COOLIE TOWN DEVELOPMENT PLAN

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

A tiny, peaceful, relatively undiscovered community rests almost hidden in the heart of the undulating, verdant banana plantation of the Roseau Valley. It is a small, linear, rural settlement located on the highland between the Roseau River Valley on the left, and the *Fond Mangé* Ravine on the right. Coolie-Town, as it was christened, is on a slightly elevated terrain in the district of Castries and is only less than a quarter mile off the main West Coast highway.

On visiting the community for the first time, one might be inspired to ask "Where are the Indians?" as the word *coolie*, in local parlance, refers to one of Indian descent. Today, the majority of the present inhabitants are Afro-Caribbean. Despite this present reality, Coolie-Town owes its name to the East-Indians, who allegedly migrated from Vieux-Fort to work on the Sugar Cane Plantations in the early 19th century. These immigrants were allowed to settle on the land, which was originally owned by Geest Industries Limited.

In order to access this community, one can use either of two well paved feeder roads –Indian Lane and Fields land which branch off from the Castries-Soufriere Highway. Early inhabitants had to walk through rugged dirt roads, which developed into an inevitable sludge when it rained. It was only in the year 2005 that the

constant pleas of the people, were heard by government, who upgraded it to the current infrastructure. This resulted in easier access to the community.

DEMOGRAHY AND LIVING CONDITIONS

The community consists of over 520 persons housed in approximately 180 private households (est. from *2010 Census)*. It comprises mainly persons of African descent with a handful of Indians. These groups are characterized by extended family households due to the high incidence of teenage pregnancy. Approximately 25% of the households are single parent families and the extended family is quite prevalent.

Approximately 80% of the houses in Coolie Town are wooden structures and the remaining 20% are made from concrete. Of these households, 70% have piped-born water in their homes and 30% access the public stand pipe in the community. Despite access to in house plumbing, 80% of households use latrines and a mere 20% have flushing toilets.

Garbage disposal is facilitated by the bi-weekly garbage collection in the community. It is felt however that trash bins should be placed throughout the community to prevent the indiscriminate dumping of garbage. The haphazard garbage disposal habits of the residents allow for the presence of rodents in the community. Rats, mice and

mosquitoes all plague the community and are seen as major problems in Coolie Town.

There were several vulnerabilities identified in the community. At the outset, the physical environment speaks volumes of the community's plight. The sight of dilapidated houses is alarming. The zinc kitchens and much damaged board houses are cause for concern especially during the hurricane season. The ravine and the river, increase Coolie-Town's vulnerability to natural disasters in the form of floods and landslides. In recent occurrences, Hurricane Tomas, thankfully, did not entirely devastate the small community. It, however, left its mark as it destroyed the retaining wall of the *Fond Mangé* Ravine. Any further land movement may lead to a loss of houses and or plantation lands.

Additionally, the intersection which connects Indian Lane to the Castries-Soufriere highway is a flood prone area. While there is no threat to building structures at that junction, further flooding may result in major destruction of the feeder road and possibly the highway. One contributing factor is the improper garbage disposal practices which also pose many health risks as persons dump their garbage in the vegetation behind their homes. This eventually gets into the river and ravine which they use as a source of water. Sadly,

there have been isolated incidents of dengue and leptospirosis which are causes for concern.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Coolie-Town's economic history date back to the early 1900's when sugar production boomed in the valley. However, in the early sixties, the sugar cane industry was based, was replaced by the banana industry. This major transition brought about greater financial hope, not just for labourers of Coolie-Town, but for the wider population of St Lucia. Subsequently, the population of Coolie-Town increased, as the East Indians were joined by persons of Afro-Caribbean descent who came from various districts to gain from the benefits of the "Green-Gold" bananas.

Most of the land in Coolie Town which is used for farming is owned by Geest Industries with a mere 5% of the farmers owning their land. The majority of men from the community are engaged in agricultural work and others in construction which is sought outside the community. The women are employed in various industries which include agriculture and factory work which is located in Odsan; a community approximately four miles away.

The community of Coolie Town enjoyed the gains of the banana industry as many residents worked as farmers and farm helpers. Unfortunately, the full onslaught of globalisation and changes in the European market led to a decline in the demand for bananas and with it, a decrease in production and employment. These changes marked the onset of a domino effect on the local economy. With the decline in the banana industry, the community's economic base in agriculture has almost eroded. As more jobs were lost, the community of Coolie-Town felt the pressure, and struggled considerably to maintain jobs in order to supply the needs of their families which ultimately led by a lowered their standard of living.

To exacerbate an already tough situation, the plantation in Roseau was pummelled by several natural disasters. Its latest impact was brought about by hurricane Tomas, which struck St. Lucia in the wee hours of October 30th 2010, leaving the lush plantation trampled, resulting in 100% loss of crops. The little economic benefit which the community received from these fields was washed away overnight. Unfortunately, this is history repeating itself as storm Debbie (1994) and Hurricane Dean (2007), both left devastating effects on this aspect of community life.

Most of the former farm workers have no other skill and are left with no alternative means of generating income. This increases the

challenge of maintaining themselves and their families amid the rising unemployment. The downward turn in the banana industry has caused chronic unemployment leaving many households economically and socially vulnerable

The community's socioeconomic scale is tipped by two key variables. On one side is the incidence of high unemployment and underemployment coupled with a lack of recreational facilities or ways of investing energy. On the other, the phenomena of increased drug use, particularly marijuana; idleness; augmented emigration; high teenage pregnancy. A combination of these factors has created dependency as mainly the elderly and children are left behind. Sadly, the unemployment dynamic along with its collateral effects has severe impact on all age groups.

