



Peasant farmers on their way to a rally in St Michel de l'Attalaye in the Artibonite department.

Photo by Leah Gordon

Farmers want to end food dependence

Haiti's peasant farmers are organising and taking action to try and bring an end to the country's dependence on food imports, and to avert the prospect of looming famine.

In recent months, meetings and demonstrations held by peasant farmer groups have been taking place across Haiti. The mobilisation is part of a fledgling political campaign to end the marginalisation of the rural population and to revamp the nation's neglected agricultural sector.

The movement flexed its political muscle on the national stage for the first time on 12 December when thousands of peasant farmers descended on the capital, Port-au-Prince, for a demonstration calling on the government to intervene to help them revive national agricultural production. Prospéry Raymond, the Haiti country representative of the British development NGO, Chris-

tian Aid, said the demonstration was "a very good way to show the authorities that the peasant organisations must be taken seriously".

Until recently largely self-sufficient in food production, declining yields and a growing population have left Haiti ever more dependent on imported food. The dangers of this reliance were starkly revealed at the beginning of 2008 when the country experienced sharp price rises for food imports. The poverty-stricken population suddenly found itself unable to afford to buy food staples such as rice, beans, and cooking oil.

In April, anti-hunger riots

The only way to definitively reduce the price of food items is by increasing national production

erupted in towns across the country, and the government was forced out of office. In an effort to stem the riots, President René Préval abandoned neo-liberal policy dogma by intervening to subsidise the price of imported rice for a six-month period. Then, in August and September, the country was hit by four tropical storms and hurricanes in the space of a few weeks. In all parts of the country, crops, livestock, and agricultural land were washed away.

Peasant organisers see the issues of environmental degradation and lack of support for the agricultural sector as closely linked. According to activists, the two primary aims of the mid-December demonstration were to get the state to prioritise environmental protection as part of a national development plan, and to force the government to take effective measures to re-launch national agricultural production.

The demonstration was called

by an alliance of 10 peasant organisations, including the national movements, Tèt Kole Ti Peyizan and the Mouvmman Peyizan Nasyonal Kongre Papay (MPNKP), as well as regional groups from the departments of the Grand'Anse, Nippes, the Central Plateau, and the South-East.

Despite an enormous exodus of people from the countryside to the towns in recent decades, some two-thirds of the population still depends on agriculture for a living. Yet no government has devoted any significant funds to revitalising the agricultural sector or restoring the environment.

The MPNKP's Edith Germain Remonvil said that the only way to definitively reduce the price of food items is by increasing national production. Remonvil pleaded with the new government, headed by Prime Minister, Michèle Pierre-Louis, to prioritise agriculture in the budget for the current year. ■

Backing the campaign Haitian food sovereignty

Following the drastic rise in the price of imported food in early 2008, the food riots in April, and the four storms that destroyed much of the country's productive agricultural capacity in August and September, the country's progressive civil society organisations have redoubled their campaign for food sovereignty. The Haiti Support Group is backing this campaign by putting international organisations on the spot as to what they are doing to help Haitian farmers to increase national food production.

In the context of high food prices and food shortages in Haiti, the aim is to get international organisations to make a significant shift away from relief – responding to widespread malnutrition, hunger, and famine by distributing imported food – and instead to do more to help Haitian farmers to grow more and cheaper food for domestic consumption.

The HSG is pleased to report that, according to information from sources in Haiti, both the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) and the international NGO, CARE, have recently con-



Prime Minister Michèle Pierre-Louis – will her government make a break with the past and give real support to Haiti's farmers?

tacted a network of rice producers' cooperatives in the Artibonite department with a view to purchasing their produce. The HSG had earlier written to both organisations to inform them that, contrary to news reports stating that the country's agricultural sector had been more or less wiped out by the summer hurricanes and flooding, some farmers' cooperatives had surplus rice and beans in stock and for sale, and could provide guaranteed harvests in the months ahead.

According to progressive organisations in Haiti, far from depriving Haitians of food, if international organisations source locally-grown food instead of paying vast amounts to import food from abroad it would greatly benefit the country's agricultural sector. This in turn would benefit the two-thirds of the population which derives its livelihood from agriculture. Food surpluses that would not otherwise have arrived at local markets or, if they did, would have to compete with cheaper imported food, would be sold. With the proceeds from these guaranteed sales, farmers' co-



UN helicopter delivering World Food Programme rice in Gonaïves, September 2008.

operatives could invest in seeds, fertilisers, tools, and irrigation systems, in order to increase the size of future harvests. Over time, Haiti would increase the amount of food it produces, and produce it at a cheaper price. The dependence on food imports would decrease.

Background

In July 2008 the HSG wrote to the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) to ask what it was doing to help Haitian farmers in the context of the massive increase in the cost of imported food in Haiti. The letter referred to the WFP's Haiti programme entitled "Food Assistance for the Relief and Protection of Vulnerable Groups Exposed to Food Insecurity". The total budget for this programme is US\$123.9m, of which the food would cost US\$69m, external transport US\$15.2m, and landside transport, storage and handling US\$14.5m. The HSG asked how much of the US\$69m would be spent on buying food produced in Haiti, and how much on importing food from abroad. It also questioned the wisdom of allocating US\$15.2m to the transportation of

imported food to Haiti – a staggering 22% of the entire budget! – and asked if it wouldn't be better to spend some of this amount on helping Haitian farmers to produce more food.

