Intractable Social-Economic Problems of Martinique

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Introduction

400 years, 400 years, 400 years.
And it’s the same.....

1 Martinique is a small (~1,100 km$^2$) island located in the eastern region of the Caribbean Sea. It is situated about 7,000 km from metropolitan France. Since 1946, it has been annexed to be an official part of France, in the form of a “Département d’Outre-Mer – DOM”. Superficially, Martinique has all the customary social and economic attributes of metropolitan France, under the aegis of “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité”. The per capita gross domestic product (€19,600 in 2008) is among the highest in the Caribbean region.

2 For the tourists, Martinique is a tropical paradise with its many sandy beaches and year round warm weather, plus all the amenities of modern western lifestyle. Most tourists are oblivious to the deep undercurrent of social and cultural discontents simmering in this island paradise.

3 This study project was undertaken to explore the social, economic and environmental issues affecting the creation of enduring meaningful employment in Martinique.

1. Agriculture economy

4 The humid warm climate and rich volcanic soil of Martinique are ideal for the cultivation of tropical crops. The main industrial crops are sugar cane and bananas. Both sugar cane and bananas are not native to this region (Deerr, 1921; Earle, 1928; Kennedy, 2009). Plantation cropping of sugar cane began in the mid-17$^{th}$ century with
the mass importation of slave workers from Africa, after the original indigenous Carib inhabitants had been exterminated. The age of industrial banana cropping in Martinique began in the 1920s, shortly after the establishment of several “banana republics” in Central America (Koeppel, 2008).

As shown in Figure 1, the principal areas of sugar cane and banana cropping are located in the lower altitudes of the island. In 2008, there were 28,000 hectares of designated agricultural land in Martinique, of which about 19,000 hectares (~68% of total agricultural land) were used for banana cropping and approximately 3,100 hectares (~11% of total agricultural land) were deployed for sugar cane cropping (FAOSTAT, 2011).

The annual productions of bananas and sugar cane have essentially been constant during the past 10 years (Figure 2). In the 2004-2008 period, the average yield of bananas and sugar cane was ~16 tonnes per hectare and ~70 tonnes per hectare, respectively. The number of persons engaged and (dependent directly) on the banana plantation industry was about 6,000 in 2008 (Cour des comptes, 2011). With increased mechanization through the shift of crops to large tracts of flat terrain, fewer workers are required in the cropping and post-harvesting operations during the past 20 years (GOI, 2003).

Figure 1. Principal areas of sugar cane and banana cropping in Martinique

![Map of Martinique showing principal areas of sugar cane and banana cropping](source: map from www.carib-trade.com)
Figure 2. Production of bananas and sugar cane in Martinique (1999-2008)

Note: The reported 2007 banana production appears to be erroneous as it does not reflect the destructive impact of Hurricane Dean on the island agriculture.

Sugar cane juice is now used mainly to produce refined sugar products for local uses (CTCS, 2011), and as a direct feedstock for local rum production under the regime of “Appellation d’origine contrôlée – AOC” (Anon, 2011b).

Virtually all bananas grown in Martinique (valued at about €30 million in 2008) are exported to France. With the recent ending the 20-year old banana trade war between the USA and the EU, banana producers of former “Africa, Caribbean and Pacific - ACP” colonies will be receiving about €200 million financial over the next few years to offset the EU grant of lower import duty on Latin American bananas (EC, 2010; Lamont, 2011).

Although Martinique is not classified as an ACP country, it is almost certain that Martiniquan banana producers will be receiving EU financial aid similar to that to be granted to ACP producers (von Reppert-Bismarck & Dunmore, 2011).

2. Historical context

The fundamentals of repressive colonial regime of slavery and racism have remained largely unchanged (Nouvet, 2009). Societal stratification along race and class lines remain deeply entrenched long after the formal abolition of slavery in Martinique in 1848 (Brereton, 1989). Most major land and business assets including sugar cane and banana cropping in Martinique were and are still controlled by white descendants of the colonial plantation owners (also known as békés) who comprise about 1% of the total population (Beaudoux, 2002; Azikiwe, 2009). Although the official acquisition of population statistics on racial composition is outlawed in France, the overall population has been estimated informally to consist of more than 95% Creoles and less than 5%
whites and others. The békés maintain considerable political influence as exercised through the government of metropolitan France.

