Rain brought by Hurricane George began to fall on the treeless mountainsides of Haiti on September 22. That night, the small town of Fonds Verrettes in the south-east was wiped off the face of the earth by a seven-foot wave of flood water, mud and debris. Buildings were demolished, and over a hundred residents were swept away and killed.

Further north, the absence of forest cover, which could have absorbed some of George's torrential rain, spelled disaster for the farmers of the Arribonite plain. The mounting water level in the Pétrelégne threatened to burst the hydro-electric dam, and engineers opened the emergency flood gates. A terrestrial tidal wave was unleashed, and, fed by storm run-off, it roared down the Arribonite valley towards the sea. By the time it reached the plain, the flood was chest-high, and livestock, crops, and frail wattle-and-daub houses were washed away. A resident of Pont Sondé told the New York Times, "The whole town was like an ocean."

All across the centre of the country, the 20 inches of rain that fell as George passed across Haiti, brought death and misery to low-lying areas and to shantytowns built on the side of ravines and alongside drainage canals. The capital's pitiful slum area of Sitey Soley, home to nearly half a million unfortunate, was submerged when several feet of muddy water overflowed from open sewers. The official death toll stands at around 170, but eyewitnesses believe it to be much higher.

The country faces a desperate aftermath. More than 177,000 people are homeless, and damage is estimated at US$200 million. Cases of typhoid caused by contaminated water have already been reported, and there is an increased danger of dengue fever, a disease spread by mosquitoes which thrive in wet conditions. Disaster relief has been announced - the US is donating drinking water, food, blankets and clothing, Cuba will send doctors, France has sent specialists to help with water purification, and aid money has been granted by Germany, Taiwan, and the UN.

This assistance will provide temporary relief, but most worrying of all is the longer term damage caused to Haitian food production. During the heavy rain, mud-slides and floods, at least 36,000 cattle drowned, the entire rice crop in the main rice-growing area, the Arribonite, was lost, seeds for the next harvest got wet and will rot, and all the country's plantain and banana plantations were destroyed.

A few days after the hurricane, the weekly newspaper, Haiti en Marche, ran an editorial entitled, "Towards an acute food shortage, and still higher prices". It pointed out that Haiti will neither be able to feed itself from domestic production, nor by imports from the Dominican Republic where 90% of the harvest was also destroyed by George. "For the moment, there is only one alternative: to import everything from Miami...The cargo shippers will raise their prices through the roof. That is what's called the law of supply and demand!"

*see Lambi Fund of Haiti on back page
A woman finds the body of her husband, murdered by police in Port-au-Prince. The killers are still unpunished. Photo by Leah Gordon

PAPDA update

In September, members of the Haiti Support Group met in Port-au-Prince with Camille Chalmas, the executive secretary of the Haitian Platform to Advocate for Alternative Development (PAPDA) who stopped in London, en route from Brussels to Haiti. The PAPDA is a coalition of grassroots organisations, non-governmental organisations, and popular education networks, formed in 1995, to stimulate debate about the economic situation and to coordinate alternative proposals for economic development. The PAPDA also works to internationalise the struggle of the Haitian people through contact with progressive organisations from abroad. In this context, Camille Chalmas visited the UK as the guest of the Haiti Support Group in 1996.

Camille summarised the situation in Haiti as a "spiraling failure and despair", commenting that the population was "powerless as it witnessed the collapse of its standard of living at the same time as the fall of its dreams of participatory democracy."

Demonstrations and rallies were staged in Port-au-Prince and the Antillas to encourage people to participate in the development of the campaign. As the international financial institutions lend Haiti more and more in return for the application of a structural adjustment programme, the PAPDA has joined the international Jubilee 2000 campaign launched by the World Bank and other international organisations to petition for the cancellation of unpayable debts owed by the most impoverished nations.

Haiti has recently been admitted to the regional body, Caricom (previously composed of just the English-speaking Caribbean nations, but now also including Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Membership raises crucial questions about Haiti's economic development, at least, the issue of import tariffs. Camille pointed out that while the structural adjustment programme required Haiti to eliminate most of its import tariffs and massively reduce others, Caricom has a region-wide tariff set at 20%. The US is believed to want Caricom to cut or eliminate its tariffs, jeopardising the local food production to benefit of the US which enjoys a food surplus.

The situation in Haiti is dire and that local residents are falling ill. Haitian organisations joined with international environmental groups, such as Greenpeace, in an effort to get the US returned to the US.

In June, the PAPDA, together with COPPEPA and the US-based Multinational Resource Centre, organised a three-day colloquium in Port-au-Prince on "Globalisation and Environmental Justice" over 60 national and international organisations took part, and called on the US government to press the United Nations to take responsibility for the removal of the ash. Camille reported that it was recently announced that over half the cost of the removal and transport of the ash back to the US will be met by the city of Philadelphia and the US government responsible for the original shipment. If (and this is a big "if") the Haitian government comes up with the remainder of the money, then the ash will be removed.

