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Bahamas, Sustainable Agriculture

**Paradise Found**

Hearing the name Bahamas typically conjures up visions of blue water, white sand, snorkeling, and palm trees. A simple search of the social media site Instagram for tags of the phrase “Bahamas” garners more than six million posts of vacationers in crystal clear waters, on island adventures, or enjoying the beautiful beaches of the Bahamas. In reality these idyllic island images hide an ugly truth behind the veil of a booming tourism economy: food insecurity.

The Bahamas is a collection of approximately 700 islands situated in the Atlantic Ocean off the southeastern coast of Florida. This string of islands enjoys a subtropical climate, but also endures annual hurricane seasons and inland flooding due to its nearness to sea level. The land is not very fertile because of the soil composition of limestone and sand and the lack of groundwater. The vast majority of Bahamian residents are located in the urban areas of Nassau and Freeport. The remaining 40% of the population resides in more suburban and rural settings with varying states of homes, from the very affluent to the extremely impoverished. The Bahamas largest employer is the government, but other employment tends to include jobs in trade skills such as fishing and construction. Some families pass small businesses down through generations and others do short stints of work to make money for their families. This island nation is widely dependent upon tourism due to its beautiful beaches and coastal water. Most meals of a typical Bahamian family are composed from imports, with very few families farming for their own food. Locals might eat meals of fresh fish, conch, rice, sea snail, and peas because they are widely available and inexpensive.

As recently as 2021, 17.2% of residents experience food insecurities (Philipp, 2024). This is largely due to the fact that the majority of food items in the Bahamas are imported and few families farm due to the lack of arable land (*Bahama Islands*). While the country is able to produce many exotic fruits, has niche farms of sisal and pineapple, and creates items from wood, shells and straw for tourists, residents are unable to support themselves with crops. Other impacts such as the unpredictable weather of hurricanes and droughts creates additional barriers to agricultural production. Due to the outside factors affecting imports such as shipping, prices, and shortages, a disproportionate amount of residents have access to an adequate, nutritious food supply. This creates not only malnutrition from food insecurities, but also a nation who is becoming sick from the easy access to non-nutritious foods. The obesity epidemic is widespread with 41% of Bahamian adults and 19% of Bahamian children suffering from obesity. The juxtaposition of obesity and malnutrition of the residents is a nod to a market saturated with inexpensive, processed foods (Philipp, 2023).

The challenge that Bahamians face is an ongoing fight to find ways to support themselves and their families so that they are the healthiest, satiated version of themselves. To do this, they must be able to sustain their island nations with limited resources and support from outside agencies. At the very least, a small-scale solution where Bahamians can have an immediate impact on their access to nutritious foods is by participating in backyard and community farming. As the nation widens their view on food insecurity, they can further address food insecurities by focusing on a midscale solution by attracting the tourism economy to niche farms located near areas that tourists already frequent. Finally, as a more large-scale and ongoing solution, the Bahamian government could focus more intently on “blue” food and management of fisheries so that they can provide a better export product that will improve the economy of the entire nation.

According to a study by Chambers, et al. (2023), the Bahamian government is encouraging residents to participate in backyard farming to combat the threat of an inadequate food supply. A monumental barrier to the success of backyard farming is the lack of arable land. The study suggests that a focus on soil improvement would improve the success of backyard farming. It found that the addition of organ carbon could maximize the health of Bahamian soil across the islands (Chambers, et al., 2023). The United States Department of Agriculture states that to increase organic carbon sequestration, residents should reduce tillage, increase plant biomass, and continue to add organic amendments such as compost, manure, and biochar (USDA, 2021). For residents to improve their farming practices, changing simple practices such as methods of tilling and the addition of organic substrates that are readily available, could impact their own family's access to nutritious foods. To educate families, the Bahamian government could issue educational pamphlets or host workshops to model best agricultural practices. The government could also involve non-profit organizations such as the Bahamas Feeding Network to continue to support families and their pursuit of materials, practices, and understanding of backyard farming. The successful implementation of Convoy of Hope in 2022 after Hurricane Dorian is a dependable model to follow for engaging local families and farming operations in changing their practices so that they can improve production of local crops and help close the gap of food insecurities (FarmProgress, 2022).

