WORK MATTERS COLUMN

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Food Crisis and The Memories of Saving a Seed to Plant.

We have to gravitate back in time to survive this global food catastrophe. Long ago it was a way of life for villagers in subsistent farming to barter seeds. Every home had an ear of dry corn hanging on the door frame and small tins with a seeds variety of beans and peas. I will like everyone to understand the nature of the beast when we speak about the food crisis. Seed is a critical input because without it the survival of everyone is endangered.

Today the society is more urbanized than rural with modernization and agricultural focus, on practices and cropping patterns. Traditional seed varieties have disappeared throughout the Caribbean. Several traditional seed varieties are now facing extinction. Farmers, in the process of adopting improved crop cultivation, lost some of their inheritable and accumulated knowledge, innovations and technologies of seed selection, treatment and storage.

The global food system is increasingly dominated by monopolization an aspect of homogenization. As the small independent businesses disappear because of fierce competition resulting in the formation of larger units of production. The larger they grew the more they benefit from economies of scale such as buying materials in large quantities and thereby getting them cheaper. Their resultant cheaper products enable them to corner increased propositions of the market. In extreme cases, the sole producer of a particular commodity can exercise complete control over the supply of the product and over the employment of the relevant section of the labour force.

Farmers in Trinidad and Tobago have been cultured to use potent insecticides such as Grammozone for many years without understanding the biodegradable nature of the product and the carcinogenic effects it has on them and their customers. Now we are faced with another revolution in agriculture: biotechnology, or genetic engineering. The same companies behind the chemical revolution are now manipulating the genetic make-up of crop plants. The science and development of developed countries are well-advanced developments from the genetic engineering companies that focus on herbicide -resistance. The chemicals and biotechnology company Monsanto, which produces the market-leading herbicide Roundup, has started producing crop plants which have been engineered to resist this herbicide. A gene from a soil bacterium is spliced into the plant enabling the crops to be sprayed with Roundup without being affected. The weeds under and around the crop are killed, leaving the crop to grow free from competition.

Which sounds wonderful. Monsanto claims its 'Roundup crops offer the prospect of higher yields, reduced use of herbicides, bigger profits for farmers and a route towards a sustainable system of farming. However, Roundup-tolerant crops will also bring Monsanto great rewards. Not only has Monsanto been able to move into the seeds market but the company has the potential to gain an increased share of the global herbicide market. Roundup is already the world's most-used herbicide and Monsanto is using genetically modified crops to tie farmers to Roundup, rather than other brands of this chemical.

The recent mergers in the agricultural input sector provide a stark example of this concentration. The drivers of these recent mergers have been a mix of both technological and economic factors. While a desire to capitalize on further complementarity between seed and chemical technologies has been one trend, broader forces have also been behind this consolidation trend. These include the rise of digital technologies, including in the agricultural sector. They also include economic forces such as financialization, low-interest rates, common ownership of business shares, and pressure from activist investors.

There have been intense debates over the implications of corporate mergers in this sector, with advocates of consolidation making the case that it will bring more innovative technologies that are both economically and environmentally beneficial. Trade unions and industrial relations must be concerned about this concentration which can lead to higher prices, less farmer choice, and

lock in what they see as environmentally harmful practices associated with high-tech monoculture agriculture.

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