

Institutional analysis of food and agriculture policy in the Caribbean: The case of Saint Lucia



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ABSTRACT

The role played by various institutions in the domestic agri-food systems of Caribbean nations has become an increasingly important area of research and policy attention. This paper assesses the main policies that have been implemented in Saint Lucia's agri-food system over two time periods (pre-1950 and 1950 to 2010), and analyzes their influence on formal and informal institutions. Results suggest that rule convergence in export (formal) and domestic (informal) agricultural production systems displaced informal institutions to a lower position in the institutional hierarchy. This institutional change has reduced interactions between farming community members, with negative implications for bonding and bridging social capital in the domestic food production system. Collectively, these changes have resulted in unintended outcomes associated with the decline of many rural communities. Our findings highlight the need to better identify bridging institutions in Saint Lucia's domestic agri-food sector that could help support shared rule-making, the decentralization of power and reciprocal knowledge flows amongst policy actors.

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1. Introduction

Historically, the plantation institution, as the basic unit of colonial agricultural production in the Caribbean, heavily influenced social norms, interactions and relations in the regional agri-food system (Saint Ville et al., 2015). As a fully integrated institution that ruled over every facet of life in the region, the plantation was more than an economic phenomenon. Levitt and Best (1975) described it as a powerful political, economic and social unit (see also Beckles and Shepherd, 1996; Richardson, 1992). Despite sweeping social transformations across the Caribbean, ranging from emancipation of slavery, universal adult suffrage and political independence (Beckles and Shepherd, 1996), plantations heavily influenced the 'rules of the game' (North, 1991; Saint Ville et al., 2015) by defining formal rules, informal norms and their enforcement (see Guha-Khasnabis et al., 2007 on linkages between formal and informal institutions). In recognition of this historical legacy, noted Caribbean 'Plantation School' economists such as Lloyd Best,

Norman Girvan, George Beckford, and Clive Y. Thomas have called for a re-examination of the agri-food institutions operating in the region (Elliott and Palmer, 2008; Timms, 2008).

Formal institutions can be defined as the codified laws that govern governments, cooperatives, firms and communities, and which are followed by members (Hodgson, 2006), while informal institutions are understood as socially-defined codes of conduct that are transmitted through and by the community (Rahman et al., 2012). Increasing research and policy attention has been placed on how informal institutions facilitate social processes that can enable actors to manage and adapt to change, (Folke, 2006; Ostrom, 2009) interact, communicate, and innovate (Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011). Here, the concept of social capital, defined as the enduring connections of networks, reciprocity and social norms that exist among social actors (Narayan, 2002), has increasingly been applied to help understand social processes that influence information flows, power relationships and collective action (Adler and Kwon, 2002). Social capital comprises three dimensions: bonding (horizontal ties within a subgroup), bridging (horizontal ties bridging distinct subgroups) and linking social capital (vertical ties to power and finance developed through shared tasks directed towards the common good) (Grootaert et al., 2004; Sabatini, 2009). Not all social capital is considered equal, with these three dimensions playing

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different roles in social processes.

While previous research has identified strong relationships between social capital, information flow, and agricultural innovation in smallholder farming systems (see van Rijn et al., 2012; Dessie et al., 2013; Speranza, 2013; Wossen et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2014; Reed and Hickey, 2016), relatively little is known about how institutional dynamics affect interactions between different dimensions of social capital (Adger, 2003; Pelling and High, 2005; Kode, 2013). Importantly, while there has been some empirical work on the various roles that different institutions play in affecting smallholder agricultural innovation systems in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa (Darr and Pretzsch, 2008; Timu et al., 2012; Mashavave et al., 2013), there has been little-to-no empirical research in the Caribbean, particularly in the context of social capital and collective action (see, for example, Dessie et al. (2013) in the context of Ethiopia). Recognizing the need to better understand these complex relationships in Caribbean smallholder farming systems, this paper explores how various dimensions of social capital have evolved and both influenced, and been influenced by, institutional dynamics in Saint Lucia's domestic agri-food system.

