



Stony Ground: Haitian farmers detail their problems. “Frankly, successive governments have waged war on peasant agriculture as if it was some sort of threat rather than the basis of the nation’s survival.”

Photo: Elizabeth Wheelan, Partners in Health (PIH)

Disastrous Food Policy Bites Hands that Feed

Haiti’s Hunger Games

One *mamit* (5.75lb tin) of rice? 150 Haitian Gourdes (about £2.24 or \$3.57), up 50% since July. Corn meal? At 100 Gourdes a *mamit*, that has doubled in the past year. Beans? Well, they are only 210 Gourdes, a mere 40% increase.

It is a measure of the scale of the food price crisis that Haitians are now using the word *goudougoudou* – their imitation of the sound of ground rumbling in the 2010 earthquake – to denote hunger pains. Soaring food prices mean the hungriest country in the Americas is getting hungrier.

The most immediate cause is the impact of Hurricane Isaac,

which devastated crops across Haiti in late August. Shortages quickly made their impact felt in markets and shops where the poor, who include many small farmers, can spend up to 75% of their minimal income on basic foodstuffs even at ‘normal’ prices.

Isaac followed a drought in April and May, ensuring a poor harvest for 2011-12. Even before the hurricane, total cereal yields were expected to be down by 7% to 607,200 tonnes: rice 15% lower at 120,300 tonnes, with the root vegetable crop projected to fall 6% to 419,000 tonnes.

The local food crisis is mirrored by an international one. The US-

farm belt’s worst harvest in 50 years is now sending wheat, maize and soya prices soaring. A similar food price spike in 2008, spawned riots across the globe, not least in Haiti. “*Goudougoudou* Demands Change,” warns the graffiti now appearing on the cement block walls of Port-au-Prince.

As ever, Haitians are right on target in directing their anger at their political leaders. In the past 30 years, it is the disastrous agricultural policy of the *klas politik* rather than the tireless efforts of Haiti’s peasants that has made the country a poster boy for food dependency and thus price vulnerability.

The technical term is ‘food in-

security’ and Haiti, considered very food secure just 30 years ago, now has the third worst level of hunger in the world, according to the current Global Hunger Index (GHI). Haiti’s status is considered “extremely alarming,” with 57% of the population undernourished and 18.9% of children under 5 underweight, the key factor in a mortality rate of 16.5% amongst this group.

How and why did this happen?

First, there has been a chronic lack of investment in farming in Haiti. Agriculture, despite long-term decline, has actually been a remarkably stable economic base,

continued on page 2 ►

Attaining Proper Food Security Means Demanding Effective Food S

A Real Repons Peyizan –The

Small is not only beautiful, it is bountiful. Whilst there is no one answer to the food crisis, there is growing consensus that the biggest single solution to the need for increased production in the hungriest countries are the farmers who have been most ignored, despised and even vilified to date: the smallest.

Haiti's small farmers' should be its biggest asset. But that requires a complete reversal of the thinking – or lack of it – that has made Haiti one of the three least food secure nations on earth: namely that food imports, meaning food dependency, ensures food security, and that food sovereignty, the right and need to produce at home, is irrelevant.

Given the pervasive myths about food pro-

duction it comes as a shock that small farmers are actually more efficient than their bigger cousins. In fact, the smaller the farm the greater the yield per unit of land, a phenomenon first documented by Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen in India and confirmed by numerous studies elsewhere since.

Small farmers' very survival usually depends on maximizing yields from minimal acreage. To do so, they use more labour per hectare, often just themselves or family members, meaning it is higher quality. More labour usually means more investment in improvements – terracing or basic irrigation for instance – and makes possible the cultivation of several crops simultaneously, such as planting beans to climb maize stalks.

Yet recent research has also shown how much more small farmers in places like Haiti could produce. In March 2011, the UN published a report documenting how small farmers had doubled food production using agroecological methods requiring nothing more than a vigorous national commitment to comprehensive training.

