

Haiti's farmers call for a break with neoliberalism

GRAIN

Peasant organisations in Haiti are angry at the Haitian authorities for allowing multinational donors and corporations to take advantage of the post-earthquake reconstruction programme to deepen the country's reliance on the outside world. They are calling instead for a radical programme of agricultural reconstruction, to rebuild the country's ravaged peasantry and bring about food sovereignty.

On 4 June 2010 some 10,000 Haitian peasant farmers marched from Papaye to Hinche in the country's central plateau. They burnt several bags of hybrid maize seeds, part of the donation that Monsanto has made to the post-earthquake reconstruction programme (*see* Box 1, page 22). Their slogans for the march included "long live native maize" and "Monsanto's GMO and hybrid seeds violate peasant agriculture".

In an interview with GRAIN, Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, a Haitian peasant leader who heads the Mouvement Paysan Papaye (MPP) and helped to organise the protest, said that Monsanto was trying to take advantage of the aid programme to make farmers dependent on its seeds and to destroy peasant agriculture. It was necessary, he said, to say a strong "No" (*see* Interview, page 24). Similar actions were undertaken in solidarity in Montreal, Canada, and Seattle, USA.

Chavannes Jean-Baptiste's position is in line with the stance adopted by 15 peasant associations, including one youth and one women's organisation, who in March 2010, with the support of the Haitian non-governmental organisation PAPDA (Plateforme

Haïtienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif), published a strong critique of the Haitian government's emergency response to the earthquake.¹

Following the severe earthquake in January 2010, which killed some 230,000 people and forced half a million to move back to the countryside from Port-au-Prince, the Haitian Ministry of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Rural Development (MARNDR) announced a US\$687-million Emergency Food Production Assistance Programme. Its main objectives, it says, are "to promote the social reintegration of migrants from the cities in rural areas", "to increase their employment opportunities", "to increase their revenue-earning capability through labour-intensive activities to enable them to purchase immediate food supplies for their immediate needs", and "to establish food security on a permanent basis".

There is little to object to in these objectives in themselves. But where those who drew up the PAPDA document disagree with the government is over the strategy to be used to reach these ends. They say that the government is failing to take the essential first step, which is to challenge the neoliberal policies that destroyed peasant agriculture in the first place. And they say that unless the government does this, it will be unable to rebuild the livelihoods of the mass of small farmers.

Until the 1980s, Haitians grew enough rice, beans, maize, sweet potato and cassava to feed themselves. But then, after the overthrow of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986, Haiti began to liberalise the economy. "The IMF and the World Bank decreed that we apply structural adjustment", said Camille Chalmers from PAPDA.

1 "Commentaires des organisations paysannes et du Programme de Plaidoyer pour la Souveraineté Alimentaire (PPSA) de la Plateforme Haïtienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif (PAPDA) sur le Programme Spécial d'Urgence et d'Appui à la Production Alimentaire du Ministère de l'Agriculture des Ressources Naturelles et du Développement Rural (MARNDR)", March 2010. http://www.papda.org/IMG/pdf/commentaires_sur_document_speciale_du_MARNDR_Layout.pdf

Monsanto's gift to Haiti

In May, Monsanto announced that it had delivered 60 tonnes of hybrid seed to Haiti, the first shipment of a total donation of 400 tonnes of seed, mainly maize, but also other vegetables, to be supplied in 2010. It is estimated that 10,000 farmers will benefit and that, at market prices, the donation is worth US\$4 million. The US company United Parcel Service will deliver the seeds, while the Winner project, a five-year US\$127-million agricultural programme funded by USAID, will distribute them.¹

According to some reports, the decision to donate seed to Haiti was decided at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland: "[Monsanto's] CEO Hugh Grant and Executive Vice-President Jerry Steiner attended the event and had conversations with attendees about what could be done to help Haiti."² It seems unlikely that any Haitian farmers were included in the conversations in Davos.

Monsanto has reacted indignantly to the charge that the donation is little more than a ruse to get the farmers hooked on seeds that need to be bought each year, rather than saved, as is the case with their traditional varieties. G. Young, a company spokesman, responds to the accusation on the company's website:

"Imaginative, yes. Accurate, no. Our donation of hybrid seed to Haiti is about farmers, people and food. Haiti's farmers need good quality seed, because the better the seed, the better the chances for more food from the same land. Haiti's people need food – better quality food, more food and more nutritious food. We learned in Malawi that a donation of hybrid seed turned a region from a food aid recipient to a food exporter. Malawi farmers were given a chance to show what they could do with good seed.³ And they did it. Haiti's farmers can do the same thing."⁴

1 Jonathan M. Katz, "Connection between Haiti and Monsanto", Political Friendster, 14 May 2010: <http://tinyurl.com/2vmfran>

2 Ibid.

3 GRAIN has a different interpretation of Malawi's "green revolution". While it recognises that this "revolution" has boosted dramatically Monsanto's hybrid maize sales, GRAIN believes that the country's present policies are unsustainable unless land is redistributed and unless the country moves away from its narrow focus on chemical fertilisers and hybrid maize. See GRAIN, *Seedling*, January 2010, "Unravelling the 'miracle' of the Malawi's green revolution", http://www.grain.org/seedling_files/seed-10-01-1.pdf

4 See http://www.monsanto.com/monsanto_today/2010/seed_donation_to_haiti.asp

☛ *"They told us that we're right next to the biggest agricultural producer in the world, so there was no reason to produce our own food because we could buy it cheaply. Instead of farming, peasants should go to the city to sell their labour to US assembly plants that make textiles and electronics for export."*

Thousands of peasant livelihoods were destroyed. According to the PAPDA statement,

"the neoliberal policies struck the rural communities at the heart of their rural resistance, provoking the massification of the rural exodus and the accelerated growth of urban shanty-towns. Local peasant agriculture was broken into pieces, to the benefit of the big corporations that operate in the food market. Peasant farmers, eliminated from the market by the liberalisation of foreign trade, had no source of income, becoming heavily dependent on outside help. Unemployment increased on a massive scale."