The WFP is the United Nations' "frontline agency in the fight against global hunger" and its stated objectives are to a) save lives in refugee crises and other emergencies, b) improve nutrition and quality of life of world's most vulnerable people at critical times in their lives, and c) enable development by helping people build assets that benefit them directly, and promoting the self-reliance of poor people and communities. The HSG believes that the WFP in Haiti concentrates on objectives a) and b), and does little to achieve objective c).

The WFP has been operating in Haiti since 1969! Year after year, over four decades, the focus of the main part of its activities in Haiti has been on providing food to hungry people. This approach means there is no solution to the problem, no victories in the 'fight against hunger'. As a result, people in Haiti have remained hungry, and the WFP has continued to

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distribute (imported) food to feed them.

The WFP acknowledged receipt of the letter, but a promised reply never materialised. Research into WFP documentation indicates that it hardly sources any food from local producers in Haiti. Remarks by WFP executive director, Josette Sheeran, suggest that the WFP's position on sourcing food from producers in Haiti can be paraphrased as: "We don't want to buy food produced in Haiti because that would deprive Haitians of the opportunity to buy food at their local market." While this sounds like a good answer, it however ignores the fact that one of the main problems facing Haitian farmers is finding buyers for their harvests. Partly it's a question of logistics – because of the rudimentary transport system in Haiti, actually moving food produce from rural areas to the urban markets is a struggle. But another important factor is that over recent decades Haiti's private sector has specialised in developing the import business, especially the import of food. These food import businesses have thrived since the lowering and elimination of import tariffs – as demanded by the international finance institutions – in the mid-1990s. Haiti has been flooded with cheap food imports, and Haitian farmers have found it ever more difficult to find buyers for their produce.

In September 2008, the HSG wrote to Geoffrey Dennis, chief executive of CARE International UK, commending the organisation for advocating a "radical overhaul of the international aid system's approach to emergencies". The letter stated that the HSG is very much in agreement with the recommendation "to end monetised food aid in recognition that the distribution of imported food aid is inefficient and can compete with poor farmers' crops and undermines their livelihoods". As CARE is one of the main partners of the WFP in the distribution of food in Haiti, the HSG asked if CARE in Haiti was taking into account the organisation's own recommendations, and whether it was distributing food that was imported or sourced locally?

CARE officials in Haiti responded that the organisation was obliged to distribute imported food because there was no locally-produced food available. The HSG replied with contact details of rice and bean farmers' cooperatives, and the details of the amounts of rice and beans they could supply. ■



Peasant farmers working on a hillside near Vallue in southern Haiti. Photo by Leah Gordon

Agencies call for more support for Haitian farmers

In November 2008, a platform of British development agencies and solidarity organisations wrote to the United Nations to express its concern about the poor international response to the joint UN/Government of Haiti Flash Appeal to help Haiti recover from the devastating series of hurricanes that hit the country in August and September.

In a letter to John Holmes, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and Emergency Relief Coordinator, the British Haiti Advocacy Platform noted that, as of 21 November 2008, only 33% of the total appeal amount of US\$108m had been raised. (The Flash Appeal was launched on 9 September.)

More worrying still for the Platform was the very poor response to the part of the Flash Appeal concerning the rehabilitation of Haiti's vital agricultural sector. An allocation of US\$10.5m had been requested by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation to:

- help rebuild the livelihoods of the farmers most affected by natural disasters,
- rehabilitate the irrigation network in the main areas affected by flooding, and
- help prevent the spread of disease among surviving livestock.

In the letter to the UN's John Holmes, the Platform deplored the fact that only US\$828,000 – just 8% of the amount originally requested for agriculture – had been provided.

The letter stated: "If Haiti is to avoid the prospect of widespread famine in the near future, there needs to be a major effort to support Haitian farmers so that they can grow the crops and rear the animals to provide food for the population."

It continued: "The fact that the response to the agriculture section of the Flash Appeal has been so disappointing suggests that once again that the international aid machine remains wedded to the short-term and has scant regard for lasting solutions to Haiti's problems."

The Platform appealed to John Holmes to raise the issue of international donor support for Haitian farmers as a matter of the highest priority.

Anne McConnell, co-ordinator of the British Haiti Advocacy Platform, said, "While it is great that the Flash Appeal recognized the importance of repairing the damage to the agricultural sector, these good intentions are rendered meaningless if the rich donor nations decline to support this part of the Appeal."

The Haiti Support Group is a member of the Platform, and its director, Charles Arthur, added, "Six or nine months from now, when the images of starving Haitian children are broadcast on North American and European television, people will ask how the situation in Haiti was allowed to get so bad. If Haitian farmers don't get help, we are looking at the strong possibility of a terrible famine."

