



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

A top-down photograph of various food items on a light-colored, speckled surface. In the upper right, a clear plastic container is tipped over, spilling a mixture of red jam, white cream, and yellow popcorn. To its right is a clear plastic bag filled with green pickles. Below the jam container is a clear plastic bag filled with shredded yellow cheese. To the right of the cheese is a clear plastic bag filled with yellow cornmeal. In the bottom right corner, a green metal can with a silver pull-tab is visible. Scattered across the surface are several small, round, orange-colored candies. A piece of brown cardboard is visible in the bottom left corner.

WORK MATTERS

COLUMN

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Food Sovereignty Vs Food Security

Over the last few weeks, the Caribbean, much like the rest of the world has been thrown into a tailspin with the mercurial and unpredictable shifts in US policy. Trump has wielded “tariffs” and threats of tariffs with seemingly no rhyme or reason and understandably we have all set off for the hills for cover. Except of course that we in the Caribbean have no cover. And if we are brutally honest, we would spare ourselves the anxiety and panic attacks because this latest “crisis” is really part for the course for a set of countries which were essentially formed on the periphery to supply the needs and whim of a centre over which we have had no control.

During European colonization, whether under British, French, Dutch, or Spanish rule, Caribbean economies were transformed into plantation societies. Enslaved Africans were denied access to fertile land and were often forced to rely on small provision grounds for survival. Indeed, I genuinely feel our “owners” were rather undone by the realization that the black chattel they had forcibly procured actually needed to be fed in order to perform in the super-human manner that was expected. This plantation economy discouraged the development of a self-sufficient local food system. Colonies became dependent on imported food staples—salted fish, flour, salted meat—from Europe and North America. Here we are post-emancipation, post-colonialism, post-everything and post-whatever, and alas the model has remained largely intact. Not only intact, but through our enduring consumption patterns, we the descendants of the chattel voluntarily and rabidly defend its preservation.

We are confronted by a persistent paradox – better still it is an ever-present ball and chain about our physical being AND psyche: despite fertile land and long agricultural traditions, we seem condemned to being one of the most food import-dependent regions in the world. And one global crisis after the next has simply exacerbated this dependency. In more recent times with the US’s threat of specific charges on Chinese boats docking at US ports, we dispatched diplomatic notes

and made earnest supplications before US committees, appealing to a non-existent sense of fair play. With the US determining that their own shipping companies would be harmed by the proposal, there was an announcement that the proposal was shelved (for the time being).

What is the plan for the next crisis? At what point do we face up to the daunting task of reclaiming real and genuine control over our food supply towards the substantive goal of cultural self-determination.

Food sovereignty is the right of a people to determine their own food systems. Here I am defining a food system as the interconnected network of processes and activities involved in the production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food. It includes everything and everyone involved in getting food from the farm to the table—and beyond. By emphasizing “system” we are reflecting a simple yet fundamental shift in the context and narrative that has underpinned food security discussion in the Caribbean. At any given time, we have only ever focused on one component or stage of the system i.e. primary production. Yet if we are to make a dent in the food import bill, we have to consider the entire food value chain and the role of its constituent parts and the different markets they serve.

I say food sovereignty (I lay no claim to the term) because what we eat, how we eat, and where it comes from – has always been externally determined. As we continue the understandably long journey to confront, contemplate and address the legacy of our colonial past, and its implications for our future, we must be prepared to up-end all that we have taken a priori and without question – our food systems have not really served us. It is not just about having enough to eat (which is the narrow confine of food security), we have to exert control over how our food is produced, distributed, and consumed. Equally as we walk the tight-rope that is climate change intersecting with ever fragile ecosystems, ecologically sound and sustainable food systems become existential.

But this wasn't meant to be a vapid piece of verbiage aimed at singing to a choir of my own making, although the reader is free to conclude it is! Rather, it is intended to be the first in a series of articles designed to map out how food sovereignty has to be defined for the entire region. It is a series because like every other development challenge we face, there is no quick fix. You don't emerge from centuries of degradation, trauma, and violence unscathed and ready to start afresh with a grand fool-proof plan like nothing has happened. At this critical juncture food sovereignty presents an opportunity to reclaim national dignity, ensure food security, empower communities, and build resilience against current and future global crises.

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