SUGAR IS LIFE

SOME FACTS ABOUT THE SUGAR INDUSTRY IN WESTMORELAND, JAMAICA

Association of Clubs, Westmoreland, Jamaica, 2007
A Brief History of Sugar Production in Jamaica

In Jamaica, sugar production has a long history dating back to the 17th century. The industry has faced numerous challenges over the years, including environmental issues, economic downturns, and political instability. Despite these challenges, sugar production remains a significant part of Jamaica's economy, providing employment to thousands of workers.

Some Facts About the Jamaican Sugar Industry

- The sugar industry is the second largest single employer of labor on the island.
- Jamaica is one of the leading sugar-producing countries in the world.
- The sugar industry contributes significantly to the country's economy, providing employment to thousands of workers.
- The production of sugar is a major contributor to Jamaica's export earnings.
- The sugar industry is facing challenges due to competition from cheaper sugarcane from other countries.
- The government has implemented various measures to support the sugar industry, including subsidies and tax breaks.
- The sugar industry is also working to improve its sustainability practices, including reducing its carbon footprint and improving water usage.

In conclusion, the sugar industry remains an important part of Jamaica's economy, providing employment and contributing to national productivity and growth.
Some Facts About Frome Sugar Estate

Frome factory

In 1937, West Indies Sugar Company (WISCO) bought 16 farms and 6 sugar mills establishing Frome Estate. WISCO, of which Tate & Lyle, a British transnational sugar corporation, was the majority owner, later acquired Monymusk as well.

- Frome was the site of a major riot in 1938, occasioned by a strike and the presence of large numbers of unemployed who were hoping to find work at the factory. As the management called in the police, rioting broke out and 4 people were fatally shot, another 15 wounded and 105 arrested. This event and a dockworkers' and general strike in Kingston led to the founding of the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union and the People's National Party in 1938. A few years later the National Workers' Union and the Jamaica Labour Party (1943) were formed.
- The 6 original sugar factories were closed down and a central factory was built at Frome in 1939. By 1960, cane production had outgrown factory capacity to the point that a new and identical second factory was built. This made Frome the largest sugar factory in the English-speaking Caribbean.
- In 1963, 1965, and 1968 Frome processed over 1 million tonnes of cane and produced over 100,000 tonnes of sugar.
- In the early 1970s, Tate & Lyle, which had lost some JMS5.5 million on its operations in 1967-1970 at Frome and Monymusk, sold the two estates to the Jamaican government. (Bernard Lodge, another large sugar estate, was sold to the government by United Fruit Co.)
- In 1974, after intensive organizing by sugar workers and the Social Action Centre, the Michael Manley and PNP-led government signed long term lease contracts with three Frome farms giving the sugar workers at Batham, Salt Pond and Morlands control over 6,000 acres of cane lands. By 1975, all 70,000 acres of land at Frome, Monymusk, and Bernard Lodge were in the hands of the Sugar Workers' Cooperative Council (SWCC), an umbrella organization providing worker management for all three estates. The factory operations remained under government control.
- The establishment of sugar workers' cooperatives represented a truly historic moment: For the first time in four hundred years, the sugar workers, many of them descendants of slaves, owned their own enterprise. Their first priority was instituting literacy and business education programs, but government efforts to control coop education resulted in a three year delay. During much of the coop era, the SWCC was engaged in trying to keep a losing business afloat while in a struggle with the former managers and government bureaucrats to change deeply entrenched institutional structures.
- The two unions, BITU and NWU, were less than helpful in these struggles. They wanted dues-paying sugar wage laborers and chose not to support the sugar workers as coop owners.
- The PNP government provided low cost sugar worker housing with affordable payment plans and low interest rates.
- The victory of the Jamaica Labour Party in the 1980 elections led to the dismantling of the cooperative structure and a resumption of government ownership. Tate & Lyle were invited back to manage the three estates.
- After a brief, and failed, effort at partial privatization in 1993 under a consortium of two Jamaican companies and the government, the latter resumed direct control and management of the estates again in 1998.
- Presently, in 2006, another privatization effort is under way for the five government-owned factories and cane lands at Frome, Monymusk, Bernard Lodge, Long Pond, and Duckenfield.
- Frome estate plays an extraordinarily important economic role in Westmoreland and Hanover parishes. It directly employs over 1,400 people. Over 5,000 cane farmers, contractors and their employees also get all, or some, of their livelihood from sugar production at Frome.
- Frome estate has 5700 hectares of good agricultural land under its control, of which 95% is used for sugar cane production. Traditionally, workers have been able to cultivate food crops on unused farm land.
Working in the Cane Fields and the Sugar Factory

The work of tending the cane fields, cutting the cane, and working on the factory floor or in transport is hard. During crop, workers get up before day. Many ride their bicycles to work over dusty, poorly kept and bumpy roads, to get to the farm to start the backbreaking labour of cutting each cane stalk down as low to the root as possible. By noon, the sun is bearing down with the sweat mixing in with the soil from the burned cane. The cutters are wearing boots and long-sleeved shirts to protect themselves from the sharp grasses and cane mace that often make their job even harder.

