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Obstacles to Small Farm Development in the Commonwealth Caribbean

By JOHN RICHARD HEATH*

ABSTRACT. *Small farms* now form the locus of attempts to develop *agriculture* in the *English-speaking Caribbean*. Attempts to boost extra-regional *exports* need to be coupled with closer cooperation among the 12 nations to substitute food imports from outside the *region*. A series of macroeconomic and sectoral constraints are working to insure that *export agriculture* is accorded higher priority than production of *staples* for the domestic market. In this way the needs of the region's poorest *farmers* tend to be overlooked.¹

I

Caribbean Development Policy

SMALL FARMS in the Commonwealth Caribbean² have long been starved of resources, a legacy of the land monopoly exercised by the large export-oriented plantations that were established during the colonial period.³ Small freehold enterprises developed on the fringe of the colonial plantations, helping to supply the servile labor force with food staples.

Following the emancipation in 1838, a large number of ex-slaves crowded onto the smallholdings on the plantation margins, forming a protopeasantry. Many of these people worked as casual wage laborers on the plantations and in local towns, remaining only loosely committed to the development of their own land.

The small holdings were a poor base for the development of farm enterprises, not only because the parcels were of such limited size but also owing to the high rate of 'absenteeism' by male household heads, a function of the diffuseness of mens' sexual ties and paternal obligations (involving circulation of males between a number of female-centred households) and migratory work patterns (including emigration to the colonial metropolis).⁴

Following independence, Caribbean governments tended to give first priority to industrial, mining and tourism development, neglecting the small farm sector. Higher wages in the urban economy increased the reserve price of agricultural labor without any accompanying rise in agricultural productivity.⁵

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Within the last decade two events have drawn attention to the need to promote small farm development.

First, since 1980 the twelve CARICOM (Caribbean Commonwealth) nations have become net importers of foodstuffs, purchases amounting to US \$800 million.⁶ While the economic blockade imposed during the Second World War obliged Caribbean nations to become more or less self-sufficient in basic foods, this trend was rapidly undone in the post-war period, the foreign exchange generated by non-agricultural exports being largely 'wasted' on the import of staples. It is estimated that only 15 per cent of food imports originate within the Caribbean region. The largest item of intra-regional trade is rice produced by Guyana. Other foodstuffs exchanged within the region are coconut products, vegetables, processed foods and citrus fruits.⁷

Second, the number of small farm enterprises has multiplied with the demise of many of the large estates: after independence many plantations passed from private into public ownership and were divided up into leasehold or freehold properties, export-oriented agriculture centering increasingly on small rather than large-scale enterprise. At the same time traditional agricultural exports were afflicted by declining prices and a drop in yields. Agricultural production for export fell by about 40 per cent between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s; the volume of regional sugar exports fell by more than 20 per cent and banana exports by nearly 50 per cent.⁸

Thus, much attention is now being focussed on the issue of how best to enhance the viability of the small farmer, both as an agricultural exporter and as a producer of basic food items for the domestic market.⁹ Some of the key limitations to small farm development programs are traceable to structural adjustment policies adopted by Caribbean nations in the 1980s, a response to the widespread mismanagement of resources in the previous decade.

During the 1970s a number of Caribbean governments (Jamaica is perhaps the most notable example) adopted expansionary fiscal policies, as a concession to the constituencies that had voted them into power and in line with electoral pledges to improve the lot of the less privileged.¹⁰ This is an innate feature of the polity in CARICOM countries: the long tradition of free trade unions and the commitment to Westminster-style political democracy leads political parties to try and outbid each other in their promises to the electorate about employment expansion and wage increases.¹¹ This tends to produce an exponential rise in public expectations that it is beyond the power of any government to meet.

