

Famine in Haiti, Causes and Consequences. What do I do?

Excerpts* from the reflections of *Chavannes Jean Baptiste*, Executive Director of the Peasant Movement of Papay

Haiti is a very small country roughly the size of Massachusetts with about 9 million people. At the time of its independence in 1804 more than 80% of the country was forested. Today more than half of the territory cannot support agriculture because of the alarming degradation of the environment. Because of the lack of ground cover, 80% of the rainwater runs directly into the ocean carrying more than 15 millions cubic meters of topsoil with it. Large areas are affected by floods; other times there are severe droughts. Both endanger the lives of people and animals, and destroy crops. We fear that this ecological disaster puts in question the very existence of the country.

Some 20 years ago, agriculture represented 40% of the exports of the country. Today it is a mere seven percent of exports. We produce only 90,000 metric tons of rice but consume 450,000. Importation of agricultural products absorbs more than 81% of the outgoing revenue of the country.

Structural causes of the food crisis include:

- Soil degradation due to erosion
- Lack of irrigation systems
- Insufficient credit
- Lack of technical assistance
- Limited and costly agricultural inputs
- Absence of rational market structures
- Lack of a guaranteed market and fair price for farm products
- Absence of favorable agricultural production policies by the Haitian government

In addition we must consider a particular conjuncture of aggravating circumstances:

- The “invasion” of Miami rice on the market, pushing down the price of local rice below profitability
- The floods that affected the country in 2006 and 2007
- The sharp increase in the price of grains on the world market due to the use of enormous quantities of corn in the production of ethanol in the USA and others countries
- Last but not least is the tremendous increase in the prices of fuel on the world market

The food crisis severely affects the 82% of the rural families who live on less than US\$ 1.00 per day. People call this famine “Clorox” because it tears through and eats up your gut like bleach or acid. Children and women are particularly affected. Another aggravating phenomenon is the migration of men to the Dominican Republic, which divides families. At the same time, farmers who remain on their land or who cannot afford to leave, are not able to obtain credit to buy seeds, tools and fertilizers to take advantage of the coming rainy season. This is a true vicious circle.

Many international institutions and countries want to jump to the rescue of the victims of the chronic famines that affect Haiti. Unfortunately, food aid may end up calming hunger only for a minority of people while at the same time making worse the medium- and long-term situations. Food aid is a poison for local and national agricultural production. Thus it is feared that in trying to help the famished population, the famine will ultimately be exacerbated.

Some short term measures to fight the famine in Haiti:

- Help farming families obtain seeds for all sorts of food crops
- Help farming families obtain agricultural tools at subsidized prices or on loan
- Support the building of community grain and seed storage silos with families
- Create temporary jobs to help with irrigation and water systems
- Set up micro-credit programs to support small businesses
- Help small-scale fisherfolk with the purchase of fishing equipment, and encourage the establishment of fish farms for local consumption

Medium and long term measures:

- Promote integrated agrarian reform in partnership with peasant organizations
- Develop integrated management of water resources
- Establish a national plan for the protection of water sheds, including the large-scale planting of fruit and hardwood trees
- Set up a national program for production of organic fertilizers using refuse from our cities
- Set up a vast support program for small livestock production
- Increase the share of the national budget devoted toward the agricultural sector to 25%

MPP is currently involved in the production of seeds for cereals and beans, the construction of cisterns and irrigation systems, and the establishment of small nurseries for fruit and hardwood tree seedlings. We and our member organizations have the capacity to do much more and hope to receive support from our partners to develop our areas of intervention.

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* Edited for length. Some parts may be paraphrased.