2. Methods

2.1. Data collection

Following a case study research design (Yin, 1994), qualitative data were collected using archival, documentary, direct observation and key-informant interview methods. This strategy allowed us to describe complex social relationships and reveal the interconnections between actors (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Becker, 1996; Yin, 2002). All field data collection activities were undertaken between July and October 2013. Key informant interviews (Becker, 1996) were conducted with 57 respondents (Table 1) across Saint Lucia, including all major farming communities (Castries-Roseau/Millet, Babonneau, Dennery, Micoud, Choiseul, Vieux Fort) on the island (see Fig. 1). Interview respondents were purposively sampled following a snowball strategy using two selection criteria: 1) they held a position or role in farmer/community mobilization at the national level (political activists, sociologists, journalists, environmentalists, anthropologists, trade unionists, historians, folk researchers, linguists); or 2) they were senior smallholder farmers who had been producing in the food system for over 50 years. To ensure that we were able to access a wide a group of these (often retired) farmers, we sought assistance from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Production, Fisheries, Cooperatives and Rural Development, private sector, NGOs, farmer

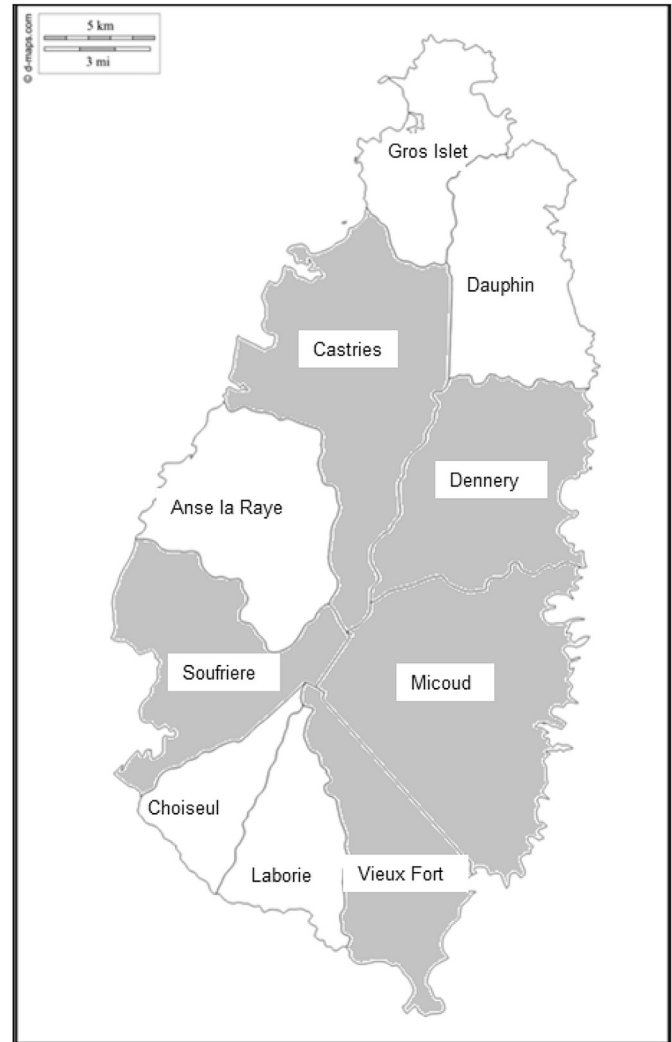


Fig. 1. Map of Saint Lucia showing major agricultural areas.

groups, faith-based organizations and community leaders in the major rural communities to identify and locate prospective farmers across the island.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format and covered four major areas: 1) the 'rules-in-use' that direct actors, and help guide

Table 1
Respondent profile.

Key Informants	Total	Male	Female
Group 1: Smallholder Farmer (65–80 years old)			
Location of Farming community			
Northern Communities (Babonneau, Bexon)	4	4	0
Southern Communities (Vieux Fort, Micoud)	12	12	0
Western Communities (Choiseul, Millet, Anse la Raye)	7	5	2
Eastern Communities (Dennery)	7	3	4
Sub-total	30	24	6
Group 2: National Specialists			
Agriculture (finance, engineering, policy, economics) and Natural resource management	7	6	1
Historian/Sociologist/Linguist/Anthropologist	8	6	2
Trade union activism/Civil society activism	2	2	0
Journalists/Counselor	4	3	1
Community development/Mobilization/Disaster management	3	1	2
Farmer organizations/Capacity building	3	2	1
Sub-total	27	20	7
Total	57	44	13

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