During the last half of the 20th century, these problems were aggravated by départemantalisation and francisation (Glissant, 1992; Burac, 1995; Gossen, 2006). One result of these French government policies has been the formalization of the alienation of the people from land and culture.

- **Départementalisation** means political annexation into France. As result, critical political decision affecting the life and wellbeing of the Martiniquans are taken solely in Paris. Decision-making in France continues to be highly centralized even though the “decentralization” legislation was enacted in 1986. A facade of more “self-government” autonomy was granted after the 2009 general strike. The political power in Martinique remains however with the Prefect who is appointed directly by the President in metropolitan France. And key administrative posts are still filled only by government officials sent from metropolitan France. In essence, locally elected council officials continue to have little or no administrative or fiscal power of consequence. The 4 elected Deputies and 2 elected Senators have virtually no influence in the politics of metropolitan France on the direction of social and economic affairs of Martinique.

- **Francisation** as a national cultural assimilation policy began in 1539 under the reign of François 1 with the promulgation of the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts (Garrisson, 1995). This Royal edict was designed to impose the dominance of French language and culture for the development of French identity during the course of territorial consolidation of the French state over the next 470 years. Some examples of this cultural-domination policy within present-day boundaries of metropolitan France are the draconian francisation of Occitans, Bretons, Catalans, Corsicans and Basques. In overseas territories, francisation results in the eradication of indigenous cultural identity. Naipaul (1962) had marveled at the Gallic pretension of the Martiniquan society in the maintaining the fictionality of metropolitan France. In the fictionalization of Caribbean history, Michener (1989) had commented on the irrational pretension of the culture of Martinique (and Guadeloupe) to be that of metropolitan France. Even though the Antillean Créole language and music have been under unrelenting assault of the State francisation policy, the cultural identities of Martiniquan créoles and metropolitan French are still highly distinct (Couti, 2003). It is interesting to note that in metropolitan France today, there is increasing discourse over the issue of national identity (de la Siega, 2009; Lichfield, 2009).

Figure 3 shows that the unemployment rate in Martinique has been consistently high during the past decade. It is about 3 times higher than that in metropolitan France (Anon, 2010a; Anon, 2011a). The persistent high rate of unemployment rate among persons under 30 years of age is especially acute. It is interesting to note that all DOMs, viz., Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyane, and Réunion have similarly high rates of chronic unemployment (Anon, 2011a).
There is a steady increase of school-leaving youth entering the job market. Emigration to metropolitan France becomes a “safety valve” for the educated as well as the less-educated youth. Figure 4 shows that the projected emigration of young people to metropolitan France and elsewhere would result in the steady increase in the median age of the population of Martinique in the coming decades. It may be noted that about 1/3 of the Martinique population already lives and works semi-permanently in clustered localities in metropolitan France. The population in Martinique was about 400,000 in 2007.

In early 2009, simmering social unrest among the lowly-paid and unemployed non-béké people finally led to a general labour strike in Martinique (Azikiwe, 2009; Meyer, 2009). « Matinik cé ta nou, cé pa ta yol » (Le Collectif du 5 février) became the rallye demand. Some short-term concessions such as an immediate labour wage supplement (viz., €200 per month) were finally granted by the metropolitan government to settle the 3-week general labour strike. But the underlying social-economic issues including class exclusion, cultural alienation, rising cost of food staples, inadequate labour wages, and chronic high level of unemployment have remained largely unresolved in the 2 years after the general strike.
3. Ecological disaster

The widespread use of pesticides, particularly chlordecone (CAS No. 143-50-0) for the intensive cropping of bananas during the past 5 decades had caused a major ecological disaster in Martinique (UNEP, 2006; Lichfield, 2007; Benkimoum and Nedelkovsi, 2010). Chlordecone was recognized to be a possible human carcinogen in 1979 (ATSDR, 1995). Increases in the prevalence of prostate and breast cancers in Martinique (as well as Guadeloupe) have now been reported (Landau-Ossondo, 2009; Multigner et al., 2010). Chlordecone has a high affinity for solid particles such as soil and organic matter (Fernandes et al., 2010) and has a high propensity of bioaccumulation (Bertrand et al., 2010; Bocquené and Franco, 2005). Chlordecone is recalcitrant to degradation by natural chemical, biological and photolytic means (ATSDR, 1995). Interestingly, it has been noted that the natural degradation of chlordecone in Martinique soil would require about 400 years (Anon, 2010b). Indeed the only assured means of ultimate destruction of chlordecone into environmentally-benign end products is controlled incineration in a specialized furnace operating at more than 850 °C. Numerous ways and means have been proposed and are being studied (Anon, 2011c). This remediation research strategy does not appear to afford a final resolution of the chlordecone pollution in the foreseeable future. A massive one-time scheme to remediate chlordecone-contaminated soil has been proposed recently (Wong, 2011).

