

Chapter 49

Farm Security for Food Security: Dealing with Farm theft in the Caribbean Region

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural production in the Caribbean is being threatened by many factors such as decreasing availability of arable land, climate change effects such as increased incidences of flooding and drought, labour shortages, and competition from importers. However, one of the most important threats to agricultural production is the often under-recognised and under-reported area of farm theft (referred to as praedial larceny in the Caribbean). It involves the theft of agricultural produce (crops, livestock and fisheries) and farm equipment. One of the main reasons why this threat is so important is that theft of this type is very hard to prove. If indeed perpetrators are caught, and prosecuted successfully, the penalty is practically negligible. This paper examines the current status of farm theft in the Caribbean region, explores some of the main factors influencing farm theft, reviews some of the strategies attempted in the Caribbean and other places around the world and makes several suggestions to create a more secure food region. While the discussion calls on food producers to take several best practice actions to mitigate losses to praedial larceny, it emphasises that the primary responsibility is with government-led actions in the areas of modernised policies, updated laws and enhanced enforcement efforts.

INTRODUCTION

*Nobody wannu plant the corn
Everybody want to raid the barn
Who yuh a guh blame it on
When is a next man yuh a depend pon
Well yuh wrong
Nobody wannu plant the corn
Everybody want to raid the barn
Haffi sing yuh own song
Can't compete with careless John.....*

These lyrics, written by Anthony B, aptly reflect the unremitting challenge facing the typical farmer in the Caribbean region. Referred to as praedial larceny throughout the Caribbean, farm theft is one of the most extensive among all crimes committed in the region in terms of the number of persons and families affected. Praedial larceny refers to the theft of agricultural produce such as crops, livestock, and fisheries. This term also covers the theft of agricultural equipment such as spray cans, brush cutters, water pumps and other irrigation equipment. It can also be extended to the theft of agriculture inputs and secondary products such as feed and fodder. Praedial larceny has been cited as one of the major challenges impacting the growth of the agricultural sector throughout the Caribbean and has been described as the “Achilles heel” of the agricultural sector across the world. Estimates indicate that the Caribbean region is losing over USD \$321 million annually to praedial larceny and it has now become one of the most pervasive and entrenched crimes in business and livelihoods (Caricom, 2011).

A Caricom 2010 study reported that among regional stakeholders there is general consensus (more than 90%) that praedial larceny was the single most discouraging and serious disincentive threatening food security in the region. Farmers throughout the region have been clamouring their Governments to introduce legislation to combat this increasing threat. However, there are concerns by the farming community throughout the region that praedial larceny is not being treated as a very serious crime. Praedial larceny is the only crime at a regional level that consistently trends upwards (Little, 2011). Praedial larceny has moved from the theft of small amounts to large amounts of produce involving in some instances truckloads of bananas in or an entire field of pineapples or other vegetable and root crops or even the entire harvest of a freshwater fish pond. Thieves may also pose serious dangers to farm families and farm workers as many cases of threats on lives of farmers or even homicide have been reported. Some farmers have abandoned their entire enterprise due to heavy losses and the high cost paid for security.

According to Smith (2010), this type of criminal activity typically occurs in a changing social landscape, affected by demographic changes, trends and by the introduction of new policing practices. No longer can the notion of the stereotypical praedial larcenist be viewed as a rural criminal or as a “piper” as many refer to them. The activity has now moved to the status of organized crime, extending away from rural areas into more urban settlements where agriculture is practised. This organized activity now requires a different set of skills and practices for policing the urban landscape (Smith, 2010)

This chapter provides an overview of the problem of praedial larceny facing the Caribbean region, tracing the historical roots of the problem. The chapter examines the drivers and nature of this, now organised criminal activity, focusing on the opportunistic and professional nature of praedial larceny.

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