

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF CORAL ATOLLS

At the first meeting of the Research Council of the South Pacific Commission in May, 1949, the limited, precarious resources of the low islands native people of the S.P.C. Area were recognized, and a plan outlined for their economic improvement. In almost any instance the island population is running close to the limit which possible production has dictated. We are not here concerned with those few, temporarily successful islands where phosphates have given present security. It is the atoll of sharply limited production which we regard as the most deserving of assistance in agriculture, and in economic security.

It is the wish of normal people everywhere to be self sufficient. The atoll people are like that. It is only out of the surplus they can take from their subsistence needs that they acquire money and can participate in the goods the world has to offer. As a general rule their cash comes from copra, from mats or other fibre products, or from shell.

Economic development implies a train of improvements. There is first the greater production in island grown food; the coconut, the breadfruit, taros, sweet potatoes, vegetables and fruits; in swine and poultry. This means increased production per plant. There are no more acres to be added, no more rainfall to be secured, no more earth to be developed. The improvement lies in the biological sciences and the arts of agriculture. To do these things we must know much more about the conditions as they are, the potentials of plants and soils, of animals and feeds, and how to control waste.

The first plan was to study the economic situation in a representative atoll or group of atolls. The island of Tarawa ( $1^{\circ}30'N.$ ,  $173^{\circ}00'E.$ ) was selected in the Gilberts and Ellice Colony for this pilot project. For administrative reasons the work did not get under way in 1949. The second meeting of the Research Council in August 1950 reviewed the plans, confirmed the original intent, noted the interest of the South Pacific Conference which requested the Commission to give all possible priority to this project, and recommended a budget of £2,800 Sterling.

In December 1950 Dr. Rene Catala and Mme. Catala were employed by the Commission to undertake the economic survey of atolls in the Gilberts. A small agricultural station is proposed which will have a continuing status under the control of the Fiji Experiment Station. Dr. Catala is experienced in tropical agriculture, is an expert in marine ecology, and understands and is sympathetic to the life and necessities of the atoll people. He has obtained leave of absence from the Institut Francais d'Océanie for this undertaking.

The time is short and the financial resources of the Commission are small. The survey is the beginning of what must be a long program of research and improvement. We are attempting to do for the atoll people in a short time what they cannot immediately do for themselves, but we must extend no false hopes, and make no promises we cannot abundantly keep.

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