



Photo by Leah Gordon

Land reform – the number one demand

“Land is truly the Number One biggest demand of Haitian peasants who have fought and died for it, because only having land can assure a peasant’s survival”, according to the co-ordinator of the Saint Louis du Nord Peasants’ Development Organisation, and this sentiment is echoed by peasant organisations across the country.

Land and who owns it is a red-hot political issue in Haiti. Since the time of the slave revolution, conflict over land has produced a history written in blood. More recently, the brutal dictatorships of the Duvaliers expressed the power of the land-owning oligarchy, and then, with the fall of Baby Doc, peasants organised themselves to demand land, and, in some cases, mobilised to take control of tracts. Large landowners responded with violent repression including a massacre of over 100 peasants in 1987.

Haiti is the most densely populated country in the Americas and the pressure on the land continues to intensify. At the same time as the population is increasing, the quantity of available agricultural land is diminishing as a result of soil erosion. Food aid and the import of cheap US foodstuffs have staved off the omnipresent threat of famine, but the influx of foreign food is undercutting the market for small peasant producers.

Peasant organisations are demanding the state intervenes to address this crisis. They want help in the form of services and inputs such as credit, tools, seeds, fertilisers and technical support. Above all they are calling for action over the question of land security.

Although the state is in theory the largest landowner, in practice, much of this land has been appropriated, stolen or leased by the friends and allies of corrupt governments over the last century. In recent years more and

more land has passed into the hands of the large landowners as economic hardship has obliged small peasants to sell off their land bit by bit.

As a result, increasing numbers of Haitian peasants work as share-croppers – a system where peasants work land they do not own and in return must hand over half the harvest to the landowner. Every couple of years the landowners eject the peasants and replace them with others. Unable to plan for the future, peasants live for the moment with no incentive to boost the productive capacity of the land nor to plant the trees that could arrest environmental degradation.

An Institute for Agrarian Reform (INARA) was established last year, and the Préval government has spoken of its determination to promote the agricultural sector, yet peasant organisations are concerned at both the lack of action, and the lack of peasant participation in the decision-making process.

A leader of the national peasant organisation, Tet Kole, told *Haiti Briefing*, “INARA receives advice from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), yet nowhere in the world has the FAO carried out an agrarian reform. We advised the government to set up a commission on agrarian reform with the participation of the many national and regional peasant organisations, but the government refused.”

In April the European Union announced it was increasing its grant aid to Haiti, and will allocate a large amount to the agricultural sector. For any agricultural policy to succeed the government must be encouraged to ensure peasant participation in the development of a strategy that includes a comprehensive agrarian reform.

In June five members of the Haiti Support Group travelled to Haiti for a week-long study tour. They met with representatives of over a dozen popular, or grassroots, organisations in the capital and in the countryside. Two of the participants here give their impressions of their first visit to the Republic of Haiti.



Children in Cité Soleil

Photo by Leah Gordon

We have travelled up the Artibonite valley to the lower central plateau, to the town of Mirebelais. Another forty-five minute drive and we arrive in the village of Poulie, just outside Lascahobas. We are late due to our slow four hour journey to Mirebelais over what is laughably called a road, but more resembles a mountain river bed. As we approach a concrete school hall, sweet song greets us from the 150 peasant women gathered in the stifling heat inside. They have been waiting for us for hours, some having walked miles to get here from their remote homes in the hills. They are singing songs of solidarity to keep up their spirits as they wait.

We take our places and introductions are made. All the women here belong to small groups of 15 or so which meet on a weekly basis. They are members of the Peasant Movement of Papaye (MPP), one of Haiti's largest peasant-based popular movements. The local MPP organiser is present and acts as facilitator, but it is the women who speak to us.

The women began organising in 1989, originally with mixed groups, but then they decided to have women only as they felt more comfortable working with each other. Organising had to be suspended during the coup years due to political repression. Many women had to go into hiding in the hills, or devote their energies to supporting husbands, themselves forced into hiding. All projects were suppressed and many women have only just got back on their feet now that meetings are possible again.

"The pain of one woman is the pain of all women. Throughout the world women are treated worse than anything. Haitian women are worth nothing to our husbands and society, yet we do all the work like donkeys, carrying loads on our heads, having babies, living with health problems. We decided to organise ourselves to catch breath from our suffering."

Spokeswomen from each group talked about their particu-

lar activities, aspirations and needs. For instance, collective capital schemes are common - each woman puts a little money into a pot and can then buy foodstuffs at harvest time and sell them on later when the price has risen. Such projects generally require a silo to store produce in, and some groups have built them with money lent by the MPP. Collective gardens are also popular, but often the women cannot even afford basic tools or seed. They would like to set up handicraft projects and community shops.

