

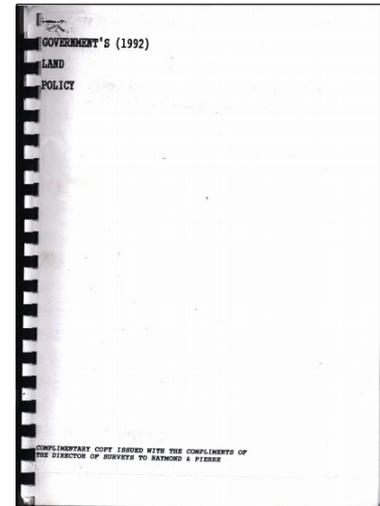
Our Land

2nd April 2015

10 CONCLUSION

10.1 A small State such as Trinidad & Tobago must accord a very high priority to the judicious management and utilization of its land resources or perish. All elements of land policy must be designed to ensure that these finite resources are efficiently utilized and husbanded in such a manner as to serve the long term interests of the national community.

—Conclusion of “A New Administration and Policy for Land” (19 November, 1992)



[Click here to download the 1992 Land Policy](#)

Long-standing public concerns over land allocation have been increased by a number of recent events. Most notably there have been reports of leases of waterfront land at ‘Chagville’ for [a waterpark](#) and the Chaguaramas Convention Centre for [a hotel project](#). The other episode to have attracted interest is the alleged occupation of 35 acres of Caroni land by SIS in Couva in contested circumstances.

When one considers the recently-announced projections for distribution of [100 new homes per week by the Housing Development Corporation](#) (HDC) and the huge ‘Land for the Landless’ proposals, it is clear that land is a hot topic. It is tempting to dismiss these proposals as being mere electioneering, but that would be a grave error, in view of the importance of land in our society. Justifiably so.



This article will set out some of the inescapable facts about our country’s land and housing situation. It is not possible to cover these vast, complicated and interlocking issues in a single column, so this is the start of an important series. History demands nothing less.

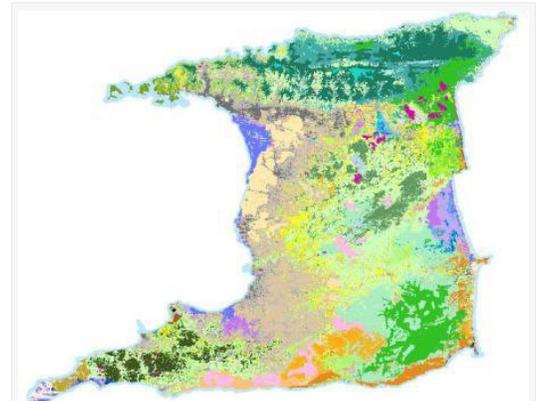
Proceeding from the general to the particular will mean deferring discussion of the specific controversies arising at this time so that the fundamental and serious issues can be properly framed.

The main points are –

The Land

The land area of Trinidad & Tobago is 5,128 sq. kilometres (1,980 sq miles), but apart from the raw quantity of land, we have to take proper account of the quality of our land. By which I mean to say that a majority of our land area is swamp, forest and mountainous terrain which is not suited for easy development – in my estimation, at least 60% of our land is in those zones.

The existence of those development-free zones is essential for the sustainability of the other zones, the developed ones. Some of the elements in that sustainability equation would include green cover on high ground to reduce run-off from heavy rainfall; aquifers which can replenish with clean water; swamps/mangrove coastal areas to buffer high-tides and form a vital link in the food-chain; forests to act as living repositories of our bio-diversity and so on.



Landsat image map of Trinidad. Click image for linked article. See p 156 of linked article.