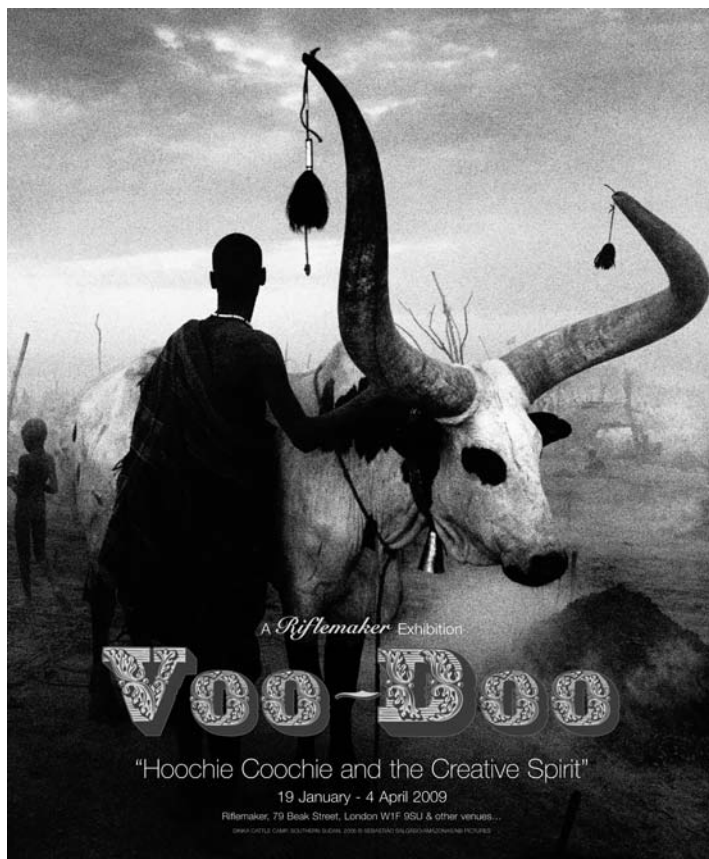
Update: 27 January 2009

John Holmes didn't reply but perhaps he did take the message on board: On 18 December, a revised UN Flash Appeal for Haiti was launched, with the amount called for increased from US\$108m to US\$127m. The original amount requested for agriculture (US\$10.5m) was increased by US\$1m. More importantly, the amount donated to the agriculture section has increased from US\$828,000 to US\$1,450,610 (the new allocation comes from France), and Canada has made a so far uncommitted pledge of US\$403,000 for rebuilding the irrigation network. ■

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Exhibition

VOO-DOO 'Hoochie Coochie and the Creative Spirit'



Reviewed by Leah Gordon

The first exhibit visitors see at the 'Voo-Doo' exhibition at the Riflemaker Gallery is a 1960s modernist map of the hubs of West African airlines which mirror the former slave ports. To its left hangs Michelle Constantine's textile piece, "Africa's Fault" (the unintentional spread of Vodou) where small bows resembling AIDS ribbons flow from Africa to America. The embedded information inherent in these two pieces provides the historical context within which the curator, Tot Taylor, has played quite gleefully with the term 'Voodoo'.

The show is eclectic in its nature and, whilst being expansive in its conception of the word 'Voo-Doo', avoids the pitfalls of out-and-out kitsch while doffing its feathered cap to it. The exhibition explores the multi-faceted notions thrown up by the word, as if 'Voo-Doo' is a pebble

thrown into a lake, and this show is a snapshot of the ripples. Riflemaker has explored artistic possession as a tool of creation, as with the art of William Burroughs, animism within contemporary art practice with the work of Alice Anderson, and the primitive in modernism. In relation to the latter there is a genius juxtaposition of a screening of Pina Bausch's version of the ballet, 'Rites of Spring', by Stravinsky, next to Maya Deren's seminal film-essay on Haitian Vodou, 'The Divine Horseman'.

The Riflemaker Gallery is renowned amongst London galleries for eschewing the modernist trope of the 'white cube' exhibition space, and retains the muted wooden panels of the original 16th century townhouse in which its based. The 'Voo-Doo' show is located on three floors of the building, and the most powerful spaces are the top floor and the ground floor stairwell. The top floor room is dimly lit with net

"The show evokes some powerful spirits"

curtains covering the window wall giving it the ambiance of a 'séance on a wet afternoon'. Here Riflemaker has housed a powerful collection of doll-like sculptures including Adrian Di Duca's 'Corpus Christi', consisting of two child figurines dressed in confirmation outfits, Alice Anderson's wax efigy of herself lying in a perspex coffin, some pieces by Haiti's Grand Rue artists, and Maurizio Anzeri's 'Late at Night', a tall imposing figure constructed from shanks of hair. In the corner, a Rachmaninov vinyl LP plays on an old Dansette.

The show evokes some powerful spirits and even those in search of an authentic Haitian Vodou experience should not be dismayed, but delighted, as the exhibition reflects the geographic and cultural flux, and the ongoing transposition and transgression of the ancestral spirits.

At Riflemaker Gallery, 79 Beak Street, London W1, from 19 January to 4 April 2009

● More info: www.riflemaker.org