

In 2008 many developing countries were severely affected by the food crisis, which led to sharp increases in the price of many staple foods. People and organisations examined the situation in their own countries and questioned the policies adopted by their governments. In this article an activist from the small island of Guadeloupe, situated in the Caribbean but integrated into France, explains how the crisis has affected her country.

The food crisis in Guadeloupe

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When in the middle of last year scenes of food rioting appeared on millions of television sets around the world, many people in Guadeloupe felt a shiver run down their spine. Some of our Caribbean neighbours, such as Haiti, were badly affected by the crisis. We saw thousands of Haitians marching down the streets yelling “we are hungry”. Could that happen here? we wondered. These events caused people to stop and think, and so we organised debates on the food crisis.

Guadeloupe has every reason to be concerned about the food crisis. After centuries as a French colony, this French Caribbean *département* still imports around 80 per cent of its food. It is therefore very dependent on the world market and vulnerable to price fluctuations. Local peasant organisations, however, such as the Union des Paysans Guadeloupéens (UPG), and some of the island’s leading individuals, such as the pharmacologist Henry Joseph, believe this situation to be absurd. Guadeloupe has a number of assets. It has, for example, good quality soils (which have unfortunately been too often polluted), a tropical climate that allows the land to be farmed all year

round, and a wide variety of plant and animal species (220 edible species, including 130 fruits and 60 vegetables). In addition, local products are rich in antioxidants and contain vitamins A, C and E.¹ These products are very good for people’s health and help the body to fight the main causes of premature death in Guadeloupe – diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. There are therefore very good reasons for Guadeloupians to eat local products rather than imported ones, which are generally processed and have little nutritional value.

It is, however, very difficult for farmers to grow crops for the local market and to diversify their produce. The authorities have neglected subsistence agriculture and have favoured export crops, such as sugar cane and bananas, which alone cover half of the island’s cultivated land. This paradoxical situation largely stems from certain unjust structures imposed on the island in its history. Guadeloupe was a French colony and was forced to send much of its agricultural production to France and other markets. Little land was left for production for the local market, and the island was therefore obliged to import most of its food from France. This set-up, which is very disadvantageous for Guadeloupe, persists today. It perpetuates a

1 Carib Créole, “Nutrition: un régime diététique caribéen”, 27 August 2008, at: <http://tinyurl.com/9zgg29>.

400-year-old history of exporting primary produce with very little added value and importing much more expensive refined and processed products. The result is a large trade deficit.

Moreover, the population's tastes are clearly westernised. Local people often prefer to consume imported products, which are often cheaper than local products. An alarming fact is that many young Guadeloupians no longer know the names of local fruit and vegetables, and have developed a phobia about foods they do not know.² So Guadeloupians eat very little of their local produce and, if the food crisis were to hit Guadeloupe, we could end up dying of hunger at the foot of a mango tree laden with fruit. In order to prevent such a situation ever arising, local groups are calling on the people of Guadeloupe to consume local produce. This summer, several individuals and organisations, including the UPG, joined together to raise the population's awareness of this issue. In the context of the food crisis, to eat locally has become a real act of citizenship.


Nevertheless, encouraging citizens to eat local food is not enough: we also need to change the government's policies to support farmers. What is needed is a complete restructuring of the sector.³ Farming on the island is too concentrated on a limited number of crops, and the trade in Guadeloupiian produce is dominated by a few companies that extract high profits. Government policies have to address these issues and ensure that farmers receive a decent income that reflects the important role they play in preserving the countryside and managing water resources. The UPG believes that a new policy is required, based on the idea of sustainable development,⁴ that promotes a system of agriculture that respects the environment and benefits all.⁵ Agriculture should preserve and enrich local biodiversity, taking advantage of both traditional and scientific knowledge. It should also respect both the people and the land by avoiding the use of pesticides.

Many ideas, such as food sovereignty, are being discussed in Guadeloupe, and efforts are being made to increase the awareness of the population and the authorities about the importance of small farming. This work is beginning to bear fruit and Guadeloupians are becoming better informed and more aware of the situation. There are many

cultural manifestations of this growing interest in local produce, including an increasing number of farmers' markets, such as the "ti bourg" market organised by the Petit Bourg commune.

Age-old customs, such as Creole gardens, are making a comeback. The Creole garden dates from the time of slavery when slave-owners allowed slave families to cultivate plots of land so that the slave-owners did not have to provide them with food, which was mostly imported and often very expensive. The Creole garden was closely integrated with the tropical environment around it. Because the sea voyage from Europe was long, very few living plants were imported from France. As a result, the people used the plants in the forests around them and from neighbouring tropical regions. The proliferation of these gardens throughout the island made it possible to preserve, improve and diversify many vegetable species.

The gardens became true temples of biodiversity. They were used to grow vegetables (such as sweet potato and breadfruit), fruit (such as banana, soursop and mango) and the spices used in local cooking (such as peppers, thyme and onion). They also became a pharmacy for poor people, who would grow all kinds of medicinal plants in them. Cultivation methods were respectful of nature, and no fertilisers or pesticides were used. All farming was done by hand. The people listened to the land and understood the cycle of life. Once a garden had been created, it was never abandoned.

When slavery came to an end, the practice of cultivating Creole gardens continued for many years and was passed from generation to generation, especially in the countryside. Although people usually had large families, they preferred to build small houses so that the rest of their land was available to be gardened. But with modernisation, urbanisation and the spread of consumer society, this age-old custom almost disappeared. More recently, however, initiatives have been taken to encourage the population to resurrect and protect this important contribution to food self-sufficiency. The Guadeloupe Regional Council, the country's chief political body, is becoming aware of the potential offered by these gardens. The struggle for food sovereignty has only just begun here, and it can count on the creativity and energy of the Guadeloupiian people. 

2 See the thesis by Nathalie Rigal and explanations by Dr Henry Joseph, "Henry Joseph: la patate douce a démontré ses vertus santé", in the online magazine LaNutrition.fr. <http://tinyurl.com/a3h9oh>

3 Marc Divirin, "Les évolutions de l'agriculture en Guadeloupe: caractéristiques et enjeux", Report of a seminar, 21-24 November, Bouillante, Guadeloupe. <http://tinyurl.com/94fjbm>

4 Alain Galladine, "Agriculture paysanne et contrat durable: la vision de l'UPG", 18 August 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/9ox7w8>

5 UPG, "Accueil", 2008. <http://tinyurl.com/74xluz>

