

A Guyanese Success Story

by Janet Jagan

Agriculture forms the base of our economy. This is a truism and very important for our future. Unless we discover offshore oil when finally the issue is settled between Guyana and Suriname, we will, no doubt, settle mainly to develop the agricultural sector. With oil of course, we could go easier into manufacturing, as Trinidad has done with rich supplies of oil and gas. We can also look forward in the future to cheap energy when we harness, as we will, one of our waterfalls.

Agriculture has been the mainstay of our economy with sugar and rice forming the vital sector of our economy. Diversification has been a principle of the PPP/Civic government and this has begun to produce results. We are now self sufficient in chickens and eggs and we should be entering the export market for both, soon. We have been successfully exporting pineapples, mainly from the Canals Polder. Recently we exported a large amount of sweet potatoes to the UK. We are shipping bora, pawpaw, limes, melons, plantains, cassava and pineapples to the Caribbean, presently to Trinidad and Barbados. This should soon expand to other Caribbean countries. Exports of fruits and vegetables have doubled this year alone.

Fish is being exported to North America and our markets there are expanding. Beef is a product that has great possibilities. We used to have a good export market for beef. I remember when I was in the Cabinet of the 1951-61 PPP government, we had a healthy beef export business then.

Unfortunately, the boost given to agriculture, livestock and fisheries when the PPP was in office in the 50s and 60s had a crooked landing when the PNC took over. At that time the copra and coffee industries were growing. I remember that we had a robust programme of encouraging farming. We gave out thousands of coconut plants; we gave crop bonuses to farmers who diversified; we had a heifer plan where a farmer was given a cow and the first calf produced was given back to the government to have a revolving scheme. Many cattle farmers began small in this manner and gradually built herds, although the basic idea was to have fresh and available milk for the children of the household.

We were later saddled with foot-and-mouth disease which prevented Guyana from exporting beef. Only recently did we leap over that hurdle and now we are free of that impediment. With mad cow disease present in Europe, this is a good time to get back into the beef export market.

I can remember, too, the tremendous success of the Guyana Marketing Corporation (GMC) which purchased farmers' produce, paid promptly and sold them to low-income urban working people at a low price, eliminating the middle men. But the PNC ruined all that. Farmers would have to wait for long periods of payment for goods supplied and eventually gave up selling to the GMC, reverting to the middlemen with both farmers and consumers losing. But that was how the PNC operated. And soon, agriculture was in the decline.

It was revived after 1992 by the PPP/Civic which placed greater emphasis on agriculture, livestock and fisheries. More agriculture land has been distributed in the period after 1992. The Guyana Marketing Corporation has been revived to a New Guyana Marketing Corporation which is again purchasing farmers' produce and helping diversify, as well as assisting in the marketing of processed agri-goods. It

encourages Guyanese to "buy local" and to appreciate our local products in the face of a barrage of imported foods that are mainly luxuries and increase the cost of living.

Of course, we have much to learn and have to strive for quality and consistent production if we want to maintain a thriving export market. New methods, new techniques have to be learnt - packaging, preservation, presentation, uniformity are all necessary for success.

During this Agriculture Month, Guyanese can be proud of our successes and achievements in the short span of time that progress began - from 1992 to the present. It is a Guyanese success story!

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