Such tendencies were particularly marked in the last decade when left-of-center governments launched ambitious public investment programs and increased public sector employment considerably. The ensuing public deficit,

coupled with wage rises, fueled inflation, obliging governments to borrow heavily from abroad. External indebtedness was magnified by the oil shocks of 1974 and 1979 and by capital flight as domestic and foreign investors lost confidence in the economy.¹²

The slower growth of the main export sectors (agriculture, mining and tourism) exacerbated the balance of payments crisis. Export growth was hindered by the overvaluation of currencies (particularly in the East Caribbean States) coupled with Latin American devaluations that reduced the competitiveness of Caribbean exports. The indexation of currencies to the U.S. dollar had a negative impact on the trade balance owing to the depreciation of European currencies: while agricultural exports from CARICOM to the United Kingdom are denoted in sterling most of the inputs and food items purchased by these countries are obtained from the U.S.A. and thus paid for in dollars. Export prices for sugar and bananas tended to rise between 1977 and 1982 so that despite the fall in volumes earnings rose. However, export earnings did not increase sufficiently to match the rise in production costs owing to plant pests and diseases, hurricane damage and spiralling labor costs.¹³

By 1980 many States had been obliged to seek financial help from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as a condition of which they were required to adopt tighter fiscal policies (freezing public sector employment and cutting price subsidies) so as to correct the external deficit. The swing toward fiscal austerity was accompanied by a move to the right in political terms, a trend consummated by the U.S. invasion of Grenada. By the end of 1983 Guyana was the only exception to the right-wing trend of CARICOM governments.

This change in the political environment had a number of consequences for rural development policy.

First, a concern to renew the bases of export-led growth took precedence over other considerations. Initiatives designed to reduce income inequalities are frequently justified in terms of the need to expand the internal market for mass consumption goods, favoring a more integrated, balanced and self-sustaining expansion of the economy (in particular, stimulating the demand for domestic manufacturers). This argument lacks persuasive power in the Caribbean countries because, however equitable the distribution of income, the small size of national populations is an insuperable obstacle to the growth of the internal market and the diversification of the economy.

This helps to explain the precedence given to export agriculture rather than the production of staples for the domestic market. It also explains the lukewarm commitment in the 1980s to those programs geared to improving the lot of the rural poor. At the crudest level poverty programs tended to be equated with

handouts which were inconsistent with fiscal austerity and (as the 1970s had taught) could be politically undesirable insofar as such programs tended to generate a massive rise in popular expectations that governments could not hope (or did not wish) to accommodate.

Second, there was a move to reduce the scope of State intervention in the agricultural sector. On one level this involved the rationalization of credit and price support policies. It also entailed a new stress on the importance of individual as opposed to collective initiatives, the private smallholder being identified as the prime mover in rural development. This was reflected in the demise of the cooperative movement. In the 1970s the state had 'incorporated' a number of voluntary associations (*e.g.* church groups and credit unions), establishing government departments whose brief was to lay down procedures for cooperative organization, provide leadership training, audit society accounts and arbitrate in disputes. Many of these groups became totally dependent on State resources and thus disappeared as soon as the cooperative program was cut back in the 1980s. Not surprisingly CARICOM governments began to stress the importance of 'self-help' schemes (encouraging the rural population to make the best use of its own resources), precisely because such schemes placed less of a burden on public funds.

There have been significant changes in the agrarian structure since independence, with a number of the large estates being broken up to form small farm enterprises. Many plantations passed from private into public ownership and were parceled out as leasehold or freehold properties. Thus export agriculture increasingly centered on small rather than large scale enterprise. But one must emphasize that this does not mean there are no longer large estates left in CARICOM.

II

Specific Constraints

IN THE LIGHT of this policy context I shall consider some of the more intractable problems facing the small farm sector. Particular emphasis should be given to those factors which prevent the sector from adequately meeting domestic food requirements.

It seems reasonable to conclude that in the CARICOM countries the natural resource base is potentially capable of meeting the food needs of the small population living in the region; however, this potential is far from being realized.¹⁴ Except in Antigua and the Bahamas, drought is not a major constraint on agricultural development. Rather than land scarcity the main problem lies in

the underuse of the most productive land in holdings, mainly owing to the collapse of the plantation enterprise and the slowness to introduce land reform.¹⁵ Between 1960 and 1970 the area under cultivation contracted by roughly one-quarter; throughout CARICOM it is estimated that roughly half a million acres of cultivable land is idle or underutilized.¹⁶

The need for land reform is demonstrated by the excessive fragmentation of holdings on the margins of the large estates. These small holdings contain poor soils and, because they are usually located on hillsides, are subject to erosion. Small farmers tend to hold their land in a number of dispersed plots so that considerable time is wasted in moving from one to another. Also, since farmers tend not to live on the land but in the towns and villages, crops and livestock are left untended, leading to considerable losses owing to poor husbandry and theft.

