

# Community taking charge of its future

ON AUGUST 28, the residents of Bon Air North, Arouca came together to celebrate the spirit of their community, their achievements and to discuss the next step forward.

This is not a story about a low-income community asking for handouts. It is not even about the residents asking for basic public utilities which they currently lack. This community stands out from the spectrum of communities in the country because it has a clear vision for its integrated development and has committed to taking responsibility for their own progress.

On that day, they hosted a discussion among themselves and representatives of UNDP GEF/Small Grants Programme and The Cropper Foundation about a sustainable livelihood project in the context of their wider community development plan. The sustainable livelihood project is funded in part by UNDP GEF/SGP and was implemented by the Bon Air North Village Council and The Cropper Foundation in May 2004.

The objectives are integrative, and if met, can address some of the social and economic needs of the residents while improving the natural environment of the community. The progress of this project has been severely hindered by the delay in the regularisation of this community as mandated in the State Land (Regularisation of Tenure) Act No 25 of 1998.

Contrary to popular belief, regularisation is not about the Government giving away land to squatters. The people who are eventually guaranteed a 5000 sq ft lot have to first meet several criteria stated in Act No 25 of 1998. They also have to pay for the land as well as contribute to the cost of upgrading the physical infrastructure of the community, such as roads, water supply, sewerage and electricity.

Fortunately, they can be facilitated by loans from IDB which will be happy to join the rest of society who has security in ownership of land for which they have paid.

At the community day, the residents launched their community profile document, Creating Community, which was based on a survey undertaken by the residents in mid-2004. The survey sought to assess the changes in the social and ecological settings of the community as well as attain present baseline data that could be used in the planning for the future of the community.

The questionnaire is included in the profile document and attempts to collect socio-economic data on land use, plans for future use and an assessment of the human resource capacity of the community. A copy can be obtained from the Cropper Foundation.

The elements of the community day helped to improve commitment and mobilisation among residents towards achieving their development vision and land tenure security.

The discussions helped to increase awareness and significance of the sustainable livelihood project and the larger community development plan of the wider community. It seemed that it was towards the end of the day that the significance was made apparent for some and even clearer for others.

There are lessons here that can be useful to the national community of T&T. It starts with the initiative and commitment to take responsibility for your own progress and development.

These communities neither have a handout mentality nor are they willing to accept cookie-cutter plans to be implemented for which they have had no input. They recognise the need to plan their community according to their own vision but within a national framework and definitely with the collaboration of public agencies.

They have maintained their efforts over the last three decades to constantly pursue avenues to improve their community. They have on many occasions pooled their limited resources to advance their community with initiatives that should have been done by the public agencies charged with the responsibilities eg drains, roads, socio-economic data.

The community is ready and willing to collaborate with the relevant government agencies on the planning process for the community. It is my hope that the public agencies can see this as an ideal opportunity to support and work with a committed community on a pilot project that can contribute to a new approach to community development in terms of sustainable practice.

**Submitted by Sarika Maharaj of the Cropper Foundation. To contact the Cropper Foundation, call 626-2628.**