

**Statement made by Mr. Randolph Cato, Senior Director / Director,
Economic Affairs at the Meeting of OECS Ministers of Agriculture which
was held on 29th May in Grenada.**

Context for Revision of the OECS Agriculture Plan of Action

Article 20 of the Economic Union Protocol of the Revised Treaty of Basseterre obligates OECS Member States to agree to the development of an agriculture policy which takes into account regional and global agreements and conventions and offers a strategic framework for prioritizing regional programmes that address cross-border dimensions of agriculture. Within that context, Member States are committed to the transformation of the agriculture sector through, *inter alia*, the establishment of a framework necessary for its modernization. Related to this and also arising from the Treaty, is the instruction given to the Secretariat/Commission by the OECS Authority to manage and facilitate a new iteration of OECS Development Strategy.

In response to these undertakings and instructions, the OECS Plan of Action for Agriculture has been revised to better reflect changes in the external environment, which present both challenges and opportunities for the repositioning of OECS agriculture, within the context of a single economic space.

The revised Plan of Action therefore recognizes and takes into account the need to transform agriculture by *inter alia*: integrating poverty and food security considerations into commercial value chains; responding to new trends in non-traditional agricultural exports; and seeking to address unsatisfied demand for value added agricultural products which the OECS is capable of supplying, as demanded by regional and extra-regional markets.

The Consultative Approach to Plan Revision

The revision of the Plan was rooted in a participatory approach, which involved extensive consultations with Member States Ministries of Agriculture individually and collectively through field missions and a technical working group meeting, with representatives of regional farmer organisations, and regional agriculture partners, including the FAO, IICA, CARDI and CARICOM, as well as some external partners including the COMSEC and UNDP.

This extensive interaction has taken place over an almost 15 month period, during which time, in parallel, the Secretariat has focused its efforts on advancing implementation of existing Ministerial mandates for which we had been able to secure technical assistance and funding from some of our development partners. Ministers will receive a progress update on these initiatives, including the establishment of an OECS cluster of small shipping vessels that play a vital role in enabling the trade of agricultural and other products across the region, and the setup of an OECS agriculture information system. Progress has also been made on securing funding for implementation of an agriculture sector development programme, which is one component of the OECS Trade and Integration Project, being funded under the 10th EDF regional programme. These initiatives themselves are integral elements of the Plan of Action.

It is important for us to emphasize the extent of the analysis and consultation that has informed the preparation of the draft revised Plan of Action for OECS Agriculture, which will be the primary focus of this Ministerial meeting. It is important to note that the revised Plan has had the benefit of the input and extensive review of senior agriculture technicians and other key stakeholders across all of our Member States. It has their full endorsement, so that Ministers can engage in deliberations on the key thrusts and elements of the Plan with the assurance that it has been extensively vetted at the technical level.

The process of formulation of the revised Plan was conducted through several phases involving desk research, technical reviews and national public/private sector sensitization and consultations. This process was undertaken with the assistance of the FAO under a Technical Cooperation Project, through which the Secretariat also secured the services of a consultant. I wish to express the deep gratitude of the OECS to the FAO for this most critical expression of its commitment to the development of agriculture in the OECS. The focus must now shift to ensuring that Member States assume full ownership of the revised Plan, following Ministerial endorsement which we hope will happen today, and thus gear up for implementation of the priority actions. This plan must now become the property of the Member States, which they must now put to very good use.

Addressing Sector Realities and Opportunities

The Plan seeks to address the following realities and opportunities confronting the sector:

- I. The global trends in prices and availability of food, as the backdrop to our collective efforts at sector transformation.
- II. Pursuit of the objective of poverty alleviation, particularly in our rural communities, driven by production priorities directed to Food and Nutrition Security. This involves a two-pronged approach that will address domestic food supply distribution and utilization, while taking advantage of export opportunities in regional markets (OECS and CARICOM) and in international markets for selected niche agricultural products.
- III. Focused attention to arrest the declining trend in agricultural performance across OECS Member States, and to actions aimed at revitalizing the sector by modernizing production practices and processes, utilising technology generation and transfer mechanisms that will promote innovation in production.
- IV. Encouragement of investments in research and technology adaptation at both national and regional levels, coupled with the stimulation and active

pursuit of opportunities for joint actions within and between public and private sector actors across the Member States to achieve economies of scale.

- V. Addressing the structural issues related to the demographics of our farming and fishing communities, and in particular the mobilization of youth into the agricultural sector.
- VI. The sustainable exploitation of natural resources especially with regard to the imperatives of global climate change; and the related issues of land use and water resource management, responsible management of our watersheds and coastal marine environments, and biodiversity conservation.
- VII. Building the capacity of institutions and farmers to promote innovations in technology, production and agribusiness management, to address risk and engender the level of productivity growth that must be the basis for significantly increasing sector output, employment and incomes.
- VIII. A robust harmonized legislative framework that will provide the necessary environment for coordinated actions across Member States in the various priority areas that have been agreed, with an emphasis on sustainable resource management, innovation and productivity enhancement; adoption and implementation of agriculture health and food safety measures, product grades and standards, risk management, investment and trade facilitation, among other areas.

All in all, what we must aim for is a very substantial improvement in the level of contribution from agriculture to the GDP and overall development of the economies and societies of the OECS collectively and individually.

Gearing up for Implementation

Given the constraints that hindered implementation of the original plan of action, the revised plan seeks to internalize the processes of resource mobilization,

coordination, monitoring and evaluation. Within that implementation framework, close attention needs to be given to the allocation of resources in national budgets and the rationalization of bilateral and regional donor support in the execution of activities included in the Plan. Important also will be the capacity of regional and international agricultural institutions to give technical support to the programme as we have developed and agreed on, and in this context, their recognition of the special and differentiated needs of the OECS sub-region. It is very vital that we see this approach from these partners, as distinct from their own separately focused initiatives.

In support of this thrust, national and regional needs for strengthening of institutional capacities in programme and project formulation and management require particular attention. Special regard will need to be paid to the leadership role of national public and private sector entities (MOAs, NGOs, Farmer/Fisher Organisations/Chambers etc) given their direct responsibility for activities in production, marketing and distribution, the development of agro-tourism linkages and engendering responses to the imperatives of climate variability.

Member State technicians have also suggested the need for establishment of a donors/partners forum that will involve public/private sector representation and that will serve to assist in the rationalization of technical and financial support, the avoidance of duplication, expedition of disbursements and monitoring of impact.

For their own part, Member States have committed to reinforcement of national programmes currently being planned and implemented for the sustainable development of the sector, to ensure more direct relevance to and impact on the regional programme priorities that have been agreed.

In concert, the OECS Secretariat is committing itself to expediting the pursuit of opportunities for regional interventions that will strengthen and accelerate execution of national programmes, even while we focus on the refinement and

implementation of harmonized programme activities best implemented at the regional level.

The underlying consideration that must be that it cannot simply be business as usual, or rather, no business, where agriculture is concerned in the OECS. We just cannot afford this. It will be far too costly for us in very many ways, not the least the very terrible price that we will pay regarding our development goals, and the improvement of the welfare of the people of the OECS which is really our fundamental aim. Agriculture cannot be ignored.