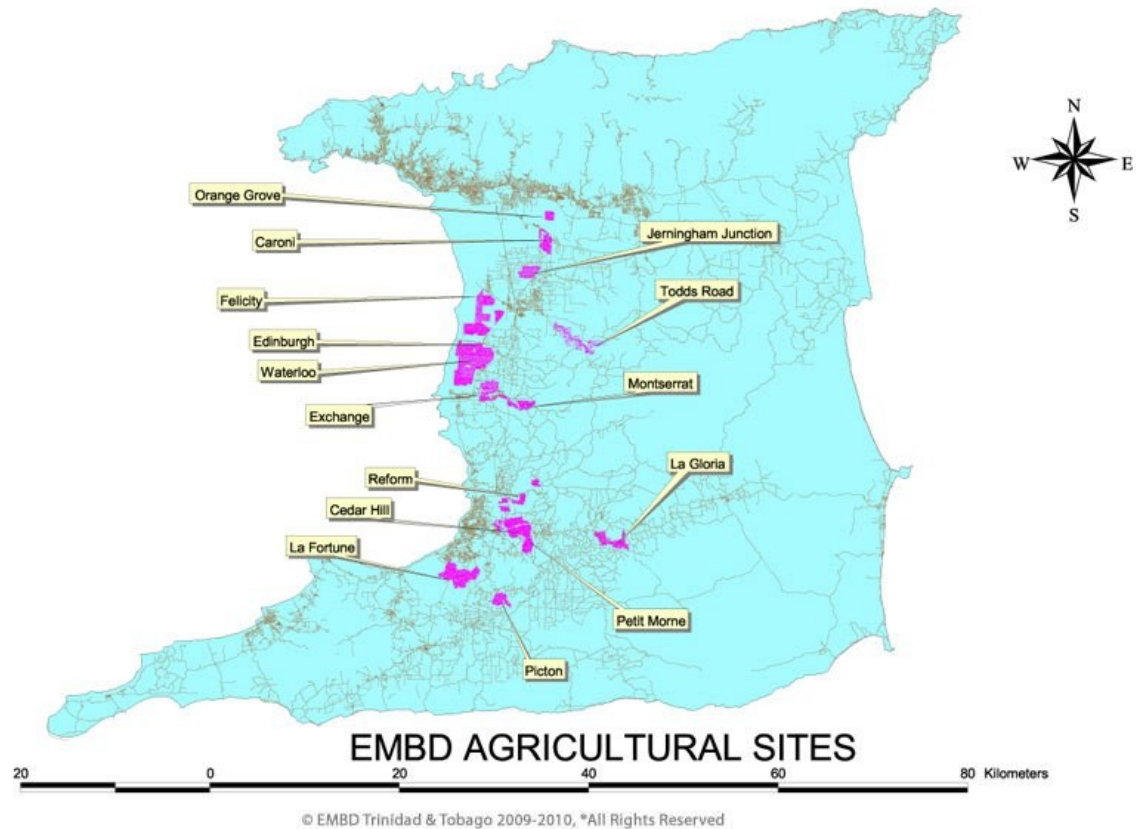


Our Land – The Caroni case



EMBD Agricultural Development Site Map. Click [this link to see a Google Earth Map of the EMBD Agricultural Development Sites.](#)

Caroni (1975) Ltd, the loss-making sugar conglomerate which was also a State Enterprise, was closed on 1 August 2003. The Caroni estate has to be located within the wider context of our national Land Policy, if we are to make sense of what is happening.

“The now-defunct Caroni (1975) Limited includes lands the size of Tobago whose value has been under-stated and which now could fall prey to a land grab.....The current Caroni Transformation Process is about converting national assets into private assets. In the main it is serving the interest of those who wish to generate private capital from public wealth stocks; for this reason the current process is exploitative and fraught with inequity.