Through an extensive review of scientific literature, the UN report demonstrates that agroecology – broadly the application of ecological science to agricultural systems – yields better small-farm results wherever and whenever it is introduced. “States can and must achieve a re-orientation of their agricultural systems,” the report from the UN Human Rights Council's Special Rapporteur on the right to food insists.

Agroecology projects in 20 countries in Africa have shown an average increase in yields of 116% within 3-10 years. Malawi, which has embraced agroecology and abandoned the sort of subsidized chemical fertilizer program now being copied by Haiti, has shown a doubling of maize yields to 2-3 tonnes per hectare.

A serious national programme to train Haitian farmers in such techniques is not only logical, it is appropriate. The intensive labour required is already a key feature of small farms in Haiti, whose farmers cannot afford expensive inputs such as fertilizer, pesticides or imported seed. Most Haitian farmers are, in agricultural parlance, already organic, if not agroecological, by default.

An agroecology focus would meet all the key aims foreign donors have set for development in Haiti, namely boosting employment, restoring the environment and decentralizing growth.

Threshing rice in the Artibonite River basin, where production has been devastated by cheap, subsidised imports from the United States. While Haitian rice import tariffs were slashed to just 3% in 1995 to open up the market, Washington's soaring subsidies to its rice farmers – \$400m by 2010 – have consolidated it, with sales to Haiti worth nearly \$270m last year.



Photo: Ronald de Hommel

► from page 1

never accounting for less than 25% of GDP and, just as crucially, employing more than 50% of the working population in Haiti. Yet typically, in 2012, the sector has been allocated a mere 6% of the national budget.

Foreign development aid spending has been even worse, with agriculture getting a miserable 2.5% of total foreign assistance in the five years ending 2005, despite farming being, in the World Bank's words, “by far the most important social and economic activity in Haiti.”

Secondly, the ruthless slashing of tariffs on foodstuffs have left Haitian farmers cruelly exposed to cheap, often subsidized, imports. With import tariffs in Haiti just 3%, compared to 20% in the Dominican Republic and an average of 26% in the Caribbean as a whole, imports of rice, for example, have soared from 16,000 metric tonnes in 1980 to 467,000 in 2010 (at a

cost of \$267m), decimating domestic production. Rice is hardly exceptional. Maize, chicken, pork, and sugar production in Haiti have all fallen precipitously in the past 20 years, crushed by imports.

Waging War on Peasants

“We have to get away from the idea that what has happened in Haiti has been the result of benign neglect,” says Chenet Jean-Baptiste, head of ITECA, one of the country's most effective peasant organizations. “Frankly, successive Haitian governments have waged war on peasant agriculture as if it was some sort of threat rather than the basis of the nation's survival.”

Chenet's charge sheet starts with the USAID-sponsored Kreyòl pig eradication programme of the early 1980s, a response to the threat of African swine fever to the US hog industry. In culling virtually the entire indigenous pig population, the slaughter probably constituted the worst single episode of de-capital-

isation in rural Haiti since independence.

Next came the food import tariff reductions: from 150% to 57% in one step in 1986, followed by another overnight drop from 50% to 3% in 1995. Within a few years, a country that had produced more than 80% of the rice it consumed, found itself importing more than 80% of its needs. One of the world's largest and oldest sugar producers effectively ceased production.

Juxtaposed with what was actually done was a complete failure to do what needed to be done, with land redistribution, titling and securitisation of tenure the key. A limited land reform effort in 1995 was soon abandoned, even though with perhaps as much as 10% of Haiti's arable land owned by the state, there was actually little need to challenge the country's *grandon* land-owning class – successive governments' main fear – by buying and redistributing their landholdings.

With so little arable land secure in the hands of those who actually farm it, whether as tenants, owners or sharecroppers, farmers have little incentive to make productive improvements, whilst the environmental degradation for which Haiti has become a byword, has continued apace. Deforestation, as clearance for subsistence farming or for charcoal production, has today left just 2% of the landmass of Haiti with forest cover.

Meanwhile, largely as a result of the loss of trees and vegetation, Haiti loses an estimated 37 million tonnes of topsoil, the equivalent of 12,000 hectares of arable land, a year. Watersheds and irrigation systems remain unrepaired or unmanaged, as the country's most precious resource, topsoil, is washed away to discolour the turquoise sea by Haiti's second most precious resource, rainfall.