Another possible solution for Bahamian food insecurity could be a continued focus on agritourism as a way to stimulate domestic food production and decrease food insecurity. The Agricultural Marketing and Resource Center defines agritourism as “any person, farm, or corporation actively engaged in the operation, management, or promotion of an agriculturally-related tourism business open to the public” (AGMRC, 2022). The Bahamas enjoys a healthy tourism economy which it could use to its advantage. The Bahamian government could invest funds in the niche farms and advertisement of activities of its residents to encourage tourists to visit and improve profits for local farmers. This could improve the relationship between agritourism and accessibility of food. While it is a small market due to the lack of decent soil for farming, it could be a viable market with continued improvements. Studies focused on the Caribbean address agritourism as an available avenue for improving the food insecurity program, but they also reveal the challenges faced along the way. These include a lack of financing, limited government incentives, and the absence of programs to encourage agritourism in the islands (Thomas, 2018). With the government’s support, Bahamian niche farms could increase tourist traffic so that it might increase their bottom line which could then be invested back into the farm to continue production and support of the imports farmed locally.

On a more large-scale operation, the Bahamian islands could benefit from focusing their efforts on a readily accessible crop: blue food. Teneva, et al. (2023) research the benefits of small island nations using blue foods as a highly traded food product to improve food security in Caribbean areas such as the Bahamas. The study suggests the use of climate-adaptive fisheries strategies might be the answer to reducing the negative effects of food insecurity so that small island nations might be more self-sufficient. This study also finds that the Bahamas is a nation that could improve financial stability and the capacity of the fisheries sector with these practices as early as 2035 (Teneva, et al. 2023). According to Blue Food Partnership, blue foods are the most highly traded food products in the world. Billions of people world-wide rely on blue foods for their dietary protein and up to 12% of the world’s population relies on the fishing industry as their primary source of income (Blue Food Partnership, 2023). The Nature Conservancy promotes this idea in the Bahamas with projects throughout the island nation. Its goal is to not only educate for enforcement and compliance of sustainable fishing, but to also advocate for financing fishery projects and provide solutions for the community livelihood through sustainable fishing (The Nature Conservancy, 2024). Through the multiple programs supported by the conservancy, the implementation of the first management plan for conch aligned with the Fisheries Act could improve a sustainable production of conch across the country (Teneva, et al. 2023). Similar to the regulation of conch fishing, The Nature Conservancy also provides ongoing work with FishPath to manage regulations, stock assessment, data collection, and reporting so that the Bahamians can work toward sustainable fisheries that will support them for many generations to come (FishPath, n.d.). The increase of governmental focus on fisheries, practices, and output could have a positive impact on the need for a successful export and the dietary needs of the Bahamian residents. Considering the global consumption of seafood has increased dramatically over the last 50 years, it would be detrimental to countries to ignore the obvious need and impact of how fisheries can improve the lives of its populations. Drawing attention to the fact that the Bahamas fishery sectors provide tens of thousands of jobs for local fishermen and contribute 20% to the Bahamian gross domestic product as government agencies support sustainable fishing will only prove to increase awareness and decrease food insecurity across the nation (FishPath, n.d.).

Most importantly, the Bahamian government must inspect what it expects. It must make every effort to improve the lives of its residents. As they improve their own local areas, the economy can only benefit from that growth. A commitment to recognizing the importance of improvements to the local economy by refining residents' knowledge of best practices in farming, organizing agritourism so that niche farms can better benefit from tourist dollars, and focusing on an ongoing improvement to fishery practices will most definitely impact the issue of food insecurity in the Bahamas nation. The key to all of this is the improvement of the Bahamian farmer’s productivity on a small or large scale. In order to ameliorate food production in the Bahamas, it is crucial that the government implements creative solutions that will broaden agricultural productivity and increase the sustainability of healthy food for its citizens. The good news is that during the Food Systems Summit of 2021, the Bahamas Ministry of Agricultural and Marine Resources stated that “transforming Bahamas’ food system is the most powerful action they could take to solve their biggest problems” (Nations, U). With governmental support already promised, the Bahamas aims to continue to seek solutions that will create a sustainable food system for Bahamians, in other words, paradise found. The relationship between the Bahamian government and The United Nations Food Systems Summit will continue to nurture the conversations and support for meaningful solutions for the improved food security for the residents of the Bahamas.

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