

**TALKING POINTS**  
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**Agriculture not a rescue plan in times of crisis, but a tool for sustainable development- Tufton**

The currency of the discussion about the importance of agriculture as an important sector to move the country out of its current economic malaise is likely to raise expectations that are unrealistic, given the low levels of investment in capacity building and agro business over the last two decades. Agriculture should not be viewed as a rescue plan in times of crisis, but a tool for sustainable development.

Much of the commentary taking place, advancing suggestions on strategies and programmes, ignores the context of a sector that has been undercapitalized and marginalized by both limited policy support and strong special interest that lobby for terms of trade that erodes the competitive possibilities of primary producers and places little effort on value added activities. A misinterpretation or manipulation of the WTO rules adds to weak or inadequate enforcements threaten an already weak agro industry lobby.

Today, the call for an economic rescue plan for Jamaica and indeed the world includes a call for farmers to respond to the marketplace, produce efficiently and consistently, add value to primary output, to engage in post harvest care and to embrace technology. These are all fundamental to our food security thrust and to a successful agro business venture, but are only achievable and sustainable if there is adequate motivation to invest in agriculture.

It is investments that will drive the sector and spawn a new breed of agro entrepreneurs. In this regard there must be State investments in infrastructure: farm roads, research and training, extension support, land reform and agro-financing, to name a few. Critically also, policy framework must motivate private sector investments in the agriculture sector, by ensuring that the model for investments in the agriculture sector provide a basis for returns on investments.

Investors are unlikely to invest in agriculture if they get better returns in all other areas of investments, including banking, trading and tourism. Even in the case of fixed deposit investments, an area that requires no effort, the returns are better for an agro investor. Invariably the agro investor usually has to face higher risk, for least returns. It is lopsided investment paradigm that has marginalized the sector for years.

The time has come for us to determine exactly what we want from the agriculture sector. Is it first and foremost a welfare activity for those on the margins of our society, or is it a tool for sustainable development? Currently it is doing too much of the former and too little of the latter.

This Government wants to use agriculture as a tool for sustainable development. We are challenging the private sector to sit with us and work with us to achieve this sustainable model. I encourage the country not to let the discussions on a need for improving food security be a nine-day wonder or only a crisis response to our current situation. At the same time let us accept that sustainability requires decisions that are costly and includes sacrifice.

All of us have a role to play in this regard: government, investors, consumers, taxpayers. An examination of the American Farm Bill and the Common Agricultural Policy for the EU makes it quite clear that the developed world view agriculture as a strategic imperative and they pursue policies to ensure sustainability, even at the expense of cost consideration.

Jamaicans at some point will have to make a decision between 'cheap food' and consistent supplies of food. In the past we have allowed ourselves to be convinced that a strategy for consistent food may be anticompetitive and protectionist. The American Farm Bill and the EU Common Agricultural Policy finds ways to justify their interventions in the sector on the grounds of the strategic interest of their citizens. What we refer to as protectionism, they refer to as strategic intervention!

I close today by asking the question, is agriculture a strategic imperative for our country? I say, it should be. Are we up to the challenge? I say, yes.

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