With the final cessation of clandestine usage of chlordecone in Martinique in 2002, it remains unclear presently whether empty containers and unused stock of chlordecone have been disposed safely to avoid additional environmental catastrophe in the future. There has been a conspicuous official silence on this matter.

Until all soil has all been successfully de-contaminated, it would be unsafe to use the land for any new agricultural activities. Indeed, the people have been warned by the local authorities to refrain from eating self-produced vegetables (Dubuisson et al., 2006; Houdart et al., 2009). Continued transport of chlordecone from soil to food stuff will continue to endanger human health. In a study of chlordecone contamination of aquatic fauna in coastal waters of Martinique, Coat et al. (2006) had found the contamination of aquatic fauna to be particularly high in Baie Fort-de-France, which is located on the opposite side of island where most of the bananas are grown (Figure 1). It is postulated that the chlordecone has been transported involuntarily by vehicle tires and by human footwear from the banana-growing region into the land area of Fort-de-France, and then the inadvertently-transported contaminated soil particles are washed into the bay through normal precipitation run-offs. Unlike open coastal areas, the turnover of water in Baie de Fort-de-France is relatively slow. Chlordecone is thus reasoned to bioaccumulate more intensively in the aquatic-fauna food chain of Baie Fort-de-France.

To date, no bodies, government officials or private enterprises, have been held accountable for perpetuating the use of chlordecone in Martinique for decades after this highly toxic pesticide had been deemed internationally to be unsafe for use (Boutrin and Confiant, 2007; Boughriet, 2010). Indeed the local political leadership has failed to protect the people of Martinique.
4. Neocolonial plantation tourism

The traditional policy approach in creating employment is the expansion of the tourist industry. The enabling means is aggressive bétonisation (literally meaning cementing over the countryside with roads, parking lots, hotels and shopping centres) which renders tourism in paradise to become an extension of the colonial plantation system. Strachan (2002) has noted that tourism economy is largely a re-creation of the plantation economy in which colonial ideologies and economics prevail. European and North American tourists are offered luxurious accommodation style which is a re-creation of past colonial era, in which workers (syn. servants) are always obedient and servile. Local culture would be promoted principally for the attraction of foreign tourists, and not for reasons of cultural revival (Burton, 1978). This form of ethno-tourism demeans the cultural integrity of the indigenous people.

This approach of job creation has largely been an unsatisfactory long-term solution of the chronic high unemployment problem in Martinique. Menial jobs are created under relentless pressure to suppress wages in competition against the neighbouring Caribbean islands which are not tied to the wage structure of metropolitan France. Table 1 shows the comparative minimum wage scale between Martinique and independent states in the Antilles. With the large wage-scale gap, it is evidently impossible for Martinique to create substantial enduring employment through the tourism trade, even with unlimited bétonisation. It may be noted also that the “high” minimum wage has not provided an adequate standard of living for many Martiniquans. The price of food and other basic necessities (largely imported) in Martinique have been typically 30% to 60% more expensive than in metropolitan France (Thull and Mabut, 2009).
Table 1: Gross minimum wage scale in selected countries of the Antilles in 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Gross minimum wage, € per hour</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martinique (and Guadeloupe)</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>Identical to France at government-prescribed 151.67 hours per month.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antigua and Barbuda</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>EC$7.00 per hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbados</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>BDS$5 per hour = EC$6.76 per hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominica</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>EC$5.00 per hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>EC$5.00 per hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Kitts and Nevis</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>EC$8.00 per hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Lucia</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>EC$300 per month = EC$1.98 per hour, pro-rated at 151.67 hours per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Vincent and the Grenadines</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>EC$25 per day = EC$3.30 per hour, pro-rated at 7.58 hours per day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

DATA FROM VARIOUS GOVERNMENT SOURCES.
Nominal exchange rate: EC$1.00 = €0.28, and EC$1.00 = BDS$0.74

21 Daniel (2001) had suggested the development of high-quality eco-tourism as a new means of Martinique economic development. However, even if the base wage differential with other Eastern Caribbean islands was ignored, the extensive pollution of Martinique soil by chlordecone would effectively eliminate this eco-tourism possibility.