Development alternatives

The PAPDA is also currently engaged in the preparation of an alternative economic strategy that will, unlike that of the international financial institutions, put the interests of the Haitian people at the heart of development. The tasks of consultation with popular organisations and the search for the development of the strategy are closely linked.
Dear Friend of Haiti,

Although media coverage of Hurricane George’s toll in Haiti has been scant, huge portions of the country are buried in three feet of mud. Eighty-five percent of the annual crop is ruined, threatening epidemic starvation. Entire villages have been displaced. Every river in the country has flooded.

Members of popular organizations file into our office to share ruinous news. Field visits, where roads still allow access, have confirmed the worst for our current projects. Some of these horror stories follow:

In the Ayiti Valley, home to 32 Lambi Fund projects, grain depots, processing mills, and food crops have been destroyed. Peasants are without food or income sources. Fields are covered with water and mud.

In the South, where the Lambi Fund supports three projects, high winds and rain have destroyed entire communities. Roads have completely washed away, making passage in or out of the zones impossible by vehicle and treacherous by foot.

In the Western region, home to eight projects, the River Grise swelled so much that it took survivors two days to empty their homes of mud. Irrigation ditches, critical to peasant survival, were wiped out within hours of the downpour.

Infrastructure that the Lambi Fund provided (mobile water pumps, grain mills, and tilling machines) has suffered extensive damage. Grain that was the next season’s investment for hundreds of farmers will rot from wet conditions. Plans for projects which grassroots groups were enthusiastically ready to launch have suffered severe setbacks.

What remains are the organising and technical skills which the Lambi Fund has helped provide to the people.

However, years of community building efforts are now destroyed. Worse, the devastation of peasant crops and food processing systems makes cultivators and market women extremely vulnerable to competition from food imports, in lieu of revitalising Haiti’s indigenous resources.

What can you do to respond to this disaster?

While large international organisations will likely respond with short-term aid like food and clothing, our staff are already meeting with local organisations and leaders to plan and initiate a response for the medium and long-term. After the aid agencies have moved on to the next disaster, the Lambi Fund, along with community organisations, will be building infrastructure and productive capacity to enable self-sufficiency.

Communities will need help with:
- clear fields and re-digging irrigation ditches;
- recapitalising seed banks;
- expanding loan funds to support short-term income generation alternatives;
- reconstructing community centres;
- restocking community stores and agricultural tool and credit banks;
- overhauling and replacing damaged farming and processing equipment;
- replanting fruit trees and controlling erosion.

“We can’t sit with our arms crossed” says Josette Perard, the Lambi Fund’s Haiti Director. Our mission has been to rebuild Haiti on terms defined and designed by the Haitian people. We were slowly accomplishing this goal on grassroots levels before Hurricane George. We must continue, now more than ever.

You can help Haitians respond to this disaster on their own terms.

An eswpa (in hope),
M. Catherine Maternowska, PhD
Executive Director

The Lambi Fund of Haiti

People in Britain sometimes ask how they can help people in Haiti directly. As Haitians reel from the effects of Hurricane George, the Haiti Support Group takes the opportunity to introduce the Lambi Fund of Haiti, a non-governmental organisation founded in 1994.

The Lambi Fund directly assists Haitians in building a self-determined and democratic future. It raises money (mainly in the UK) and provides training to promote local democratic development efforts in Haiti. It directly channels resources to organisations and programmes conceived, planned and implemented by the Haitian people themselves. Small grassroots projects have included reforestation, agricultural production, community development, and women’s income-generating activities.

The Lambi Fund has a small office and a staff of three in Haiti. In the US, two directors work, not from an office, but from their homes. In this way, the maximum share of the money raised can go to fund projects in Haiti. A five-person advisory board in Haiti includes progressive priests, Fathers Hugo Triest and William Smith, who are well-known to the Haiti Support Group for their commitment to popular education and mobilisation for social change.

We reproduce (right) an appeal letter written by the executive director of the Lambi Fund. Should you require more information about the Fund please contact us. We will pleased to receive cheques made payable the Haiti Support Group and marked “Lambi Fund” on the reverse, convert the amount into US dollars, and then forward it on to the Fund.

*The lambi, or conch shell, has long been used as a musical instrument. During the days of slave resistance, the lambi’s call alerted communities to impending danger and the need to assemble. Today, the echo of the lambi alerts villagers in distant hamlets that a community meeting is about to begin.*

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HAITI DROPS NEARER THE VERY BOTTOM

The 1998 United Nations Development Programme annual report showed the dire state of Haiti relative to other countries. Using a ‘human development index’, the report ranks countries in terms of life expectancy, standard of living, and education. Between 1992 and 1997, Haiti had already dropped 32 places in the ranking. This year it slipped another three to 159 out of 174 countries. Neighbours Cuba and the Dominican Republic were ranked 85 and 88 respectively. Canada was first, France second, and the UK eighteenth.

In Haiti the average annual per capita income is US$ 250, 20% of the population accounts for 86% of personal consumption, 35% of the population is not expected to survive to the age of 40, adult illiteracy is at 55%, and 70% of the workforce is unemployed.