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Haiti - A Nation in Crisis: Improving Food Security through Agricultural Extension Centers

Introduction

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...
(Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities)

In our modern era of advanced scientific and technological innovation it should be the best of times for all. There have been exponential increases in world food production. Since 1961, the world's grain production has tripled while the world's population has only doubled (Bailey). Unfortunately, Haiti has not benefited from the best of what science and humanity have to offer. This past April Haiti faced a severe food crisis, which was ignited by the ongoing food affordability calamity that riled through our world's poorest nations. Grain prices increased by 88% since March 2007 and within one week a 50-kilo bag of rice doubled in price (Chossudovsky). The effects of this shock were devastating; it was reported in the world news media that Haitian mothers were forced to sit by while their children ate "mud cookies" because they had no other option for food (Green). In Haiti they have a name for this kind of hunger, it is called "clorox" or "battery acid" hunger, in other words it is something that eats you from the inside out (Labossiere). Fatal riots ignited by this food shortage threatened to destabilize the Haitian government and led to the dismissal of the prime minister.

It can be said that throughout history the Haitian people have suffered the worst of human indignities including colonization, slavery, dictatorship, occupation and domination, however it is only a relatively recent development that the Haitians are unable to produce enough food to feed themselves. Colonial Haiti, once called the Jewel of the Antilles, supplied as much as 50% of France's gross domestic product (Corbett). Under the French, this same Haiti was considered a most ruthless slave nation and, as such, the threat by a slave owner to send a slave to Haiti was a powerful deterrent.

As recently as 30 years ago, Haiti still produced enough rice, the main staple crop, to feed its own population (Quigley). A combination of events involving the world community, particularly the United States, has lead Haiti down the path to food insecurity. For the past 30 years it has been cheaper for Haiti to import rice than it is for Haitian farmers to produce it. When the expulsion of the corrupt dictator 'Baby Doc' Duvalier in 1986 left the country bankrupt, the International Monetary Fund with the U.S., required Haiti to reduce tariff protection on rice in order to receive a desperately needed loan (Quigley). Making matters worse, the 1991 military coup and the following 1994 world embargo had a devastating effect on the agricultural sector (Storz). The Haitian economy was left without capital. This combination of forced tariff reduction and decapitalization opened the doors for free flowing subsidized rice imports from the United States and with those imports, the collapse of rice production in Haiti.

This by no means tells the whole complex story. The exact reason why Haiti has reached the epitome of the worst of our times is still debated. The point is that the world has greatly contributed to Haiti's vast problems, but the more important question is, what can the world community do to insure the food security of Haiti? In order to answer this question it is important to understand what life is like for the average Haitian farm family today.

Small Subsistence Farmer

The Republic of Haiti is located in the Caribbean where it shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere (The World Factbook; Haiti). Eighty percent of the 8,924,533 citizens earn less than \$1 day and over half of the entire population is in abject poverty (USAID). Less than 51% of Haitians have access to potable water (Haiti: WHO). The average Haitian receives less than half the calories of what is recommended. Due to food shortages, deaths of infants and toddlers are very common. Twelve percent of children die before their first birthday and 1/3 of all children die before reaching the age of five. There is normally no hope for sick people because only three in every 10,000 Haitians has access to a physician (Haiti: WHO). This justifies the statistic that the normal life expectancy of a Haitian is only about 57 years (The World Factbook; Haiti).

There are not many options for schooling in Haiti; about 90% of all schools are private (Haiti: Government Policies...). Education is not widespread throughout Haiti; less than half of school age children ever begin school (Our Goal). For the average girl it is even worse, she normally attends about 2-3 years before she is greatly needed at home to facilitate her family. Ninety percent of Haitians speak Creole although their official written language is French. This provides the number one reason children in Haiti don't attend school; classes are mostly taught in French. Therefore, only 2% stay in school beyond the fifth grade (Corbett). As a result, nearly 50% of Haitians are illiterate (The World Factbook; Haiti).

Haiti is the only country left in the Western Hemisphere whose majority still survives on small subsistence farming (McClintock). The most common crops grown in Haiti are corn, beans and sorghum. Seventy percent of Haitians have agriculture related jobs (Improved Seeds). The abolishment of slavery in 1805 led to an unfair distribution of land, which still remains today. The slaves settled in the rough conditions of the mountains, while the elite kept the fertile lowlands. The average Haitian farm family today lives on the rugged hillside in an undersized one-room home with a thatched roof and walls made of sticks covered in dry mud. The family normally consists of two parents, maybe grandparents, and about 6-8 children, all who must survive on an average annual income of about \$350. The average family farm raises pigs, cattle, guinea fowl and chickens on their .60-acre farms (McClintock). This land is barely large enough to support their family, much less have extra produce to sell.