Partly owing to the limited access to land (but also as a consequence of inadequate price incentives and a generalized aversion to work on the land) small-scale farming tends to be a part-time activity. Rarely is it the main source of household income. Providing these households with more land is only a partial solution since observation suggests that the commitment to off-farm work is not a simple function of holding size. In CARICOM 70 per cent of the population live in the countryside but only 24 per cent of the labor force are employed in agriculture; for Latin America the figures are respectively 41 and 36 per cent.¹⁷ Land reform programs have tended to pay insufficient attention to the role of non-farm activities in the rural economy.

Governments are now inclining to land reform schemes based on freehold tenure. This is partly because farmers who own their land generally encounter less difficulties in obtaining bank credit and are believed to be more likely to invest in land improvement. Past experiments with the leasing out of public land were a considerable drain on the public purse owing to widespread tenant indebtedness and the obligation on the State to maintain these lands. When land is redistributed under freehold tenure candidates for parcels tend to be restricted to those with the means to pay for them. This is still the case when prospective buyers are provided with credit and a generous grace period, enabling them to spread the burden of purchase over many years. The poorest are often wary of assuming the obligations implicit in credit repayments, a wariness reinforced by lack of confidence in their prospects as fully-fledged farmers. While freehold schemes may initially serve to correct some of the more extreme inequalities in landholding, they tend not to improve the lot of the poorest.

Attempts to implement land reform, with the aim of providing marginal farmers with larger and more viable parcels, are faced with a number of problems. First,

in the general absence of complete nationwide surveys of land capability and land value it is difficult (a) to select the most appropriate sites for agricultural development, (b) to determine a viable holding size and (c) to arrive at a fair price for the settler acquiring freehold rights. Second, the estates scheduled for reform are often occupied by tenants and squatters, some (or indeed most) of whom will be displaced when the land is redistributed. The provision for absorbing the displaced into off-farm employment should form an integral part of the program but is usually neglected.

The problem of displacement does not arise when farmers are settled on what was formerly virgin land. The potential for opening up new land is particularly marked in Belize and Guyana: these countries jointly account for 90 per cent of the land in the region but contain only 10 per cent of the cultivated land.¹⁸ However, the cost of land clearance and infrastructure has acted as a major deterrent for settlement schemes, being hard to justify, given the small size of these nations' populations. For the foreseeable future expansion of the cultivated area in CARICOM will continue to focus on the redistribution of land within the existing area of holdings.

III

Role of Small Farmers in Export-Agriculture

WITH THE BREAKUP of the large estates small farmers are playing an increasingly important role in export agriculture. Since domestic demand is generally too low to support a large expansion of farming, the fortunes of the majority of small farmers will continue to be tied to distant overseas markets in which their bargaining strength is limited. However, current trends toward trade protection in the developed world hold out few hopes for sustained export expansion. On the other hand, there is only limited scope for closer integration with the regional market since the similarity of climate, soils and topography throughout the Caribbean reduces the possibility for specialization by individual nations.¹⁹

CARICOM nations do not individually control a large enough share of the world output of traditional export crops (sugar and bananas) to be able to influence prices. Increased export earnings are therefore contingent on raising productivity. However, many of the commodity associations are heavily in debt because their outlay on extension, input provision and pest control has yet to yield the anticipated productivity gains.

Although exports of the traditional crops are protected by quota agreements, the price obtainable in the guaranteed European Community (EC) market is not high enough to cover production costs. In the case of sugar, CARICOM

nations have been adversely affected by the EC's transition from being a net importer to a net exporter of sugar. This has driven down the price in the free world market, depriving Caribbean exporters of a profitable alternative outlet to the quota controlled markets.²⁰

The Caribbean Basin Initiative, which was introduced in 1984 with the intention of granting tariff-free entry for many of the regions' exports to the United States, has been a conspicuous failure. Comparing 1983 with 1986, U.S. imports from the 22 nations involved in the scheme fell by 30 per cent while its exports to the region rose by 9 per cent. This trend has continued through 1987 and it seems likely that, by the end of that year, America will record a trade surplus with the region for the first time this decade.²¹

Inadvertently or not, the protectionist cause has been served by the stringent packaging and labelling requirements, quality control restrictions and rigorous monitoring of plant pests and diseases imposed by the U.S. and other developed nations. In the Windward and Leeward Islands similar restrictions are beginning to limit the access of small exporters (hucksters) to the lucrative markets of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Quality controls operated by the developed nations have also restricted the growth of export-oriented agroindustry in CARICOM. Moreover, tariff barriers tend to be higher for processed than for unprocessed goods.