22 Sex tourism in its many forms is emerging as a lucrative growth industry in the Caribbean (Grenade, 2007; Jones and Jemmott, 2010; Sengupta, 2010). It has yet to be proposed and promoted as a novel means to revive the Martiniquan economy.

5. Political and economic realities

23 With continued large-scale industrial cropping for export and expanded bétonisation, Martinique has essentially become ever more dependent on imported food to sustain its people (Paravisni-Gebert, 2008). Figure 5 illustrates the recent pattern of Martinique import and exports of agricultural products and food. The balance of trade is chronically distorted. The principal exports are heavily-subvented bananas to metropolitan France and refined petroleum products to nearby Guadeloupe, the other Antillean DOM. Crude petroleum is imported routinely for processing at the Fort-de-France refinery into gasoline, gas-oil and other petroleum-based products. In essence, Martinique external trade has effectively no comparative or absolute advantages.
A substantial change in the social and economic structure in conjunction with the 
implementation of alternative strategies to create meaning jobs would be needed to 
rectify this problem of chronic high level of unemployment. The problems are well 
described, but there appears to be an acute absence of development and 
implementation of new remedial strategies (Desse, 2010; Desse and Selise, 2010). 
Thinking on this Perhaps not coincidentally, a similar economic dysfunction exists in 
other DOMs (Simon, 2010) (Figure 6).

Local leadership obstacles
In retrospect, the initiative led by Aimé Césaire (co-founder of the Négritude movement 
and former long-time Mayor of Martinique) in 1946 to have Martinique accepted by 
France as a DOM might have been a grave mistake. Césaire had reasoned that départememntalisation means the social and economic benefits from metropolitan France’s 
republican universalism. Burton (1978) had noted that “Not only did the Republic seek 
to assimilate the colony, but the colony-particularly its mulatto middle-class-ardently 
sought to be assimilated. So long as the békés preserved an effective stranglehold on 
the economy, the intermediary coloured class’s sole means of asserting itself lay in 
political and cultural activity and it naturally saw the acquisition of full French 
citizenship and the transformation of Martinique into a department of France as its 
best course to counter white hegemony”. By the early 1960s, it was apparent that départememntalisation had failed the people of Martinique substantially. During the 
following 50 years, Césaire had continued to ignore the teaching of Frantz Fanon (1961), 
a fellow Martiniquan, to rectify the dismal failure of départememntalisation. Significant 
ambivalence about the legacy of Césaire continues today in Martinique (Daniel, 2009a; 
Daniel, 2009b; Reno, 2009).
In essence, *departmentalization* had effectively isolated Martinique culturally and economically from other Caribbean states. Interestingly, in 1946, the békés were generally against *départementalisation* for fear losing the feudal control over the general population. In the 65 years since, the békés have successfully deployed *départementalisation* (which they had opposed initially) for their continuing control over the economic affairs of the island.

The referendum held in early 2010 approved the *status quo* (Anon, 2010c). To a large extent, middle-class citizens of Martinique are fearful of any changes which would degrade their accustomed Gallic style of living (Célestine, 2010). With the *status quo*, the chronic high unemployment problem and failed public policy of creating jobs with a “living wage” is doomed to remain unchanged (Anon, 2010d). Exportation of young people to France becomes the only means to reduce social discontent. In the meantime, *francisation* and *bétonisation* continue forward relentlessly.

*Consolation of départementalisation*

Martinique has some notable “benefits” of being a DOM. All Martiniquans are effectively citizens of the French Republic. They have complete freedom to seek employment in metropolitan France when there are no prospects of any meaningful jobs in Martinique. It is generally recognized that people would prefer to stay in their homeland for cultural and social reasons if there were no compelling economic circumstances to cause migration (Llana, 2010).

As French citizens, all unemployed Martiniquans are entitled to apply and receive monthly welfare payment of at least €466 per (single) person from *Le revenu de Solidarité active* (*Le rSa*) program. There were 34,777 unemployed Martiniquans registered at the end of December, 2008 (Mekkois, 2010); the gross welfare payment from the metropolitan France treasury would have been about €16 million per month, if the present payment schedule of *Le rSa* was active then. The current schedule of guaranteed welfare payment came into force for DOM citizens on January 1, 2011 (*Le rSa*, 2011). In comparison to the minimum wage scale at about €1,365 per month as
given in Table 1 and in view of substantially higher local costs of foods and other life
nenecessities, this level of welfare payment alone is clearly insufficient to sustain even
the most minimal standard of living in Martinique. It is thus not surprising that there
are considerable repressed frustration and anger among many Martiniquans.

