



Food and nutrition security policies in the Caribbean: Challenging the corporate food regime?



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ABSTRACT

Trinidad and Tobago is contributing to climate change by maintaining a model for food security that is based on corporate controls over food and agriculture. With policy documents, media sources, and ethnographic data, I argue that Trinidad and Tobago's food system is connected to national and transnational markets that firmly affix the country's food system to the fossil fuel economy. Three examples are provided. The first is the adoption of the World Bank's 'value chain' model for agriculture, which favours larger, economically (rather than ecologically) efficient farmers. The second is the recent state-led campaign to 'put T&T on your table', which overlooks the political prioritisation of industrial food imports exemplified by current policies to eliminate VAT (Value Added Tax) on industrial food imports. The final example is the November 2013 Memorandum of Understanding between Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, under which Guyanese lands are being converted for the industrial production of corn, soya, and other crops for final processing and consumption in Trinidad and Tobago. While such policies are justified under the label of national and regional food security, I argue that they perpetuate a Caribbean-style corporate food regime that counteracts more climate-sensitive efforts to create sustainable producer–consumer networks.

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1. Introduction

The question of carbon emissions roots global problems in ... the energetic foundations of modernity itself.

[Peet et al. (2011: 10)]

According to Philip McMichael (2005: 265), the corporate food regime displaces subsistence ('peasant') agriculture by industrially-produced food imports and promotes industrially-produced agro-exports over local food production. Industrialised agriculture makes up 10–12% of annual greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and at least 30% of global GHG emissions when factors such as deforestation, fuel for machinery and transport, and petrochemical production and use are taken into account (Conway, 2012: 306–7, citing The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC]). These climate risks are reinforced by many of the Trinidad and Tobago government's food security policies, which promote imports and exports of industrially-produced food, thereby reinforcing the corporate food regime.

In this paper I argue that food security policies in Trinidad and Tobago reflect the corporate food regime because they encourage industrial food production for export and domestic consumption,

while supporting continued reliance on imports from the United States and, now, Guyana. In Chris Philo's terms (2012) the 'big-S' Food Security concerns of powerful interests in Trinidad and Tobago (such as the state and corporate actors) eclipse the 'small-s' food security concerns of less powerful actors (such as agroecological farmers and consumers concerned about agrochemical use). I analyse media and policy documents from Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean and use survey and interview data collected during a 6-week period of ethnographic research (June–July 2014) to show how food production, processing, and consumption in Trinidad and Tobago are connected to national and transnational markets that firmly affix the country's food system to the fossil fuel economy.

The paper is divided into four parts. In the first I provide a brief background to the 2011 Regional Food and Nutrition Security Policy of CARICOM (The Caribbean Community and Common Market)¹ and its national variant in Trinidad and Tobago. I show how the Regional Food and Nutrition Security Policy of CARICOM

¹ Established under the Treaty of Chaguaramas in 1973, CARICOM was a successor to an earlier attempt to create a single regional market called CARIFTA (the Caribbean Free Trade Area), which was established in 1965 (Seaga, 2005: 128). There are fifteen member countries of CARICOM, including Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, St Lucia, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.

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(RFNSP) reproduces the corporate food regime and associated climate risks by conforming to the World Bank's model of 'value chain' farming. In the second part I highlight related contradictions of food security policies in Trinidad and Tobago, particularly the 2011 campaign to 'put T&T [Trinidad and Tobago] on your table' and the zero-VAT (Value Added Tax) measure of 2012. Discrepancies between the 2011 campaign and the zero-VAT measure underscore the continued importance of the corporate food regime in Trinidad and Tobago, supported by the combined interests of government officials and food importers. The third part of the paper focusses on another project for regional and national food security that is increasing the *insecurities* of affected populations and environments: the 2013 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, under which Guyanese lands are being converted to mega-farms to produce, among other things, corn and soya feed for animals reared in Trinidad and Tobago. I argue that plans set forth in the recent MoU jeopardise the livelihoods of small farmers in Trinidad and Tobago and reduce the carbon offsetting potential of tropical forests in Guyana. I conclude that social and environmental injustices perpetuated by Trinidad and Tobago's food security policies may be rectified if the climate change adaptation and mitigation potential of agroecological practices are recognised in food security agendas.