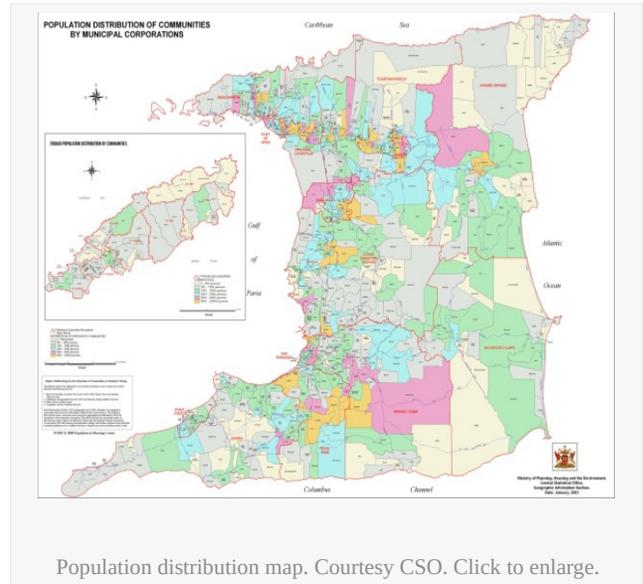
The balance between the two types of zones is in constant tension, given the high level of national wealth; the tendency of wealthy persons to land-hoard; the tendency of poor people to take up unauthorised occupation of land and our growing environmental awareness. Those rising tensions as to land use can only be properly addressed by balancing of the needs of the human population against those of the other living elements; the present generation against those of the unborn and not least, the appetites of the wealthy against the needs of the poor.

Idealists would suggest that those elements are not in actual conflict with each other, but realism and the facts before us speak of a grim kind of contest. The systems for environmental study, public consultation and urban & regional planning are all intended to set norms for the resolution of those conflicting demands.

Population density

Since the land area of our country is static (at 5,128 sq kilometres) apart from marginal gains and losses due to reclamation and erosion, the actual population is an important measure of the pressure that our lands are under.

The population density of T&T as at 2011 is 262 persons per sq kilometre, which places us 31st in terms of world population density, out of 194 countries measured at the [Index Mundi website](#). Of course that figure is a serious underestimate, given the fact that our 'official' population has been recorded as virtually static at about 1.3M for quite some time now. The underestimate in terms of population is clear when one considers the [electoral list of over-18s, which is just under 1,060,000 as at 2011](#). The situation is even starker when considered with the relevant figures for owner-occupation and the huge numbers shown in the HDC's waiting-list.



It seems clear that our actual population is significantly higher than the official figure, which means that the population density is much higher than stated by Index Mundi.

Land Policy

For the reasons outlined earlier, there has been a steady stream of criticism of the systems in place for environmental management, public consultation and planning in relation to our nation's physical development.

There is almost no discussion as to our land policy. The fact is that the national land policy was established in 1992 and has not been revised, superseded or withdrawn. As a practitioner in the field, I am aware of the policy and consider its contents to be substantially beneficial to our collective interests.

The problem is that the official land policy is seldom observed, so much so that I often wonder how widely-known is its existence or contents.

To test my suspicions, I decided to try an experiment by asking some surveyor colleagues at a recent conference and was astonished at the number of people who had no idea if there was a land policy. Some colleagues went beyond uncertainty to flatly deny its existence.

But that is not all, not at all.

I then caused queries to be raised with the relevant official bodies as to the existence of a national land policy. The replies need to be carefully noted, so that we can understand the turmoil and confusion which exists at the official level.

Here is what we were told –

- **Ministry of Housing & Urban Development** – Did not confirm or deny, but referred us to the Land Settlement Agency, which is a Division of that Ministry.
- **Land Settlement Agency** – Stated that they were unaware of any official land policy in existence and suggested that we contact the Ministry of Planning & Sustainable Development.
- **Ministry of Planning & Sustainable Development** – Did not confirm or deny, but referred us to the Ministry of Land & Marine Resources. Another query to MPSD yielded the suggestion to contact the Town & Country Planning Division of that Ministry, but the TCPD then stated that “a policy was in process but nothing had been finalised.”
- **Ministry of Land & Marine Resources** – Did not confirm or deny, but referred us to the Commissioner of State Lands, which office is yet to answer our repeated calls. Further queries to other departments within MLMR only yielded repeated statements that no such policy exists.



This official level of confusion and ignorance is unacceptable, given the critical importance of land in “satisfying the long-term interests of the national community.”

Quite frankly, the fact that only one of the many officials we spoke with was willing to give a name, which was actually someone else’s, speaks volumes to the pitiful position of official ignorance or obfuscation on this critical national resource. The responsible officials behaving irresponsibly in matters of the first importance. What is this?

We are either witness to woeful ignorance or a species of wilful blindness which can never serve our collective interests. The worst type of ignorance being displayed by those who do not know that they do not know. I tell you.

Given what is happening with State land in our country, this matter deserves our sternest scrutiny, so next week I will delve deeper.