Prospects for those farmers producing mainly for the internal market are equally restricted. Because domestic markets are usually so small and so easily glutted there is little incentive for staple producers to expand their enterprise or to produce more efficiently. The majority of staple producers are therefore largely subsistence oriented, the marketed surplus they produce remaining small and erratic.

Attempts by the State to regulate food prices in order to protect the livelihood of low income producers and consumers have generally been ineffective. Supply irregularities and the high cost of dealing with a large number of small producers help to explain why, throughout CARICOM, domestic marketing boards have landed heavily in debt.

Where the marketing board is involved in produce collection and farm-to-market transport (often over poor roads) the financial burden is enormous. Often boards are faced with the dilemma of not being able to shore up the price in the local market during periods of oversupply because they do not have the necessary storage capacity to accommodate buffer stocks. On the other hand, the marked seasonal lulls in supply do not justify the large overhead costs that would be entailed in expanding storage facilities.²²

Usually farmers prefer to sell their produce to small traders because the latter

buy at the farm gate; also, since there are a large number of small traders competing with each other the farmers' price-negotiating strength is enhanced. Therefore, farmers tend only to sell to the marketing board when the market is glutted, when the price offered by small traders falls below the floor price set by the board. For half a year or more a board's storage capacity lies virtually unused and revenues from the sale of produce to the domestic market are not enough to cover costs.

Thus, it has proved impossible for CARICOM governments to intervene in local markets in a manner that protects the incomes of poor producers and consumers without running up considerable debts that lead to pressures for the marketing board to be dissolved. There is currently a trend for boards to withdraw from the domestic market in order to concentrate on developing and handling non-traditional agricultural exports.

Similar marketing problems arise when attempts are made to improve the integration between primary production and domestic food processing industries. Agroindustry has to be supplied with raw product on a contract basis (often in exchange for farm inputs). When spot prices rise substantially above contract prices, farmers often fail to honor their contracts and processing facilities are left without supplies. Because of the tendency for small producers to satisfy home consumption and fresh produce demand first, the processing facilities are left operating under full capacity.

In addition to their attempts to influence the price received by the farmer, CARICOM governments have also set retail price controls on certain food products with a view to protecting the low-income consumer. These initiatives have generally proved to be counterproductive since they create disincentives to local production. The retail prices at which meat and dairy products have been fixed are often too low to cover the cost of inputs to livestock production (many of which are imported). Consequently, a large proportion of the livestock products consumed in CARICOM are purchased abroad.²³ Price controls are an attractive short-term expedient for politicians seeking to increase the urban vote; however, insofar as they stimulate food imports, price controls may generate imported price inflation, harming the interests of the very group the controls were designed to protect.

Access to credit is a key constraint on peasant agricultural development in CARICOM. Small farmers are starved of institutional credit because banks are generally unwilling to meet the high cost of administering a large number of small loans to widely dispersed customers, particularly when farm access is poor. The effectiveness of small farm loans is often low because credit facilities are not backed up by effective extension services designed to show the small

farmer how to make the best use of the resources at his disposal. In this respect there is a marked discrepancy between the quality of service offered to small export producers and smallholders producing staples for the internal market. Commodity associations handling export crops offer a more integrated package (extension, crop spraying, fertilizer) through revolving credit schemes, the cost of inputs being deducted from the price that the association pays for the crop. However, these associations do not provide long-term loans to finance land improvement and farm expansion.