30 Limited economic ties to CARICOM
Because its DOM status, Martinique trade with neighbouring CARICOM market is highly
and 771/2009 effectively restrict the importation of most vegetables and fruits from
nearby CARICOM member states (EC, 2007; EC, 2008; EC, 2009). These EC regulations
were designed largely to serve the prevailing product standards and economic interest
of mainland EU producers and consumers. Because Martinique is a DOM of France, the
importation of food could only be effectively sourced from the European Union
suppliers, viz., France.

31 As shown in Figure 7, the trade with other regional states is miniscule. This situation
actually serves the neocolonial practices well, as the economy of food and other
consumer goods remains in the control of békés and their commercial-political allies in
metropolitan France. Coincidentally, the extensive chlordecone contamination of local
water and food supply also strengthens the business interest of importers of alimentary
products from France.

Conclusion: Path forward for national salvation

32 There are essentially very few options available to rectify the continuing predicament.
Within the prevailing béké-dominated social and economic structure, it is not inducive
for the establishment of alternatives economic activities by for small-scale independent
farmers and economically-deprived citizens. Extensive contamination of the soil,
water, flora and fauna by the past widespread use of toxic chlordecone pesticide is an
additional development barrier. For different political reasons, both obstacles are not
easy to overcome.

33 Natural geography and shared history certainly favour cultural and economic
integration with other Caribbean islands. But this approach could not be realized
unless Martinique is disengaged firstly from being a DOM of France, and secondly from
the EU. After an orderly phase-out of the DOM status, Martinique could begin to trade
freely with CARICOM member states. New agriculture\(^1\) could be implemented in earnest
with the primary goal of food self-sufficiency, after the island soil has been fully de-
contaminated\(^2\). As a part of the negotiated settlement with Martinique, metropolitan
France should accept full financial responsibility for the total of clean-up of all
chlordecone-contaminated soil.

34 The path towards the renaissance of Martinique will be tortuous. France has never had
a history of voluntary relinquishment of its overseas empire. Witness the bitter and
bloody battles over the independence of Haiti (1791-1804), Vietnam (1945-1954) and
Figure 7: Value of Martinique external trade in 2008

Source: Anon, 2011a.

Notes:

CARIBBEAN ACP COMPRISSES OF ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA, BAHAMAS, BARBADOS, BELIZE, CUBA, DOMINICA, GRENADA GUYANA, HAITI, JAMAICA, ST. KITTS AND NEVIS, ST. LUCIA, ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES, SURINAME, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, AND TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO.

Guadeloupe and Guyane are DOMs of France.

Export to Guadeloupe consisted mainly of refined petroleum products.

The causes of social and economic problems in the island paradise are not unrelated. Propagation of the neocolonial regime has led to further destruction of the land and people to be burdened with the tragic legacy of widespread use of knowingly carcinogenic pesticide in banana cropping during the last half of the 20th century. The task to overcome these social, economic and environmental disorders is substantial in the renaissance of Martinique in real time.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

ACP
Africa, Caribbean and Pacific countries which have been former colonies of European states.

BDSS
Barbados dollar

CARICOM
Caribbean Community (2011 full members: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and, Trinidad and Tobago)
DOM
Département d’Outre-Mer (of France): Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyane, Réunion and Mayotte are considered to be integral parts of the EU.

EC$ Eastern Caribbean dollar

EU European Union


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ANNEXES

Abbreviations used

NOTES

2. A paper entitled «Outlook for the remediation of chlordecone-contaminated soil in Martinique» will be released in the UK in July, 2012.
There is substantial social unrest underlying the prevailing neocolonial political and societal structure in Martinique. It is burdened with chronic high rate of unemployment rate and continuing rising cost of imported food and other basic necessities of life. Banana is the foremost plantation crop grown in Martinique. There is also an ecological disaster arising from the widespread use of carcinogenic chlordecone for controlling banana pests for more than 3 decades. Although this practice had stopped in 2003, the recalcitrant pesticide remained largely in the soil. The challenge to create meaningful new jobs under these social-economic and environmental constraints is thus formidable.