What is completely beyond their means is the creation of dispensaries and health clinics. Pregnant women may have to walk three hours to see a doctor, and he may not be a very good one. It is also very hard to get first aid. There are few schools and fewer roads. In one place we were told about, children living on an island have to go across Lake Peligre to get to school, and some have drowned on the way. On top of all these problems most people don't own their land and have to pay rent to absentee landlords.

This paints a picture of dire poverty and a people living without basic infrastructure. All this is true, but these are also people living with hope and courage. The meeting was truly inspiring - the strength and self-respect of the women were so powerful. They are living at the bottom of the pile in every way, but they don't want this to continue. They have been abandoned by their elected representatives so they are uniting to attain their objectives.

"We want a society where everyone can live in equality,

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF PORT-AU-PRINCE

by Mimi Sheller

Sac, the Haitian capital has grown rapidly over the last two decades as thousands have fled the famished mountains, faltering economy, and social injustice of the countryside. The eradication of the Creole pig in the early 1980s, the collapse of rice production following imports of cheap US surpluses, and continuing problems of soil erosion and deforestation, have all conspired against a peasant economy that once met all the country's food needs.

International finance agencies have backed the small export assembly sector, but this has only exacerbated the growth of slums and unemployment by drawing even more of the rural population into the city in the hope of finding jobs where hardly any exist. Meanwhile, as several of the organisations we met pointed out, even under the Lavalas govern-

ment there have been only scattered public works projects, and no integrated plan for national development.

This rural exodus has fed the burgeoning slums built on urban margins without electricity, drainage, or drinking water. The people of Cité Soleil tell us that their flimsy corrugated-iron shacks, perched on mounting trash and awash in floods of murky sewage, are not fit for human life, yet they have nowhere else to raise their hungry children. Even these pathetic shelters are not safe though - many were burnt down during the coup to drive out popular organisations, while more recently, in the nearby La Saline area, others have been bulldozed because the people did not own the land they had built on. One cluster of new two-storey homes stands unfinished and uninhabited in the midst of the winding alleyways - a half-hearted government project that seems only to mock the paltry hand-made structures crowding around.

A small school run by the Union of Young Revolutionaries provides one ray of human dignity amid the desperation. A little boy told us he liked school simply because "the teachers pay attention to me" - even the smallest support and encouragement can affect a young life. Most schools teach in French, a language that is not the native-tongue of the majority. With a 75% illiteracy rate, the progress of another generation is stunted.

In a different part of the city, a youth group, the Cultural Association for Research and Empowerment, has set up a community centre where young people have a place of safety to socialise, and seek self-education through

reading, videos, and discussion groups.

One of the greatest problems in Port-au-Prince and throughout Haiti is the government's failure to provide primary health care, compounded by the lack of basic sanitation, public hygiene and public education. Private donors cannot fill the gap left by a sub-minimal state. At the Women's Health Clinic, in the Carrefour Feuilles area, people wait all day for the chance to see two over-burdened doctors who only get half-salary from the Ministry of Health, and struggle to see 180 women and children per day. We learned from the co-ordinator of the clinic that poor people's basic rights to life and health have been ignored. The government addresses neither the underlying causes of illness, such as poverty, unemployment, and poor living conditions in the slums, nor the resulting health problems. One hundred and thirty-three children out of every thousand die before the age of five, while child-birth kills five out of every thousand mothers.

All the leaders and activists we met during the study tour were inspiring models of commitment, courage and perseverance in the face of adverse political and economic conditions. The most important message we came away with was the continuing need for our solidarity in disseminating information about Haiti, promoting the aims of the popular movement, and working to influence both European public opinion and decision-making by international organisations.

As the Préval government continues to carry out the structural adjustment policies of the IMF and World Bank, the conditions of daily life are deteriorating, and popular mobilisation for democracy is threatened by creeping disillusionment. Decision-making is going on behind closed doors, without any transparency. Popular organisations have been excluded from the political process. Now it is more important than ever that we stand by the Haitian organisations that are trying to keep popular hopes and democratic participation alive.■

MEETING THE WOMEN OF LASCAHOBAS

by Mike Jones

where what everyone has is for everyone, not some people having more than others. We also want to change relations between men and women so that men don't walk ahead but we walk side by side...Before we formed into groups women were like slaves, but by organising ourselves we have made a great step forward, because now we have the right to speak out and participate in all activities."

In the past the MPP lent money to such groups but due to their experience during the coup years, when groups associated with them met with repression, they are looking to decentralise funding. The women of the Lascahobas region hope to get directly in touch with First World funding sources. It is beyond doubt that the women know what they need and have the ability to achieve it, given the money - and it is very little money that is needed for their small group projects.