The absence of any loan system in rural Haiti means that, even if

The View from the Ground

There is no industry on earth more labour intensive than small-scale agriculture; nothing gives the local population more of a stake in the restoration and preservation of their environment.

Meantime, what could decentralize labour, services and production more completely from Port-au-Prince than agriculture? What could stimulate rural economies and ancillary industries more than the storage, processing, transportation and local sale of more grain, fruit and vegetables?

But the logic runs even deeper than that. Poverty alleviation is the declared number one goal of foreign donors. The eight UN Millennium Development Goals for 2015, which include halving the proportion of the global population going hungry, are built around it.

Poverty is at its worst in Haiti in rural areas: nearly 90% of the 55% of Haitians who live in the countryside are poor. Two-thirds of those living in rural areas – some 33% of the total Haitian population – are considered extremely poor, living on incomes of less than the equivalent of \$1 a day.

Numerous programmes have demonstrated that the quickest, most effective and most sustainable way to reduce poverty is to invest heavily in small-scale agriculture. The World Bank asserts that growth in agriculture is more than twice as effective at reducing poverty as growth in any other sector. Better still, investment in agriculture is the most effective way to reduce extreme poverty. It is, after all, in the countryside that such poverty is concentrated.

Importing food, however cheap, does not ensure it will be available or affordable to those



Counting the cost of hunger in a Haitian market where the price of rice has risen 50% in three months and corn meal 100% in the past year. Haiti now has the third worst level of hunger in the world.

Photo: Ronald de Hommel

who need it most – in fact, by competing with or even crushing domestic production, imports, which are often subsidized by foreign governments, tend to do the opposite.

Enabling and encouraging more Haitians to produce more of their food by giving them the means – the land, the tools, and the training – ensures more of them will eat more regularly, whether they are themselves farmers or not.

The UN report, reinforced by other studies, has given global impetus to what is known as the food sovereignty movement, which extends “the right to food” concept beyond food security to the means by which such security is achieved, namely the right of nations to define their own food production systems.

The more progressive peasant-based civil society organisations (CSOs) in Haiti have been advocating such an approach for decades as the most productive, practical, poverty-reducing solution. Their stance is based on years of real experience in counteracting the devastating effect of what has passed for Haitian agricultural policy to date.

“There can be no real food security, without food sovereignty,” says Doudou Pierre, the Haitian representative of *Via Campesina*, the global campaign for food sovereignty. “The groups we work with are already implementing the solution by putting the means in the hands of small farmers locally. The government needs to listen, learn and scale up what we know works.” ■

available, credit can cost small farmers 50% a month. We are not talking about funds to buy tractors or machinery here, but the absence of the sort of micro-loans needed to buy hoes, seeds, transport or any of the most basic agricultural extension services.

In Haiti, the widespread lack of basic storage, drying and processing facilities, distribution or transport services means that at any one time or place, 20-40% of harvests are lost before reaching market. “Frankly, the past thirty years has been a holocaust, with the Haitian peasantry and their communities the victims,” concludes Chenet Jean-Baptiste.

Rural Reality: Blame the Victims

Today, more than one million Haitians farm a patchwork of tiny plots known as *mouchwa* (handkerchiefs) that average less than one-third of an acre in size, with individuals often occupying three or more non-adjacent plots each.

Burdened with a land pattern that appears fractured beyond all practical use, without support and, indeed, actively undermined, it is an incredible feat of perseverance that Haiti’s small farmers continue to plant, cultivate, harvest, process, store, transport and sell most of the country’s varied staple food.

While external consultants decry the custom that has led to the endless sub-division of plots of land between all heirs equally, few but those who work with Haitian peasants appreciate its real meaning: a commitment to the land, a commitment to farming, a commitment to sufficiency and stability that the country should cherish and cultivate.

The failure to work with such producers, addressing their problems, rather than blaming them and trying to eliminate their economic base, is a telling metaphor for Haiti, past and present. In essence, the small-farm sector’s treatment crystallizes the disdain with which

the rural peasantry, *moun andeyò* – the world beyond Port-au-Prince – has always been held by those in power.