The Case for Agricultural Extension Centers

Poor is not a harsh enough word to describe the situation of small Haitian farm families. Men farm but often are also laborers making \$0.35 an hour, which only provides them with 1/2 of what is needed for basic necessities. Women tend to chores, but often try to supplement their income by working on handicrafts. The Haitian woman is often responsible for one very harmful but necessary survival strategy: the production of wood charcoal for fuel. The majority of the once heavily forested mountains are deserted. Only two percent of Haiti's total population of trees remain today (McClintock). It is a vicious cycle; trees are cut down and are not replanted. These families do not have any other choice; they need the trees to make charcoal to enable them to cook food for their families. Haitian families do not use other sources of fuel because Haiti has no other fuel resource. Farm families are so desperate and their needs are so immediate that they aren't able to look into the possibility of future problems as a result of chopping down the vast majority of trees.

Haitian farm families have another dilemma to face, erosion. Haiti literally means 'mountainous land,' 63% of all land in Haiti has slopes greater than 20%. Of all Haiti's land, less than 20% is considered arable, but more than 50% of Haiti's land is being cultivated (McClintock). A third of all land is being severely degraded. Small subsistence farmers continue to plant and plow their land on these great slopes until repeated poor harvests strike. They then initiate short-term coping strategies and move to another piece of land hoping that their crops will become more productive. The problem of erosion is tied directly with poverty; Haitian farmers do not have access to productive farmland and they also have very

primitive farming methods (Eneas). These methods are very detrimental to the environment and will only continue to drastically decrease farm production. Current Haitian farm practices are obviously not sustainable.

Haiti cannot support itself and “the poorest of the poor,” as stated by Jeff Sachs in his article *Helping the Worlds Poorest* in The Economist “are nearly invisible.” The only way for Haiti to climb out of the devastation is for the world community to provide help with food security by assisting them with agricultural education through local extension programs starting with the family farm. The center of the education and advisory services should be increasing farm yields by providing improved seeds suited for Haiti’s climate and soil conditions, combined with proven technologies. Yields in Haiti have decreased consistently year to year for two decades due to agricultural practices, soil erosion and adverse climate conditions, such as drought and hurricanes (IDB approves \$17.8 million...). Statistics show, from the Haitian Ministry of Agriculture, that of the national seed requirements only seven percent are being supplied and “currently the majority of farmers have little or no access to improved seeds and are planting food grains bought in the market. These inefficient grains have low germination (often around 30%), and have neither been selected for high performance nor resistance to heat, drought or disease” (Improved Seeds).

In the interim, until Haiti becomes self-sufficient, the world community must provide food security by insuring an adequate and affordable food supply. Haiti should not have to compete with speculators in the commodity markets. Seventy five percent of Haiti’s imports come from the United States (Storz) therefore Haiti should initiate a direct negotiation with the United States in order to establish reliable fair grain prices.

Even with food security guarantees, increased agricultural education awareness through extension services will be difficult to implement without government support at a local level. Haiti’s food insecurity is exacerbated not only by a lack of education but also by a lack of stable effective government. Following a line of dictators, Haiti has only recently experienced the freedoms of self-determination. The current president Rene Preval, was the first peacefully elected democratic president in Haiti’s 202 year history (Roig-Franzia). Haiti is divided into ten departments but their government is very centralized. Local governments in Haiti have very little power. The central government’s inability to manage their reserves is a big problem. Their mismanagement and miscommunications led to a lack of vital investments in their country. Haiti has little infrastructure and no road system to speak of. These problems have been going on for years. The government repeatedly fails to implement crucial decisions and very little is accomplished.

Decentralizing Haiti’s government will bring power to the local people and significantly improve the problems that their nation is currently experiencing. LOKAL (Limye ak Oganizasyon pou Kolektivite yo Ale Lwen, in Creole) along with a Presidential Commission have started to prepare a new legal structure for decentralizing Haiti. ARD (Applying Global Research for People Oriented Results) contributed to the draft laws that were presented to the Parliament for consideration. ARD, along with the State University of New York at Albany, supported the Haitian Parliament by facilitating the eventual passing of this important legislation. In Haiti’s ten departments, this program is also working with Mayors to establish the National Federation of Haitian Mayors. The COP (Chief of Party) Louis Siegel stated, “Despite all of the problems and years of unrest and extreme poverty, Haitians remain optimistic about their future and are eager to participate in projects like ours. Local solutions to local problems remain the most promising strategy for improving the livelihoods of the Haitian people and decentralized local governance is an essential element in this strategy” (Bringing Local Leadership to Haiti).