- The earnings of a cane cutter range from JMS 8,000 - 12,000 per fortnight (with overtime pay on Saturday and Sunday), or US$ 65.00-100.00 per week. Day labor is paid at a rate of JMS 48.00 or US$ 8.00/day or JMS 2,400.00 (barely US$ 40.00) for a 5-day work week. Although most of the cane cutters are men, some women do cut cane, but are usually assigned hard-to-cut weed-infested areas. These cutters are paid the day labor rate, as are the workers who fertilize the fields, weed, or dig irrigation ditches or trenches.

- Field and factory labourers' work is still held in low esteem in Jamaican society. It is not the work per se that is considered inferior, since it is ok to cut cane in the United States, but rather the very low wages paid for this work in Jamaica. However, some hold the image of a dirty sugar cane cutter who is all 'black-up' from the burned cane. A cane cutter from Long Pond Estate summed it up, 

  "We a di dullest set a workers and wi get the smallest pay. The $2,000 or $3,000 caan support wi. No drive nah carry wi till we change wi clothes; wi haffi walk."

- Increasingly contractors are used for the hauling of cane and for reaping independent farmers' crop. The contract workers who work for contracting companies at a flat rate of JMS 200 - $300 per ton of cane cut, only work during crop, approximately 6 months out of the year. The Sugar Company of Jamaica is also increasingly relying on independent haulers causing dissatisfaction among workers who are not paid when the equipment breaks down and no spare parts are available.

- Three unions, the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU), National Workers Union (NWU), and University and Allied Workers

Working in the Cane Fields, Continued...

Union, negotiate on both the registered and contract workers' behalf for better housing, healthcare, life insurance, and pension benefits. However, the unions have found their hands tied by the losses suffered by the industry and are frequently told that there is simply not enough money to satisfy workers' demands.

- The workers' most consistent complaints are the very low pay, meager benefits, and lack of respect they suffer from some managers.

- Registered workers receive some guaranteed out-of-crop work. Meal and clothing allowances are paid to all cane cutters, new housing is being built, and a health clinic serves their basic healthcare needs.

- Many workers are disturbed by poorly cared for cane fields and equipment. When the cane fields are overgrown with grasses, it is more difficult to cut the stalks and workers earn less. Factory and hauling equipment is often idled for lack of spare parts.

- These workers see the industry as a legacy handed down to them by their forefathers since the times of slavery, sustaining them and their families. They want to have a say in running the business and be respected by the managers at Frome and in Kingston for their knowledge and experience.

- When grievances are not addressed, they protest by withholding their labour, knowing that their work is critical to the well being of the sugar industry and the nation.

- Most of the independent cane farmers grow cane to supplement food farming or meager incomes. Their concerns are low cane prices, expensive farm inputs, the absence of low cost loans and the overall decline in farm income.
The Future of the Jamaican Sugar Industry: Problems and Possibilities

Since Jamaica became independent in 1962, the domestic sugar industry has suffered a gradual decline. Some five million tonnes of cane were processed to produce about 500,000 tonnes of sugar in the mid-1960s, but by the end of the 2004-05 crop season production had slipped to its lowest level of 1.4 million tonnes of cane and 124,000 tonnes of sugar in 60 years.

Many factors have contributed to the decline:
- In spite of the higher than world market price paid by the European buyers of most of Jamaica's raw sugar, the price has not kept up with a steady rise in the price of imported inputs, including oil, machinery and spare parts, fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides.
- The preferential EU agreement applies to raw sugar only, which reproduces the long standing global inequities dating back to colonial times. High value added production is still reserved for the (former) colonizers while the (former) colonies are relegated to low priced raw material production only.
- With the exception of rum, Jamaica's sugar industry produces practically no finished products or by-products and the country actually imports refined sugar for domestic consumption!
- According to some analysts, the sugar industry bureaucracy is top heavy with several agencies having overlapping responsibilities. Proper financial oversight has also been lacking. Workers complain about wasteful practices of highly paid managers who do not know much about the nuts and bolts of sugar production.
- The impending 36% reduction in the price paid for Jamaican raw sugar exports to the EU between 2006 and 2011, will place a further strain on the already beleaguered sugar industry. Jamaica and other Asian, Caribbean, and Pacific sugar producing nations are pressuring the EU to increase the aid it has committed for restructuring or dismantling inefficient sugar production systems in these countries.