As such, agriculture’s status is just the most extreme example of the national exclusion of the poor. Nowhere are there more poor people in Haiti than in the countryside; nowhere is there less political or even practical consideration of their needs. Understandably, given the conditions, rebellion has historically come from the provinces, where small farmers live: repression, taxation, exploitation rather than consultation or negotiation was always Port-au-Prince’s first-choice response.

In more recent decades, agricultural policy, such as it is, has been subordinated to an unholy alliance of international and national actors. The former are the foreign governments/donors, invariably seeking to “open up” Haitian markets for western business, agro-industrial corporations in this case; the latter

are the Haitian business elite of the country’s urban centres, whose economies they monopolize.

As migration to the cities, spurred by the “war” on the peasantry, has soared, the profitability of monopoly import licenses for foreign foodstuffs, and, downstream, their distribution and sales, has grown accordingly. “There are very powerful interests making us dependent on foreign food imports, both here and abroad,” says Camille Chalmers of PAPDA, the Platform for Alternative Development. “Increasingly Haitians consume in US dollars but earn in gourdes. It’s a recipe for the disaster we now live.”

The exchange rate relationship serves to magnify international food price spikes, amplifying Haiti’s hunger and malnutrition. Many Haitians are effectively starved by such a food policy as they strive to meet prices that are the profits of those who benefit both at home and abroad.

continued on back page ►

Published by the Haiti Support Group, 49 Stanger Road, London SE25 5LD

Phone: 0208 676 1347

Email: info@haitisupportgroup.org

Website: www.haitisupportgroup.org

Design: Smith+Bell (www.smithplusbell.com)

Main contributor: Phillip Wearne

Editors: Anne McConnell & Andy Taylor

► from page 3

For those civil society organizations (CSOs) working with peasants and small farmers, the consequences of such policies have been obvious for years. What has changed since April 2008, when tens of thousands of Haitians took to the streets to secure the resignation of Prime Minister Jacques-Edouard Alexis, is that Haitian leaders and their international funders claim to have got the message too.

President René Prével boosted spending on agriculture to 6% (2009-10), then 9% (2010-11) of the national budget. The latter, although only half what even the World Bank now considers appropriate in the wake of its own 2008 *mea culpa* over the neglect of support for agriculture in the developing world, was, inevitably, never realized. Government revenue, along with policy, collapsed in the wake of the earthquake.

Indeed, the earthquake spawned another huge de-capitalisation of the agricultural sector. What the quake itself did not destroy, a massive reverse migration to the countryside, imported foreign food aid, and a post-earthquake tsunami of funding that again largely ignored agriculture, did.

Taking Out the Food Chain

Ultimately it was the lunacy of Haitian agricultural policy and practice that forced those with the biggest bully-pulpits to take notice. Leading the way in 2010 was Bill Clinton, UN Special Envoy to Haiti and co-chair of the Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission (IHRC).

Testifying to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2010, Clinton admitted that forcing Haiti to virtually eliminate food import tariffs had been a disaster. In doing so, he noted the blatant transfer of wealth from Haitian farmers to those in his home state, from which much of Haiti's rice imports originate.

"It may have been good for some of my farmers in Arkansas, but it ... was a mistake ..." he asserted. "I had to live with the consequences of the lost capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people because of what I did, nobody else."

Three weeks later in New York, Clinton broadened his critique to the neo-liberal economics that underpinned the move. Such policies had "failed everywhere they have been tried," he told reporters, going on to refute the "competitive advantage" doctrine, that Haitians should, in the globalised economy, buy cheap food from industrial-scale producers and sell their cheap labour to assembly plant factories to pay for that same food.

"You just can't take the food chain out of production ... and go straight to the industrial era ... it undermines a lot of the

culture, the fabric of life, the sense of self-determination," he concluded. "We should have continued to ... help them be self-sufficient in agriculture. And that's a lot of what we're doing now."