Although Haiti is in desperate need of change, there is hope. Many good things are happening on the agricultural front, but most on a small scale. The U.S. Agency for International Development

(USAID), through a *farmer to farmer program* has enacted many projects to help reverse Haiti's environmental degradation. USAID has led reforestation developments to plant more tree species that will produce a cash crop. They provided Haitians with agriculture techniques to improve quality of yields and succeeded, seeing 30%-50% survival increase. USAID also began a project to promote an agroforestry technique called *alley cropping*. Shrubs are planted in between crops so that when pruned, the clippings will be scattered and act as mulch, which releases nutrients for uptake by the crop as well as contributes organic matter to the soil. This project alone saved 350,000 metric tons of soil within two years (McClintock).

USAID has also joined with the group CARE to distribute 10,000 drought resistance varieties of seeds to help farm families in their next planting season. In addition, CARE has sponsored activities to carry out important soil conservation techniques, and improve repair work on roads for marketing purposes. CARE also has scheduled food for work programs. Their plan is to provide seasonal planting activities to supply resources to aid Haitian families access to food, seeds etc (Laumark).

USAID and CARE are not alone. There are numerous organizations trying to build Haiti into a better place. The following are only a few examples. Wynne Farm teaches children the basics about the environment. Haitian, Jane Wynne, teaches about the destruction that the charcoal industry brings in Haiti. She also introduces new methods of alternative fuel, such as paper briquettes that are made from recycled paper. Jane teaches gardening among other activities, her students in turn, learn crucial facts about the environment (Marek).

The philanthropic organization, Geneva Global, leads an Initiative's Implementing Organization, which teaches farmers to grow plants to enrich the soil, prevent erosion and provide nutrition and income for farmers' families. This project has impacted nearly 25,400 Haitian lives (North Haiti-Environment and Economic Empowerment).

All these initiatives are positive, but to alleviate poverty and hunger on a grand scale an organized nation-wide system needs to be developed. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) is implementing the most promising large-scale effort. In four of ten departments in Haiti, the program strengthens the Ministry of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Rural Development (MARNDR). It promotes cooperation between public-private groups and invests in existing research and extension centers. Project steering committees include knowledgeable farmers to guarantee that research and extension programs address local needs. The four MARNDR extension centers "will be rehabilitated and equipped and their staff trained to implement 12 research and disseminating programs with collaboration with participants of key rural supply chains. Investments made under the program will complement other rural development projects financed by the IDB and various international agencies and donors in Haiti." The supply chain program is expected to help tens of thousands of Haitian farmers (IDB approves \$17.8 million...).

The IDB project is promising because it offers a model that could be replicated in all ten departments in Haiti. The emphasis on investing in research would insure that the most recent and relevant crop biology and agronomic technologies would be used. The emphasis on cooperation would maximize efficiencies of all private and public agencies, ensuring that organizations are in alignment. Finally, the extension component should reach directly to the Haitian farm family and offer the help they so badly need. Once the tools for agricultural success are in their hands and the Haitian farmer begins to see an increase in productivity, there will be improvements in farm income. Since Haiti's yields have continued to decline for twenty years (IDB approves \$17.8 million...), success will be measured with the first increase in productivity. When increased productivity becomes a trend, the farmer will feel accomplished and that will confirm the success of the extension programs.

Conclusion

It may not be the best of times for Haiti, but it should not be the worst. This year's episode of *mud cookies* and disastrous food riots are evidence that Haiti has suffered enough. **Now** is the time to move Haiti on the path to food security. According to Michael Lipton in The Farm Family in a Globalizing World, until about 2035 most of the world's entire poor population will reside in the rural areas. However, guaranteeing small farm-based progress can slash mass poverty. The extent of Haiti's distinctive problems must be addressed toward the particular needs of the Haitian farm family. Haitian farmers need access to agricultural extension programs where they would receive education and training for implementing technologies and practices specific to Haiti. Improved seeds and farming practices will increase productivity of yields as well as help solve Haiti's destructive erosion problem. The Inter-American Development Bank's extension service projects offer a framework, which shows potential for duplication nation-wide. To ensure the success and sustainability of such programs, there must be government support at a local level. The Haitian government needs to decentralize in order to extend the helping hand of government directly into the fields of the small subsistence farmer. The establishment of The National Federation of Haitian Mayors will be a step towards the necessary redistribution of power. Decentralizing Haiti's government will also help address the corruption and inefficiencies that Haiti currently faces. No change will happen without ensuring that Haiti has an immediate, reliable and affordable food supply. The United States government is partially responsible for Haiti's food dependence; therefore, it is obligated to supply grain at a fair price. With the help of the U.S. government, along with the world community, a nourished Haitian farm population will begin to heal and move Haiti down the path to self-sufficiency. There are numerous organizations currently involved in Haitian relief; this is proof that many hearts around the world are pouring out to the people of Haiti. If the efforts of these organizations can be efficiently funneled directly to the farm family, Haiti can once again become The Jewel of the Antilles.

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