One such effect is migration which seems to be a quick fix for many of the youth. This may lead to 'brain drain' as the skilled and qualified who hold the key to development and improvement leave in search of better opportunities elsewhere. This further aggravates the growing poverty dynamic where those who are better skilled and educated cannot contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty. Additionally, young men are also at a precarious position for drug abuse through peer pressure and idleness, while the more mature men have fallen prey to alcoholism. Effects of this issue, was seen in

2005 when a young Coolie-Town resident lost his life by the hands of another intoxicated member.

A constant reality faced by women in the community is transactional sex. Some single mothers sometimes have to sacrifice their reputation to provide for their children, some of whom are forced to remain at home at least one day of the school week because of a lack of resources. Young children are often seen loafing after nightfall, much like the young adults. Perhaps this might be an indication of failing value systems and a deteriorating social fibre, provoked by absent parents who may be out working or have migrated, leaving relatives as guardians. Being too tired or preoccupied, the relatives may not be able to focus on discipline. These unsupervised boys and girls may soon fall into the cycle of juvenile delinquency and contract sexually transmitted diseases.

Amidst this scene of gloom, the community radiates a beam of hope. A few persons have been able to excel despite these circumstances and their families benefit as a result. Those who migrate, maintain ties with their families, loyally sending monetary gifts or goods home. While their efforts are noble, it concretises the belief held by residents that in order to succeed one must leave the community. Nonetheless, these remittances are a source of livelihood as many households depend on them.

In the midst of the present struggle, is the observation that the residents of Coolie-Town boast of a low crime rate, with the main offences including praedial larceny and petty theft committed by invaders, “If anything bad happens here it’s from outside,” the community leader said boastfully.

Yet the all encompassing fibre which permeates from this tangled web of socioeconomic and physical vulnerability is the community’s social network. Coolie-Town exudes an ambience of one enormous extended family, which provides mutual support for members. Each member shares responsibilities, pools resources, lends a helping hand- despite their circumstances, and respects each other. The system has worked thus far, and continues to do so, as was expressed by Angelina Augustin, community council president. The strong sense of solidarity has sustained Coolie-Town over the years, and may account for its prosperity, low crime rate, hope and perseverance.

This cohesion is conveyed in their daily living. Imagine the jubilant sound of laughing children splashing around in a pool of pristine water, or animated women sharing an anecdote while they assemble at the Roseau River to do laundry on a sunny day. Or a troop of shirtless, boot-clad men donning little else but smiles and energy as

they show up to assist in another community development project or a '*coup-d-main*'.

Diversion and socialisation is offered in the form of weekly Friday festivities. On a Friday evening the community is set ablaze with their dependable, well-attended karaoke session, which sets the pace for an all night dance at the Sunset Bar and Disco. In the months of September and October greater festivity is experienced during the Coolie-Town Day and Creole Day celebrations respectively. These not only serve to distract from a mundane existence but also to generate income.

Another unifying element is the Church of God of Prophesy which is the only religious organization in the community. Other than contributing to the persons' spiritual needs, it teaches morals and Christian values which have, over the years produced honourable citizens. Community members who belong to other Christian denominations must go to neighbouring communities to attend church services.

There is a sense of frustration that is still felt by residents and a sense of hopelessness is lost as promises of improvement over the years by government and non-governmental institutions have gone unfulfilled. The residents believe that to develop Coolie-Town, skills training must be implemented with an employment and

income generating focus. This may serve as means of curbing the negative migration and unemployment. The situation in the community necessitates social and economic development. Hence, interventions must concentrate on improving the human resource of Coolie-Town for sustainable human development in the long run.

COMMUNITY FACILITIES

Very few facilities are in the community with the exception of a building which houses a day care centre and a newly refurbished information technology (IT) room. Of concern to residents are the toddlers who attend the community's day-care centre. Their motor skills development may be hindered because the centre does not have access to a playground. Additionally, the size of the community centre limits the number of children who can attend the already seemingly overcrowded day care. Primary school education is accessed at the Roseau Combined School located in the community of Jacmel which is approximately one mile away. Many children also commute to Castries to attend school, especially if their parents are employed in the city. The Marigot Secondary school is in close proximity to the community where students can access high school education. Residents visit the Jacmel health centre for health

services, and primary health workers care for the sick, shut-in and post-natal community members through periodical visits.

The residents of the Coolie Town, particularly its youthful population are avid football fans of their local team. A young female resident stated that the community is transformed when there is a football match in Jacmel. She was excited to convey that this provided an opportunity for them to dress up and enjoy the time of leisure. The sports men and women use the field at Marigot playing field which is located a short distance away.

Like many communities, residents benefit from the availability of electricity, potable water, cable television, landline and mobile telephone. There are nine rum shops and three mini marts which service the community. Entertainment is provided by three discos and a cock fighting pit located within the community. These facilities provide both social and economic benefits to residents.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZTIONS

Coolie Town has two registered organisations; the Development Committee and a Football Club. The Coolie Town Development Committee is a newly elected body, committed to promoting initiatives that will bring social and economic benefits to the residents.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

In keeping with the democratic processes encouraged by the St. Lucia Social Development Fund, a series of meetings were held for residents to identify and prioritise the needs of the community. The following list of projects was identified by residents:

1. Bus Shelter
2. Computer Lab and Classes
3. Craft Arcade
4. Expansion of Community Centre
5. Footpath
6. Pipe borne water to households
7. Public Facility
8. Recreational facility

Proposed Intervention

Through a collaborative effort, the residents of Coolie Town agreed on the renovation and expansion of the Community Centre. As the community's population increases, the need for a bigger space for community activities is vital for meetings and other social gatherings.

IMPLEMENTATION OF PLAN

The Coolie Town Development Committee through continuous consultation with residents and collaboration with other agencies will provide leadership for the carrying out of this plan.