“The historical model is being excruciatingly exacted on Caroni lands. The current transformation clones the historical model.” The Report criticised areas of the current restructuring process which echoed those of the exploitative historical model. It said: “The enterprise is conceived to control land

space. To control land space especially prime property near the port is to control the socio-economic agenda. Land is leased on gratuitous terms, 99 years for example, without publication of the terms of the lease or tenure. This leaves the process open to political and economic opportunism and speculation...”

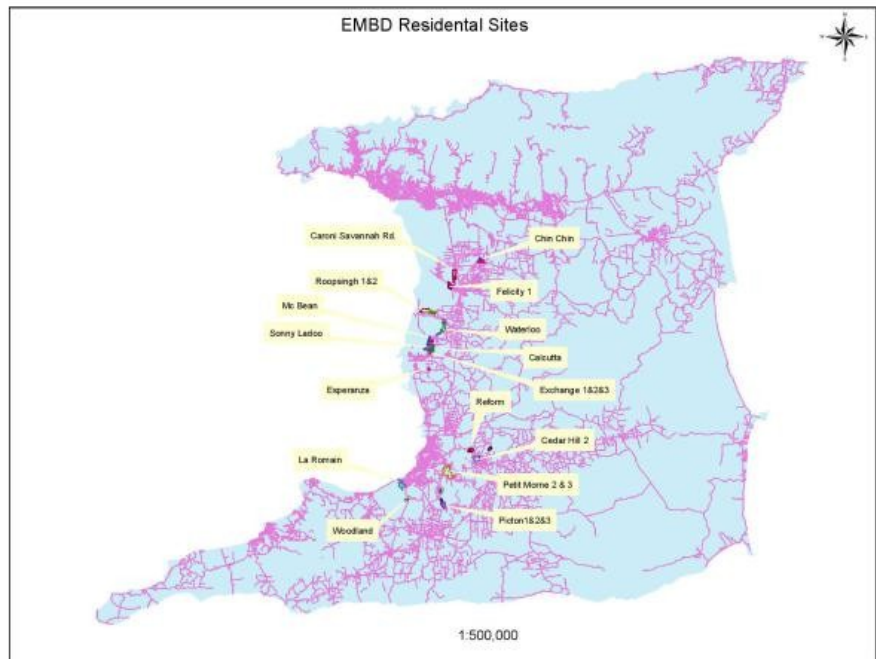
These extracts are from UWI’s Position Paper – ‘A Framework for National Development: Caroni Transformation Process’ dated July 2003 as [reported in the Trinidad and Tobago Newsday](#).

At that time, my academic colleagues at UWI were placing on record their serious concerns at the implications of the procedures being adopted by the Manning government in relation to the Caroni lands.

How many of those concerns are justified today, with the Peoples Partnership government in office since May 2010?

The best estimates of the land area of the Caroni Estate at 2003 were in the 76,000 to 77,000 acre range, which would equate to about 6% of our country’s entire land area. The Caroni lands stretch from Orange Grove in the north – just south of Trincity – to the outskirts of Princes Town in south Trinidad. The lands belonging to Caroni (1975) Ltd also included property at Mayaro and ‘Down-the-Islands’.

The EMBD website states that it is responsible for the development of the former Caroni lands – [some 7,500 residential lots are being prepared for ex-Caroni workers as part of their retrenchment package](#), with a further 8,400 agricultural leases of 2-acre parcels reportedly being processed. By my estimation, that means about 940 acres are to be used for the residential lots, with at least 16,800 additional acres to be used for the agricultural plots. The total land area to be used in these programs would therefore be of the order of 17,740 acres, which is just under a quarter (about 23%) of the estimated area of the Caroni lands.



EMDB Residential Sites

There are significant struggles becoming evident in relation to the EMBD land distribution exercise, with these lands being allocated free to former Caroni workers as part of their retrenchment compensation.

The [Trinidad Express reported](#) that the Minister of Finance & the Economy, Larry Howai, announced a significant change in the original policy in the 2015 budget, in that the ex-workers receiving agricultural leases were now free to sell these lands. This announcement in September 2014 sparked a sharp response from Shiraz Khan, President of the Trinidad United Farmers’ Association, who labelled

the new policy as ‘ nonsensical‘ and ‘ destructive to the agricultural sector. ‘ One has to wonder if this important shift in land policy was discussed with the Farmers’ Association.