Except, taking "the food chain out of production" is exactly what Bill Clinton and others did, while "helping them be self-sufficient in agriculture" is not what he or his policy acolytes are advocating or advancing now.

There has been no move to raise tariffs, or indeed any statement from Clinton to support one. When the issue was raised with Tom Adams, the US State Department's Special Coordinator for Haiti, he argued that higher tariffs would now mean Haitians going hungry. Such logic seems to amount to making a growing food dependency the sole definition of food security.

Settled comfortably in the driver's seat of the IHRC in 2010-11, Bill Clinton did nothing to direct even a fraction of the development aid that flowed into Haiti post-earthquake to agriculture. This, in spite of the fact that by May 2010 it was the one sector of the Haitian economy that had a comprehensive national investment plan awaiting funding, the principal product of the Prével government's efforts to boost agriculture post 2008.

Indeed, Bill Clinton did exactly the opposite, pushing through IHRC approval of a massive \$178m assembly plant factory complex in the Caracol Valley on some of the richest agricultural land in northern Haiti with unseemly haste. "We grew a lot of plantains, beans, corn and manioc here. That's how our families survive and raise their children. It's like our Treasury," said one distraught, dispossessed and uncompensated local farmer, Pierre Renel.

In the Caracol valley, three hundred farmers lost their land and livelihoods. Haiti lost yet more food production, whilst the leading financier of the project, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), lost all credibility when it was revealed it had not even bothered to do the environmental impact assessment required by its own funding protocols.

Agriculture = Agribusiness

The Martelly government, knowing, quite literally, where its corn comes from, has followed its funders' lead, making little mention of basic food production or family farms. This, despite the President winning election with a party named *Repons Peyizan* (Peasants' Response), with a bull, perhaps the ultimate small-farmer aspiration, as its symbol.

The government's agricultural vision seems overwhelmingly export-oriented, focusing on coffee, cocoa, mangoes and vetiver. It stresses co-operation with multinationals such as Coca-Cola in

production of a new "Mango-Tango" soda or the need to supply Starbucks with specialist Haitian coffee. The emphasis is large, localized, distinct, foreign-investor-led projects, rather than a small-farmer-oriented, departmental and national, agricultural support programme.

While some of these new schemes may benefit family farmers and the internal market – both mangoes and coffee are grown on small plots as well as larger commercial holdings – small farmers are, at best, marginal to the plans. The clear emphasis is getting Haiti's agricultural exports up, rather than Haitian hunger down.

"We're changing the dynamics of how we do agriculture in Haiti," Luiz Almeida of the IDB boasted to one journalist as recently as August, adding: "When I say agriculture, I say agribusiness." As such, Haiti's small food producers could face a slew of new threats: contract farming to produce high-value vegetables for export; biofuels, such as jatropha, which many foreign experts believe will thrive in Haiti, or even GMO seeds and the agro-industrial corporate dependence they entail.

It is exactly the sort of model that leads to even greater malnutrition and poverty in the midst of plantations of plenty, as in so much of the Americas, the growing threat of which has spawned Oxfam's GROW campaign, a global, on-going, demand for food justice due to launch in Haiti next year.

"The global food system is broken," Oxfam declares, citing flat-lining yields, climate change and weather vulnerability, unfair trade, land grabs, food price spikes, and failing markets as interconnected symptoms of failure, linked by "the dominance of a few powerful governments and companies."

Few countries yield more evidence of the combined effects of such forces as Haiti. As such, local CSOs are currently discussing how to feed into Oxfam's global advocacy effort abroad, while developing their own campaign to force the Haitian government to launch a co-ordinated, cohesive and co-operative commitment to small farmers at home. Life and death in the Haitian hunger games could depend on it.

- For more on Haitian Agriculture HSG recommends two Oxfam Briefing Papers – *Planting Now, Second Edition: Revitalizing Agriculture for Reconstruction and Development in Haiti (October 2012)* and *Planting Now: Agricultural Challenges and Opportunities for Haiti's Reconstruction (October 2010)* at www.oxfam.org
- To learn more and get involved in the GROW food justice campaign visit: www.oxfam.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/our-campaigns/grow