Larger projects, such as the provision of dispensaries and nursing staff, agronomists for agricultural projects, schools and roads, could be funded by international aid agencies. What funders should understand is that the small projects are equally as important. There are so many possible improvements to life at the most basic level that would have a great impact on rural society generally, and the power of these women to improve their lives would be immense if they were given the support they need. The challenge for funders is to devise programmes that can reach the small groups and empower them to effect the changes that, by their success, would inspire others to effect similar change.■



Members of a peasant group planting tree seedlings

Photo by Leah Gordon

ADVOCATING THE ALTERNATIVE

In early July the Haiti Support Group organised the UK visit of the two co-ordinators from the Haitian Platform to Advocate for an Alternative Development (PAPDA). The platform is a coalition of progressive Haitian NGOs, labour unions and peasant groups. They are united in their belief that the structural adjustment programme demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank threatens to reverse Haiti's limited democratic gains.

Formed in late 1995, PAPDA works to inform Haitian public opinion about the effects of structural adjustment and the existence of viable alternatives for Haiti's economic development. It also attempts to internationalise the struggle of the Haitian people through developing links with solidarity organisations in the North and the South.

G-7 counter-summit

In June the leaders of PAPDA travelled to Lyon, France, to attend the counter-summit to that of the G7 nations. On their way back to Haiti they spent three days in the UK briefing British government officials, development aid organisations and journalists. They also addressed a meeting of the Haiti Support Group.

PAPDA's executive secretary, Camille Chalmers, is Professor of Economics at the State University of Haiti. Badly beaten by soldiers during the coup period, he was forced to leave Haiti and seek medical treatment in the US. There he became chief of staff for exiled President Aristide in Washington. In 1994 he resigned this post in protest when representatives of the Aristide government signed the international financial institutions' programme for structural adjustment.

The economic coup d'état

Noting that the first stages of the structural adjustment programme (SAP) began to be carried out in the early 1980s by the Duvalier dictatorship, Chalmers outlined the history of popular resistance to it since 1986. He situated the military coup d'état against Aristide firmly in the context of the



Poster calling for organisation and mobilisation to combat the 'death plan'. The IMF and World Bank feast on the soon-to-be privatised state-owned enterprises. Under the table the poor suffer illness, hunger and unemployment. (Produced by the popular organisation, Chandel, in May 1996)

struggle for a participatory democracy.

"The 1991 coup and the SAP are essentially about the same objective. One was to eliminate the involvement of the popular social classes in politics. The other is to shut them out with economic exclusion mechanisms. We call the SAP an economic coup d'état."

PAPDA argues that the SAP is based on a set of dogmas that are debatable in any circumstances and highly contentious in a poor, unstructured, and uncompetitive economy like that of Haiti.

Sweatshops or boat-people

In the neo-liberal model, the motor for growth in Haiti relies on the expansion of the light industrial export assembly sector. Chalmers revealed that "a recent draft of the World Bank development strategy for Haiti in one sentence outlines the options for the 70% of the population living as peasants: either they can find work in the towns or they can emigrate - sweatshops or boat-people. They have eliminated the entire peasant economy from their model."

The Preval government claims the application of the SAP is the only way to secure the promised loans, and that without this money the country cannot function. PAPDA contends that these loans will in-

crease Haiti's indebtedness without bringing broad-based economic development.

The alternative

The alternative proposed by PAPDA would base development on the growth of the internal market that could be achieved by State intervention to help peasant producers. An intrinsic part of this would be a comprehensive agrarian reform. If enough food was produced to satisfy the population's nutritional needs, one of the major causes of the country's balance of payments deficit - importing food - would be virtually eliminated. As well as advocating a development strategy based on the inclusion and involvement of the majority and their organisations, PAPDA points to the existence of alternative sources of finance.

"A recent improvement in tax collection increased income from 220m. gourdes a month to 270m. (15 gourdes equals US\$1), and could be improved still further. Then there is the Haitian diaspora that sends back an estimated US\$300m. a year. If this money was channelled through credible institutions there could be significant investment on a national level," said Chalmers. The development of tourism, and the promotion of the country's art and handicrafts could also contribute to Haiti's development.

While recognising the tremendous sense of disappointment and deception since the return of Aristide in 1994, Chalmers' assistant, Jonathan Pitts, pointed to positive signs. Whereas in the past popular mobilisation was based around the symbol of Aristide, now there is resistance around questions of economic policy. Popular organisations and members of the Haitian Parliament are resisting pressures to surrender to the SAP.

What you can do:

Write and ask your MP to ask the Minister for Overseas Development to take into account the objections of many Haitian MPs and organisations to the SAP. Mention that they want an informed national debate about Haiti's development strategy and do not want to be rushed into a development path that will not help the majority of Haitians. The UK is one of the World Bank's five most powerful shareholders and should be taking an interest in how the Bank's policy is affecting Haiti. Write to your MP at the House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. A sample letter is available from the Haiti Support Group.

Write to the World Bank and IMF directly, asking what steps are being taken to redesign the SAP in a way that respects the views and knowledge of Haitian organisations, and that will be beneficial for the majority of Haiti's people. Write to Huw Evans, UK Executive Director to the World Bank and IMF, 700 19th Street NW, Washington DC 20431, USA. A sample letter is available.

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