The split in positions became glaring with the swift response of Lily Herai, an ex-Caroni worker who is President of the Couva/Point Lisas Chamber of Commerce, who is reported to have “welcomed the move because it will add to the business development of the area.” Ms. Herai was also quoted as saying – “...We are in the Couva/Point Lisas area. There are a lot of service type business that have emerged recently and it keeps growing. It gives the leaseholders an opportunity to sell their lands..”

To my mind, the most startling statements on the EMBD lands came from Minister in the Ministry of Finance & the Economy, Rudranath Indarsingh, former President of the All Trinidad General Workers’ Trade Union (ATGWTU). His comments are [reported in the Trinidad Express](#) on 12 December 2014:

“...Despite being given permission to sell their lands on the open market, ex-Caroni (1975) workers were urged yesterday not to sell by Minister in the Ministry of Finance Rudranath Indarsingh.

Indarsingh, a former president of the All Trinidad General Workers’ Trade Union (ATGWTU), said the union worked hard to get the lands for the workers, and land value can only increase.

*He was speaking yesterday at a ceremony in Couva to distribute more land leases to the ex-employees. Speaking to the Express afterwards, Indarsingh said **there were rumours Government ministers were preying upon the recipients, encouraging them to sell their recently received land** ...”
(The emphasis is mine.)*

I tell you.

Apart from this battle on the EMBD projects, we have to consider the ‘Land for the Landless’ program which is intended to provide some 3,000 to 4,000 residential lots each year. That is the strain being put onto the limited lands available in our country, as we fight for clarity on what is happening to our country’s lands.

The lack of the database proposed in the 1992 Land Policy means that we are operating in an information vacuum which appears to be deliberate.

Every public official is accustomed to the world of today, with the instantaneous access to detailed information on an astounding range of issues, worldwide. We all know that the banks and insurance companies have all the relevant details of many millions of accounts and transactions available at our virtual fingertips. We all know that, so why are we continuing to permit this rapid disposal of our country’s land without some public system to provide the details for our consideration?

The State Agencies responsible for land

This is a listing of the key Ministries and the relevant State Agencies which manage our country’s lands. The sheer number of bodies with overlapping responsibilities makes understanding the land question a major challenge.

1. **Ministry of Land and Marine Resources**

Minister: *Jairam Seemungal MP*

Agencies

- o Lands & Surveys Division
- o Commissioner of State Lands
- o Land Settlement Agency (LSA)



2. **Ministry of Housing and Urban Development**

Minister: *Dr Roodal Moonilal, MP*

Agencies

- o Estate Management & Development Company Ltd (EMBD)
- o Housing Development Corporation (HDC)
- o Urban Development Corporation of T&T (UDECOTT)
- o Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee (SILWC)



3. **Ministry of Planning & Sustainable Development**

Minister: *Senator Dr Bhoendradatt Tewarie*

Agencies

- o Town & Country Planning Division (TCPD)
- o Chaguaramas Development Authority (CDA)
- o East Port-of-Spain Development Company Ltd.



As [I wrote](#) in May 2004 –

“...Our nation’s interest demands that we recognise that the Caroni lands are too big, too important and too valuable to be the preserve of any single group or political party...”

At that time, I was criticising the short-sighted policy of the Manning government in relation to the Caroni lands.

After one time, is two times.

Next, I will delve further into the EMBD situation and the features of the land/property information system we so urgently need.

4. **Ministry of Food Production**
Minister: Senator Devant Maharaj
Agencies



- o Agricultural Development Bank
- o Agricultural Society of T&T
- o Cocoa & Coffee Industry Board of T&T
- o Livestock & Livestock Products Board
- o National Agricultural Marketing and Development Company (NAMDEVCO)
- o Sugarcane Feeds Centre

5. **Ministry of the Environment & Water Resources**
Minister: Senator Ganga Singh
Agencies



- o Environmental Management Agency (EMA)