Throughout CARICOM education and training programs have generally failed to boost the small farm sector. The level of literacy is high in relation to other developing nations; one side effect of this is to increase the awareness of alternatives and to raise expectations, thus encouraging rural children to leave farm work and seek urban employment. Owing to the drift out of agriculture, the average age of the farm labor force in CARICOM is over 50.²⁴

Formal education has done little to encourage the young to remain on the land. School syllabuses tend not to address the development needs of the Caribbean nations. Primary schooling is mainly oriented to the selection of pupils for secondary and higher education while the needs of the non-academic are largely neglected. School enrolment rates are high for both sexes but the efficiency of education is low since most pupils drop out after the primary grade without vocational skills. The need for Junior Secondary Schools, designed to provide vocational training for the non-academic, is widely recognized but in many countries the development of this program has been impeded by the limited resources available for recruiting new teachers and building additional schools.

Attempts have been made to include agricultural science in the primary school syllabus although this still tends to be taught in an overly academic way: owing to the unavailability of land, the inadequacy of teaching materials and the lack of basic implements, few schools conduct practical work in school gardens. Also, teachers generally have no special training in the subject. An important alternative source of basic agricultural training are the 4-H clubs which aim to attract primary school children outside school hours, teaching them to tend garden plots and small livestock. In general, there is considerable scope for increasing the number and variety of skills-training schemes available to school leavers.

While the educational system does not successfully woo the potential farmer, the agricultural extension agencies have insufficient contact with existing farmers, failing to generate a broad-based improvement in farming practices. Since the extension agencies are undermanned and are obliged to operate with few ve-

hicles and limited gasoline or mileage allowances, they tend not to reach farmers in remoter parts. The lack of rural housing for extension workers exacerbates the problem of limited farmer contact by obliging workers to waste time and mileage allowances in commuting between their district and their place of residence. In the more accessible areas the problems are of a different nature. A single farmer may receive a number of visits from different agencies in the course of the year; there is sometimes a lack of coordination between the different agencies accompanied by the wasteful duplication of functions.

Commodity associations and externally-funded projects tend to skim the cream of the best agricultural extension workers from government service by offering higher wages. Thus, there are often insufficient staff active in 'generic' extension work and too many workers focussing on a single crop or activity. This results in a poor appreciation of how the rural enterprise functions as an integrated whole. In particular, there is a failure to come to terms with the central role of women in the rural economy. Owing to the frequent absence of the male partner from the household, women tend to have a major say in the allocation of household resources. However, although the woman is usually the manager of the rural household, the man is still nominally regarded as its head. Agricultural extension agencies tend to deal solely with men even though women are often directly responsible for cultivating and marketing food staples.

This bias is perhaps less harmful in the case of crop-specific extension since it is men who handle the export crops to which these extension agencies are oriented. However, the extension work conducted by agencies specializing in particular export crops tends to be limited to the provision of inputs, neglecting the task of farmer education.

A final point to make concerns the frequent lack of coordination within the Ministry of Agriculture, between the technical service units (*e.g.* Market Intelligence, Livestock) and the Extension Unit. As a consequence extension agents are not trained as well as they might be; they tend not to be kept informed of the results of recent research and this has an adverse effect on the quality of advice passed on to the farmer.

IV

Conclusions

CURRENTLY, RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS in the Commonwealth Caribbean center on (a) diversifying export crops, (b) increasing the productivity of traditional agricultural exports and (c) substituting food imports.

With the break-up of the large estates, small farmers are playing an increasingly important role in export agriculture, in addition to their traditional function of

helping to supply the domestic market. However, the increasing export orientation of small farmers is mainly confined to landowners. In the case of tree crops the long term investment involved is not justified for farmers who have no security of tenure. This suggests that there is a case for redistributing estate lands to small farmers on freehold terms. However, this sort of land reform is unlikely to benefit the poorest who generally lack the means to purchase land.

A key problem concerns the stability of returns from export agriculture. In many cases projects are launched before overseas markets have been properly identified. Moreover, the worldwide trend toward trade protectionism severely limits the size of potential export markets. Also, while in principle it makes sense for farmers to produce in line with comparative advantage, in practice such advantages are highly mutable (terms of trade shift).

There are several obstacles that prevent farmers from moving quickly into new crops. Farmers may have capital tied up in tree crops. It takes time to acquire the expertise to grow new crops. The supporting infrastructure for new activities may not be readily available. It is the poorer farmers who tend to be less flexible, less able to move swiftly in response to market signals.

