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National Development Strategy

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Some proposals for a land policy and strategy

The difficulty that is faced by most countries which contemplate land reform is that, frequently, the land that it is intended to distribute is not held by the state but by a number of wealthy influential landholders. This is by no means the situation in Guyana, where the government owns about ninety per cent of the national territory. On our crowded coastland, however, more than eight thousand farm families possess less than ten acres of land each, with an average landholding of two acres. This turns out in Guyana to be an infra-subsistence level of landholding, and is probably the major explanation of the poverty found in rural areas. Everything else being equal, too many rural families have too small a land base to rise above poverty. Land reform should therefore be a crucial factor in the Poverty Reduction Strategy which is currently being formulated.

The Guyana Sugar Corporation (GUYSUCO) is one of the biggest exceptions in the country in regard to the size of landholdings, possessing as it does 164,000 acres of prime coastal land. It utilizes, however, only about 100,000 acres. Moreover it is estimated that 50,000 acres of its holdings are either not under cane, or have been permanently abandoned. As a result, a not insignificant area of fertile, well-located land lies idle, while the landless remain poor and destitute.

The point is that any government which is intent on distributing adequate amounts of productive lands to its citizens would be constrained neither by the availability nor the ownership of the resource.

The formulators of the National Development Strategy have proposed that the principal broad objectives of a land policy should include improving the efficiency with which land resources are utilized; enhancing access to land by landless rural and urban families, and by farming families with limited acreages; rationalizing the land distribution process to ensure that applications are reviewed objectively and expeditiously; improving lease agreements in order to provide greater security of tenure; improving access to financing for agriculture investments; improving the transferability of leased land and its use as collateral; accelerating the process of conversion of leased land to freehold; optimising the administration of Guyana's land resources by establishing a lease management structure that is supported by adequate documentation and an effective system for collecting rentals; eliminating and preventing squatting on agricultural land, in part by providing better access to such land for poor families, and in part by improving the

usability of the rental instrument; re-centralising the Land and Surveys Commission's functions towards more efficient land administration; rationalising and modernising the responsibilities of the Deeds Registry and improving its functioning; stimulating and increasing the productive use of freehold lands, while improving their contribution to national revenues; making available the sugar industry's unutilized land for agriculture and other development; acquiring the land use and land capability data necessary for investment; establishing clear Amerindian District boundaries; and providing economic sized landholdings for all farmers.

It is not possible in an article of this length to provide the details of the rather comprehensive strategy which has been prescribed in the NDS to implement this land policy. Accordingly, only its essential features will be described here. These are as follows:

- (i) the government should undertake an institutional analysis of the current systems of land administration with a view to the elimination of existing overlaps and the rationalisation of operations. It is recommended that, given its historical role, the Land and Surveys Department should be the final clearing house regarding land use;
- (ii) the Deeds Registry should be established as a semi-autonomous body, able to retain a portion of the revenues generated by its services. It would thus be in a position to provide better wages and benefit packages and enhance the quality of its staff. Since many fees and charges are outdated, it would also be necessary to implement realistic charges for its services;
- (iii) a new standard agricultural lease should be formulated. This would include the following provisions: lease terms for 99 years instead of the present 25 year limit, the right of lessees to transfer leases fully after ten years of beneficial occupancy without administrative approval, the right to use leased land as collateral without official approval, the right of lessees who have beneficially occupied land for more than fifteen years to convert to freehold;
- (iv) the selection of lessees for leases in state lands should be based on established criteria, such as the applicant's ability to work the land, the amount of land the applicant already possesses, and the size of the family. Reasons for decisions should be clearly spelled out and made available to all concerned. Appeal mechanisms should be put in place;
- (v) Regional Democratic Councils should not be involved in land selection processes. District and regional land selection committees should receive applications, interview applicants and make recommendations;
- (vi) the members of land selection committees should be elected by the people of the district. The regional committees should comprise elected members from each district committee;

(vii) special rent provisions should be made for the rural poor (defined as families with incomes below the prevailing poverty line). These rentals should be subjected to annual adjustments;

(viii) the selection of citizens for land for housing should follow the same procedures suggested for agricultural land;

(ix) land for housing should be granted free of charge to all those below the poverty line;

(x) an assessment of the status of all lands held by GUYSSUCO should be made