over recent decades, several Caribbean economies have been pursuing a cheap food policy supported by imports.

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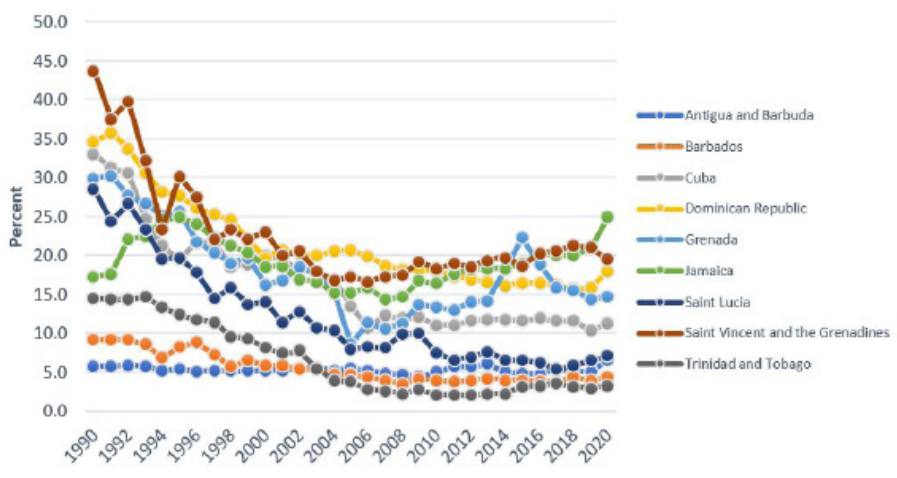
[1] These are typically referred to as food crops and include green bananas, plantains, pumpkin, roots crops, vegetables, pulses and legumes (bodi, pigeon peas), and condiments among others.

Figure 1: Agricultural Value Added as a Share of GDP- Selected Caribbean Countries: 1990-2020



Source: Based on FAOSTAT Data, 2022

While this strategy allows the Caribbean to exploit cost and scale economies from global food sources, it also exposes the subregion to supply chain disruptions and changes in global shipping costs which ultimately affect food supply reliability and prices, particularly for the small markets of the Caribbean. Distribution of imported food in many Caribbean markets is also practiced under oligopolistic conditions, which limit price efficiency. Low investment in domestic food distribution has also constrained the development of markets for locally produced food.

INCOMES POLICY:

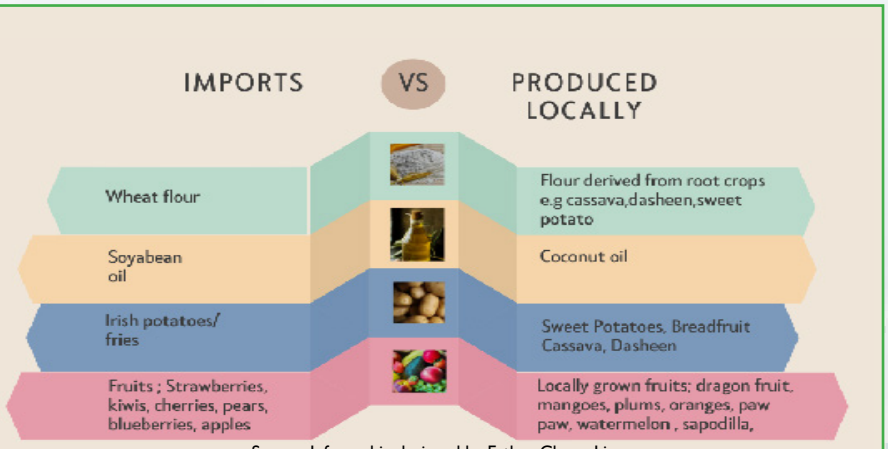
As demonstrated by Sen (1981), falling real incomes, even in the presence of food availability, can also lead to food insecurity, since this reduces the capacity or entitlements of households to purchase food over time.

While data for the Caribbean are scarce, real incomes have increased only relatively slowly for Jamaica (5 per cent) and Haiti (8 per cent) between 2015 – 2019 (ECLAC, 2022). At the same time, food inflation has reduced household purchasing power, implying that policies to enhance and sustain family incomes such as conditional cash transfers are also important considerations in ensuring food security.

NUTRITION POLICY:

As noted above, food consumption patterns in the Caribbean are highly influenced by North American food preferences.

The Caribbean continues to lack nutrition polices and legislation that address challenges faced by SIDS. Shifting consumption to include local produce in nutrition plans will enhance the familiarity of consumers with alternatives that may have higher nutrition content. Strategies for fostering such a shift could include increased public education on the value and use of locally produced foods, as well as more local content requirements, particularly for publicly provided foods to schools and health care institutions.



Source: Infographic designed by Esther Chong Ling

TOURISM POLICY:

Although the Caribbean is a major tourism destination globally, its provision of hospitality services in the form of accommodations and food is supported largely by regional food imports. This is partly due to the structure of ownership of some hotel chains.

Estimates by the World Bank and FAO (2008) suggest that for the Organization of Eastern Caribbean Countries, only 32 per cent of the tourism sector demand is met from local sources. Jansen, Stern and Weiss (2015) also observe that as much as 60 per cent of fresh produce used in the hotel sector in these countries is imported. Given the subregion's underdevelopment of other food value chains, the supply of other higher valued food inputs such as processed meats, dairy, cereals, and canned foods is met almost exclusively from imports, and constitutes a significant share of the subregion's total food imports. Such high level of dependency on food imports makes the Caribbean tourism sector extremely vulnerable to food supply shocks, with wider economic and social implications, given the pivotal role of tourism in these economies.

By way of conclusion, renewed efforts to improve food security for Caribbean SIDS would require a broadened perspective, if this policy goal is to be achieved in the long run. These considerations should include diverse sector production variables, as well as social factors such as consumer tastes and preferences, incomes and nutrition and health. ■

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