The Jamaican Sugar Industry: Future Possibilities

The vast majority of people in Westmoreland and Hanover believe that the sugar industry must continue to operate in the region. If it does not survive, they predict that unemployment will rise, foreign exchange earnings will be reduced, businesses will close, more people will crowd into Negril competing for tourism jobs, and that crime and violence will increase, further diminishing the prospects for a decent livelihood.

But people also believe that a number of things can be done to deal with the current crisis. For example,
- More products can be produced from cane, such as refined and wet sugar for domestic consumption, ethanol (now that the oil price is high), and co-generation of electricity for sale. Currently the bagasse is only used as fuel for the sugar factory.

Cane fields, Frome factory and hills in the far distance
- EU assistance can be invested in refurbishing aging factories and equipment, providing low interest replanting loans to the estates and cane farmers, and streamlining industry operations.
- Many workers and community members think that the Jamaican government should maintain majority ownership of the estates to ensure that the Jamaican people will have control over this vital resource, and utilize expertise from countries with more efficient sugar production systems.
- A few workers, who remember the cooperatives, think that with a comprehensive education program sugar workers could run the estates as they did in the 1970s.
Future Possibilities, Continued...

- Some suggested that foreign ownership would be more likely to result in more efficient organization of production and would take the financial burden off the government and tax payers. And some of the large independent cane farmers would like to see the land be turned over to them while the factories would be sold to one or several foreign companies.

- The industry should consider eliminating the burning of cane fields before reaping with a corresponding raise in worker pay.

- Many workers and community members emphasized the need for comprehensive education programs, including literacy and business skills training. An educated workforce can contribute more to the industry and will have more options for jobs in other fields. Presently many feel that cane cutters, cultivators, and factory workers work in the sugar industry only as a last resort because no other opportunities are available.

  Outdoor reading class at the Petersfield Basic School

- Work should be organized so as to ensure maximum input from the workers in the production process. Many workers have decades of experience in cultivating and cutting cane which can be tapped for the benefit of the industry.

- Many older workers recalled with pleasure the ‘old times’ under WISCO when departmental sports teams competed against each other and against teams from other estates. And they remembered the crop-over celebrations that brought field workers, office staff, and managers together fostering a sense of unity and camaraderie. These traditions can be brought back with minimal expenditures.

Community Organizing in Sugar Worker Communities

One of the lasting legacies of the sugar workers’ cooperatives at Frome are the seven (originally eight) community organizations united under the umbrella association, the Association of Clubs (AOC). Each organization is located in one of the communities adjacent to farms that constitute the Frome estate. In the face of opposition and imposed delays from some government officials, the sugar worker coops instituted their own education program teaching worker/owners literacy and business skills. They also initiated community-based organizations among the sugar workers to help forge unity, provide education, and promote cultural awareness in sugar worker communities.

Although all estate education programs were discontinued with the dismantling of the cooperative ownership structure, the work of the community organizations continues to this day.

Among the countless projects undertaken by AOC and its member clubs are,

- Literacy, computer skills, and video film training
- Small business loan program (Frank Morgan Fund)
- Volunteer worker program
- Village tourism program, with local families providing housing for student and volunteer groups
- Annual four-week summer camp for over 100 children
- HIV/AIDS and other health education programs

Galloway Citizens' Association Meeting
Resources

To learn more about Jamaica, the sugar industry, and the sugar cooperatives, you may consult the following sources:

ACP (Asian, Caribbean, Pacific) Group website: www.acpsugar.org
Feuer, Carl, Jamaica and the Sugar Worker Cooperatives: The Politics of Reform. West View Press, 1984
Thomas, Clive, The Inversion of Meaning: Trade Policy and the Caribbean Sugar Industry.” Paper presented to the Policy History Conference, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, June 1-3, 2000

“We have inherited the sugar industry from our forefathers going back to slavery. We work hard so that we can leave this heritage to our children. If we did not care about what happens to the business, we would not work for so little money.”

Tractor and Transport worker

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