1.1. Case 1: The RFNSP and the World Bank's model for value chain agriculture

Food security is now a central concern for policymakers in the Caribbean. In 2003 and 2008 the first and second phases of the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) project for food security in the Caribbean was initiated with a total budget of just under US \$9 million (FAO, 2012). After the global food crisis of 2008–2009, when prices for staple commodities like corn and soya rose steeply, FAO continued to support efforts towards Caribbean food security. The resulting Regional Food and Nutrition Security Policy (RFNSP) of 2010 has become a model for food security policies (and preliminary 'action plans') for all member states in the CARICOM region, including Trinidad and Tobago.²

Like earlier policies,³ the ostensible aim of the FAO-led RFNSP is to counteract the region's long-term dependency on the global market for imports of primary commodities like feed corn:

Since ninety percent of the food consumed in the CARICOM region is imported either raw or semi-processed for final processing, the food and financial crises of 2008–2009 and 2011, and the resulting volatility of food prices, have brought the CARICOM region face to face with the harsh financial, food security and health-related consequences of such high dependence on food imports. ... Even the food commodities produced within the region depend to a large extent on imported inputs. Thus when there is a drought in Russia or floods in Pakistan, as happened recently, the food import bill of the region jumps to a new high and the cost of local chicken and domestically produced livestock soars because the region imports [from the United States] the maize and other constituents of the animal feeds on which they are fed.

[Regional Food and Nutrition Security Action Plan, 2011: 1]

² As of the time of writing (mid-2015) Trinidad and Tobago has published an action plan but not a Food and Nutrition Security Policy, though plans for the latter are underway.

³ Earlier efforts in this vein include the Regional Food Plan of 1975, the Regional Food and Nutrition Strategy of 1983, the Caribbean Community Programme for Agricultural Development and Regional Action Plan, both of 1989, and the Regional Transformation Programme for Agriculture of 1996 (RFNSAP, 2011: 21).

The two main objectives of the RFNSP and national action plans are: (1) to create regional and national 'value chains' by establishing links between small and medium-sized farmers and food industries in the region and (2) to cut imports of key commodities from the United States such as feed corn. While the latter objective is leading to the creation of regional supply chains and the conversion of lands for food and feed in countries like Guyana (see Section 1.3, below), the former is consistent with the most recent model for agricultural development promoted by the World Bank (2008), which sees small farmers as key actors in value chains.

The value chain concept reflects the recent re-valuation of small farmers by international institutions such as the World Bank. This 'new' model for agricultural development contrasts with earlier structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s, under which developing countries in the Caribbean and elsewhere were required to import a minimum amount of raw materials and food manufactures from countries such as the United States in repayment for loans issued by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Under the IMF's structural adjustment policies, countries in the Caribbean and elsewhere were encouraged to import foodstuffs from developed countries while producing 'non-traditional' exports for developed countries such as fruits and vegetables. By contrast, the World Bank's (2008) value-chain approach promotes the creation of more localised producer-consumer networks, alongside a continued focus on non-traditional exports.

At first glance, the World Bank's value chain approach seems to overcome the long-term neglect of small farmers across the developing world, while counteracting tendencies of the corporate food regime such as import dependencies. Yet the World Bank's value chain approach (to which we shall soon return) differs in important ways from agroecological approaches to small-scale farming. For instance, the much-cited International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD, 2009: 29) promotes lower-input, more diversified agroecological farming for enhancing the livelihoods of smaller, 'resource-poor' farmers. According to Miguel Altieri (2007) agroecological practices such as mulching, inter-cropping and the use of worm humus counteract the tendency to simplify agricultural ecologies through monocultures and synthetic inputs, increasing the biodiversity of soils and environments. Carbon sequestration from agricultural soils that have been treated in such ways has the potential to offset 5–15% of global fossil fuel emissions (Conway, 2012: 311). In his final report of December 2014, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, argues that small farmers are the primary exemplars of sustainable, agroecological production (De Schutter, 2014: 3). According to De Schutter (2014: 3), small farmers often practice agroecological methods, which reproduce 'the whole farm [eco]system' largely without the need for external inputs such as insecticides and fertilizers. By contrast, the industrial model for agriculture focuses on 'individual farm components' such as monocultures (Wright, 2012), the reproduction of which usually requires high volumes of external inputs made from fossil fuels.

There are numerous voices in the Caribbean that reflect these perspectives on small farmers' agroecological practices. One is the Caribbean Farmers' Network (CAFAN; <http://www.caribbeanfarmers.org/>), which includes small farmers from Trinidad and Tobago. In its recent Position Paper (CAFAN, 2014), CAFAN claims that Caribbean 'small farm families' are the primary forerunners for climate change adaptation and mitigation in the region because they can more easily adopt agroecological methods such as crop rotation and integrated pest management. The Network of Rural Women Producers of Trinidad and Tobago (NRWPTT; <http://nrwptt.net/>) also actively support the development of agroecological producer-consumer networks at local, national and regional scales (Wilson, ethnographic notes).

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