



Economic Letter February 2021



Eating What You Grow Won't Increase Food Security

A few days ago I saw a news clip about the resurgence of a plague of locusts in Somalia, in East Africa. A Somali farmer was lamenting the fact that his family faced starvation, as he led the reporter around his fields, where he normally provided all the food his family needed. The locusts had stripped the land bare of vegetation: crops lay dying in the fields and there was no food for the animals. Without urgent food aid, famine threatens his family, the community and that entire region.

This is a stark reminder of the fact that depending on the food you produce yourself is a very insecure way to live. That is true for the household, the community and any small nation. If Barbadians depended mainly on fruits and vegetables grown locally, we would suffer from acute shortages whenever there was drought, flooding or extreme weather, or whenever crops were affected by infestations, predators or other adversity. Growing your own food does not increase food security; it decreases food security.

There are good reasons to promote competitive local production of quality fresh produce, but they have nothing to do with food security. Instead, local farmers should be encouraged to provide top quality food in support of healthy lifestyles for Barbadians. Nutritionists attest to the fact that fresh produce, locally grown, is the key to a healthy diet. The very first Fish & Dragon Festival, held annually to celebrate Chinese New Year, featured presentations by local herbalists and nutritionists. One piece of advice that has stuck with me from that event is that your healthiest diet uses the products that are grown all around you.

There is a qualification: it does matter how the food is grown. We need to ask whether current agricultural practices in Barbados do in fact produce high quality food that is healthy and nutritious to eat. My wife Monica and I live in the country, and I have to confess that the frequent scent of herbicides and pesticides, wafting across from cultivated fields nearby, is more than a little disconcerting.

In order to turn the corner on what is still a failing agricultural sector, farmers need to focus on the production of high quality fresh foods, produced organically and distributed to consumers safely, quickly and conveniently. This will not be cheap food for mass consumption; if the product is cheap to buy the return to the farmer will be low, or you will not find the product fresh in the supermarket, and you will have to go pick or dig your own supply.

A focus on organically produced fresh food production offers ample scope for vigorous expansion in farm output in Barbados and the Caribbean. There is already a demand for healthy, nutritious food, and the Caribbean now boasts creative chefs who use local products as the basis for exciting culinary experiences for residents and visitors alike. With the use of suitable incentives, Governments can provide the stimulus for the growth of a sustainable agriculture that does not depend on bans, prohibitions or tariffs on imported foods, and which provides a comfortable middle-class lifestyle for farmers.