These problems suggest that small farm development programs should not be limited to export crops. Equal priority should be accorded to promoting staple production for the domestic market and increasing food security. Throughout CARICOM food imports have grown faster than food exports in the past decade. (The main 'food deficit' nations are Antigua, Bahamas, Barbados, St Lucia and Trinidad).²⁵ From the viewpoint of the small farmer increasing domestic staple production has two advantages. First, it has positive nutritional consequences because these farmers tend to consume a significant proportion of what they produce. Programs that encourage farmers to add small livestock production to staple cultivation have helped to raise the protein intake of farm households.²⁶ Second, a lower dependence on food imports is in the interests of the landless poor (who purchase all their food) because the living standards of this group are highly vulnerable to the import-induced price inflation characteristic of open Caribbean economies.

However, attempts to boost staple production still face the problem of market saturation with the result that farm gate prices fall below production costs. Small farmers can 'tolerate' this price squeeze because (a) unpaid family labor is not reckoned as a cost and (b) they may consume a larger proportion of what they produce. Both expedients have only limited application since when faced by consistently low prices most small farmers will probably give up staple production and look for alternative employment; if a large number of farmers act in this way there will be a major decline in marketed surplus of staples, the

resulting supply irregularities leading to sharp fluctuations in the retail price of these goods obliging governments to employ (expensive) price regulation mechanisms.

A partial solution to this problem is to improve market intelligence services so that the farmer may know in advance what staples are likely to be oversupplied and when the market is most likely to be glutted. Also, larger storage facilities are needed. To spread the burden of the high overheads entailed by expanding storage capacity attempts should be made to accommodate new export crops as well as staples for the domestic market.

By increasing the consistency of produce quality and reducing supply irregularities staple producers will be better placed to tap the large tourist demand that exists on many islands (accounting for a large part of the food import bill).²⁷

Finally, it is necessary to reexamine the possibilities of closer regional co-operation in food production, encouraging specialization in order to facilitate trade between the Caribbean nations. The Agricultural Marketing Protocol is one step in this direction.²⁸ Countries are required to make a twice-yearly declaration of their surpluses or deficits in 22 items of fruit, vegetables and meat, with a view to stimulating intra-regional exchange. Thus far, poor market intelligence has been the main problem encountered, with deficit countries not knowing who to turn to for supplies. Also, the prices set by the AMP are often above the costs of production in importing countries with the result that they artificially reduce the amount of regional trade by encouraging import substitution within each country. In the future particular emphasis should be given to working out a division of labor for beef and dairy production and the cultivation of livestock feed. As long as the region's import bill for livestock inputs and products remains so considerable, the gains from increasing the volume and diversity of agricultural exports will be largely wasted.

Notes

1. This article is based on a report submitted to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations concerning the implementation of proposals made by the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in the Caribbean region.

2. The Caribbean Commonwealth (CARICOM) embraces all English-speaking Caribbean nations that are former possessions of Great Britain: Antigua, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Trinidad and Tobago.

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22. John R. Heath, *Institutional Aspects of Rural Development in Dominica* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations, 1984).

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How—and Why—Feminism Waxed and Waned in Italy

JUDITH ADLER HELLMAN of York University in the United Kingdom undertook to study the women's movement in Italy. Tracing it from the 1960s through the 1980s, she studied "the various ways that feminist thinking was received and integrated (or not) into the political lives of women in 5 cities, Turin, Milan, Reggio, Emilia, Verona and Caserta" (p. 2). She reports the results of her investigation in *Journeys Among Women: Feminism in Five Italian Cities* (200 Madison Av., New York 10016: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987, \$39.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper).

"Each of the women's groups we have studied passed through similar stages of what has been called the 'cycle of protest movements,' " Professor Hellman concludes (p. 202). "Not only were women's groups torn by centrifugal forces—internally generated tensions and contradictions that undermined their unity—but external pressures also, operated to demobilize the [self-help] collectives [activity groups]. . . . [T]he demand that the State fund social services or intervene in previously private spheres was followed by loss of control . . . by the very movements that had brought them to life"

With the true scholar's objectivity, Professor Hellman weighs the gains and the losses of the movement and seeks to identify the causes of the outcomes. This makes her work an outstanding contribution to the study of social movements.

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