

## Tourism needs a much closer relationship with agriculture

### The Business of Tourism

David Jessop

When in the early 1990s it became apparent that Europe's preferential regimes for Caribbean bananas and sugar were coming to an end, an impassioned debate began about a transition to other forms of economic activity.

For the most part the focus was on alternative crops, import substitution, manufacturing, and financial services. Little was said at the time about tourism because its sustainability was widely regarded as uncertain.

Since then, the world has moved on. Tourism has come to dominate most Caribbean economies.

In contrast, agriculture has been slow to reorient itself, hardly scratched the surface of tourism's burgeoning demand for high quality food, fish and processed foodstuffs, and has failed to reorient and integrate its production with the hugely valuable visitor market that is often adjacent to viable agricultural land.

Some in agriculture have moved on and identified niche domestic or export markets, and in the case of the Dominican Republic and to a lesser extent Cuba and Jamaica have begun to encourage linkages with tourism. Despite this, most Caribbean farmers remain caught in the past. The result is an aging industry, with little new thinking about how agriculture might adapt or be incentivised to integrate with the high value demand that tourism creates.

For this reason, a just published Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) and UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 'Study on the State of Agriculture in the Caribbean' is breath of fresh air as it outlines how, with a significantly changed approach, the sector could generally become of much greater economic and social relevance, and more specifically might adapt to supply the tourism sector.

As well as identifying the steps required to resuscitate the industry and reduce the region's huge food import bill, it in part focuses on how the influx of foreign tourists since the 1980s has increased the local demand for food, and for specific food products. It notes that despite this in most of CDB's borrowing members countries (CARICOM and the UK Overseas

Territories) the opportunity this offered for local farmers to expand and diversify their production was not met. Instead imports of food products increased.

The report quotes the example of Negril where notwithstanding the demand for locally produced foodstuffs, at times agricultural producers have been unable to supply product in a consistent manner as a result of the absence of cold storage facilities and inefficient irrigation systems; problems that were exacerbated by weak organisation, and poor communication between producers and hotel representatives. It notes too that in some parts of the region 32 per cent or less of the food demand arising from the tourism is being met locally.

CDB's report also suggests that when it comes to tourism there is substantial room for the creation of new linkages between local agricultural production and tourism but that there is an information asymmetry regarding the standards required by hotel and restaurant chains, cruise ships, and the yachting sector.

CDB make clear that while the principal challenge facing agriculture in the region is improving competitiveness and productivity, to adequately respond to tourism's rapidly growing demand for high-standard, agri-food products it will also need to advance its ability to comply with modern food safety and quality standards.

Despite this, the report, which addresses fisheries and aquaculture as well, says the sector, as a whole, has great potential for the creation of stronger market linkages with tourism if support is provided to farmers, fisherfolk and agri-food businesses to adopt current international best practice and technologies.

CDB's intention now is to develop a new agricultural policy and strategy paper for governments, multilateral institutions and aid donors, with the intention of modernising Caribbean agricultural practice, identifying key trends and the innovative practices and the science necessary to support an integrated approach.

If the Caribbean's agri-food system is to become more competitive, inclusive and sustainable, it has long been self-evident that agriculture requires a new approach, new policies and investment. In particular, to survive as a sector, it needs to overcome its inefficiencies, adopt best practice and integrate with tourism and local manufacturing in parallel to identifying niche export market opportunities.

What makes CDB's report particularly important is that it is forward looking, outlines solutions and opportunities and gives hope to all who believe in the centrality of agriculture to Caribbean life and who want visitors to experience in an holistic way, all that the region has to offer.

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July 10, 2019

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