

Education for culture?

A comment on educational alignment, development and food production in the Turks and Caicos Islands

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During recent fieldwork on the Turks and Caicos Islands, investigating food consumption and supply, we were fortunate enough to attend an annual seminar event, organised by the national electricity company Fortis. Discussion focused on education, culture and economic development. During the morning meeting – attended by ministers, educators and students – the guest speakers, Dr. Adrian Augier and Dr. Carlton Mills, well acknowledged the point highlighted by introductory speeches, from Eddington Powell (Fortis TCI President and CEO) and TCI Invest, that quality education was essential for TCI's economic growth. While both speakers focused on broadening and deepening understandings of the composition and purpose of contemporary education, we add further comment in relation to our experience—derived from scholarly research undertaken across the TCI, which explores the relationship between development, feeding and food production.

Dr. Augier spoke of the need to avoid a narrow and instrumental education system that functions only to discipline future generations into working as 'slaves on the beech', the drones of international investments. He emphasised that in place of focusing only on employability, education systems and society at large must value and support young people interested in studying the humanities: art, literature and history. These subjects, Augier argues, 'make us human', and without them the young are left bereft of a sense of who they are, defined only as wage workers in a culture defined by consumption activities. Education, therefore, can act as a tool to support culture in the widest sense: that of genuine self and collective identity, a deep understanding of what we value, and an appreciation of the very essence of how and why we come together as a society.

Complementing this sentiment, Dr. Carlton Mills focused on the importance of alignment between TCI's education system and the people's wishes for the future. Dr. Mills advocate that education must be fit for local purpose, and not mechanistically imported from elsewhere. Recognising that the central engine of economic growth in the Turks and Caicos Islands is tourism, Mills noted the importance of understanding the diverse inputs needed to best support this sector: for example, through investments in training a range of leisure managers, as well as other vital professionals such as motor mechanics. Educational institutions and businesses are well placed to support each other in working towards these ends Mills highlighted, and particularly where training responsibilities are formalised through inclusion in Business Development Agreements for example.

A point implicit within what Dr. Mills discussed is that while tourism is the central engine of economic growth on TCI, the sector does not and cannot exist in a vacuum. Tourism is intimately connected to, and relies upon, a huge array of other economic activity, including logistics,

accountancy, finance and construction, but also the supply of food and beverages. While Dr Mills highlighted the traditional importance of the fishing sector in TCI, we stress that the prospective supply of a wider range of food produce marks a much larger opportunity for the domestic economy to maximise returns from tourist arrivals.

As is widely known, TCI imports well over 90% of all food available (by value). While the resident population of just over 31K people consumes a portion of this \$60 million foreign exchange spend (statistics as of 2012), a vast proportion is used to feed the 290K stop-over and 779K cruise visitors that now arrive annually (based on 2013 statistics)¹. The Beaches resort, for example, imports over 98% of the food consumed on site². While imported food raises income for the government via a range of import duties, the private sector sees only limited and largely indirect benefits. Indeed, the money spent by tourists on food in hotels and restaurants largely returns directly to their origin countries (principally the USA and also Canada). Essentially, TCI offers little more than the aesthetic context for what many argue is the real core of any 'culture': that of food, its production, preparation and consumption.

Given this reality it is pertinent to engage with a debate that has echoed across the islands, with different degree of sincerity, for decades: can TCI produce more food, as a means for the private sector to capture additional income from visitor spending, and/or as a way to better feed its resident population? From our research, we believe that TCI can benefit from greater development of agriculture and mari-culture. However, this will require investment in many connecting sectors; a principle component of which is *education*. A wide academic education, as championed by Dr Augier is needed, both in the biology and chemistry to understand the science of contemporary food systems, and to sow the seeds of innovation in food production. That is, with a serious investment in science for agriculture, TCI has the potential to innovate, leading the way in developing sustainable agriculture designed to work in symbiosis with its unique *physical* and *cultural* environment. In this way, Dr Mills' call for vocational education should translate into learning that equips emerging generations for highly technical jobs in farm and marine management. Our research suggests that agriculture is considered by many to be back-breaking, undesirable work. However, in reality, any significant production of food on the islands will require the application of appropriate technology: and the pioneering examples of hydroponic, aquaponic and conch farming on TCI testify to this reality.

Taking these ideas forward, the new Director of Agriculture, Margaret Kalloo, has recently hosted four student interns who learned of the opportunities available in the contemporary sector. Should the plans for a reformed Government Farm go ahead on North Caicos (subject to the passing of legislation currently in process), a place of primary research and education will go on to provide countless opportunities for the creative linking of education to food production; and in addition to those already possible within the private sector should the necessary relationships be developed. After decades of political non-commitment to domestic food production, now is the time for action on the part of the ministerial government. A fundamental part of this must be a commitment to embed food and feeding in the curriculum, so if nothing else, those with political influence in the next generation at least understand both the possibilities and realities for innovation in contemporary food production. It is only through this investment that the great economic, social and cultural benefits of domestically producing more significant amounts of food can finally reach the people of the Turks and Caicos Islands.

1 DEPS and CD 2012. *External Merchandise Trade Report 2012*.

Turks and Caicos Islands Tourism Statistics 2013:

<http://www.turksandcaicostourism.com/content/root/File/Turks%20and%20Caicos%20Islands%20Tourism%20Statistics%202013.pdf>

2 TC Weekly News 2014. North Caicos leads the way in local food production [Online].

<http://tcweeklynews.com/north-caicos-leads-the-way-in-local-food-production-p4821-127.htm>.