

INTRODUCTION

Increasing attention is being paid to the improvement of peasant production throughout the British Colonial Empire. This policy is aimed at improving the general standard of living of the great masses of colonial peoples. In the West Indies with the present over-population liable to be doubled in the next 40 years at the present rate of increase and in the absence of any alternative basic industry, efforts to conserve and improve soil fertility and generally increase production by improved agricultural techniques are particularly urgent. Peasants in general are hardworking and skilled in the individual agricultural operations, but are lacking in knowledge of improved methods of agriculture and defective in the powers of organisation and management necessary in deriving the fullest support from the resources at their disposal without detrimental effects to their holdings. With few exceptions peasant agriculture is characterised by a low level of productivity, declining fertility, the absence of any system in the use of land and some form or other of shifting cultivation. The problem does not entirely rest with the peasants. They are often handicapped by the comparatively poor lands at their disposal (a problem that will become increasingly difficult as more and more marginal and submarginal land is brought into use to meet the demands of the increasing population), the widely separated units comprising their holdings, insecure tenure, poor and unreliable marketing facilities and the absence of satisfactory sources of credit. Lewis⁽⁹⁾ lists education as the first item on the programme of improvement of peasant agriculture. Education - "Agricultural Extension", however, "presupposes knowledge to extend"⁽²⁾. Agricultural Instructors have been provided at considerable expense by the various colonies to little avail. "Until peasant agriculture in a colony is properly understood and better systems are devised for it, Instructors can give no more than incidental, superficial help"⁽³⁾.

Within the broad outline of problems facing peasant agriculture in the West Indies, different combinations of natural

social and economic factors are at play within each colony which require individual study before any sound programme of improvement can be formulated. The West Indies is particularly lacking in such information.

Considerable information is at present available to agriculture in the West Indies as a result of "basic" research by scientists of the various Departments of Agriculture of the various colonies and the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture. Page (11) points out, however, that "the present ratio of fourteen extension research projects to one basic research project" in the West Indies "is not nearly high enough", and divides schemes for agricultural betterment involving the application of modern, scientific knowledge (basic research) by extension research and finally extension work into two kinds: (i) "those for the benefit of existing farming enterprises" and (ii) "development schemes for enlarging the area devoted to economic crops and stock". The various governments of the British West Indies have undertaken land settlement schemes to increase the area devoted to agriculture and relieve the high unemployment figures throughout the area. The Royal Commission report of 1940⁽⁴⁾, however, pointed out that land settlement "is only one of the several ways by which the number of peasant holdings may be increased" and stressed in order of importance the need for "the improvement of the husbandry of existing small holdings in the light of the results of the enquiries recommended, then the improvement of existing land settlements and the establishment of new settlements". The enquiries recommended listed "Surveys of peasant agriculture and investigations for the purpose of devising better farming systems based on mixed farming and the complementary use of livestock and crops". Such surveys must deal not only with the sizes of holdings, systems of cropping and other purely agricultural matters, but also with the economics of peasant life.

It is hoped that the following report on a survey of peasant agriculture on the Aranguez Estate in Trinidad will contribute its quota to providing a basis for future extension work in the area by indicating the best manner in which basic research data available may be applied by the departments concerned.