The state sector was cut to the bone by the neoliberal reforms, and left without the resources, human or financial, to prepare Haiti for natural disasters, be they earthquakes or hurricanes. According to the PAPDA document,

"The scale of the [earthquake] damage is intrinsically linked to the characteristics of a state built in defiance of the people. It is no secret that back in 2007 a report from Purdue University warned of the imminence of an earthquake but the state did not publicise the alert and took no measures to prepare and protect the people."

Now, in the wake of the hugely damaging earthquake, MARNDR has announced an agricultural reconstruction programme that, says PAPDA, will do far more to benefit multinationals than to benefit peasant farmers. More than half of the US\$687 million has been allocated to infrastructure projects – irrigation systems, rural roads, the repair and reinforcement of river banks and so on. The second most important allocation is for the acquisition of mechanical equipment such as tractors and other motorised farm equipment (US\$113.5 million), followed by reforestation (US\$58 million), animal husbandry – cattle and goat rearing, aviculture, apiculture – (US\$37 million), and anti-erosion structures (US\$20 million). A considerable outlay is also earmarked for fertilisers (US\$18.4 million), pesticides (US\$4.7 million) and seeds/seedlings (US\$5 million).



Haitians' response to Monsanto's gift. The donated seeds are burned on the demonstration held in central Haiti on 4 June.



On 4 June 2010 some 10,000 Haitian peasant farmers marched from Papaye to Hinche in the country's central plateau.

Because the vast majority of Haiti's farmers cannot afford tractors or chemical inputs, even if they are subsidised, the programme will benefit only a small minority. Moreover, because Haiti does not produce its own chemical fertilisers, pesticides or farm equipment, foreign companies will win the contracts to provide these. It is very likely too that multinationals will also win the infrastructure contracts. Rather than promoting national self-sufficiency, the programme will deepen the country's dependence on foreign inputs. And the PAPDA document believes that over time the programme will be rejigged to favour foreign interests even more blatantly: "It will be redrafted, dictated, and revised by international actors. It will be made even worse after USAID and other agencies have imposed their own rectifications."

The PAPDA document comments bitterly: "Humanitarian aid is obsessed with the laws of the capitalist market, which means that most of the money goes back to the donor countries. Capitalism's concern to make profit is never-ending." The Haitian authorities, it says, no longer see peasant farmers as legitimate players who need to be consulted:

"MARNDR denies the existence and resources of the peasant population. This neoliberal choice rejects peasant knowledge and expertise.... MARNDR continues to treat international NGOs, and [foreign] enterprises as genuine national actors in the place of peasant farmers whose interests are always, conveniently, put last."

Mervyn Claxton, an expert on Caribbean political economy, also believes that the Haitian authorities are failing to seize the opportunity to kick-start a genuine peasant economy that could move the country towards real reconstruction:

"Haiti has a range of traditional rice, maize, and bean varieties. Rice was brought to Haiti by African slaves more than two centuries ago."

There are several traditional varieties which are grouped under two main types – mountain rice and swamp rice. Those traditional varieties are known to be more nutritious than the cheaper, subsidised American rice ('Miami' rice), which replaced them two or three decades ago as a result of trade liberalisation. Haiti's traditional rice is therefore better for combating malnutrition, which the government considers a major problem, than imported HYVs [high yielding varieties].... The use of HYVs will almost certainly increase the risk of food insecurity instead of reducing it, because their absolute need for a regular, adequate supply of water would not be met during the periods of chronic drought to which Haiti is prone.... The use of HYVs will promote exclusion rather than inclusion because their absolute need for water has made the Ministry exclude non-irrigated or non-irrigable areas from that part of the Emergency Programme. Proprietors of the less cultivable, less fertile, excluded farm lands would necessarily be the country's poorer farmers."

Peasant movements have a vision, too, of the alternative farming model they wish to construct. In the PAPDA document, they call for a redefinition of policies so that there is a clear break with past practices: "rupture with the neoliberal model of development; rupture with exclusion; rupture with imperialism; and rupture with the centralising state". Instead, they say, reconstruction should mobilise four important social forces: women, peasantry, youth, and artists and artisans.

Doudou Pierre, who, like Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, is a member of the Mouvement National des Paysans de Congrès de Papaye (MPNKP), fleshes out the alternative model. He says that agriculture in Haiti should be "relaunched" around two guiding principles. One is food sovereignty, which means producing most of Haiti's food at home: "We could produce here at least 80 per cent of what we eat." And the second is integrated land reform. "We can't talk

about food sovereignty if people don't have land. Our plan is take the land from the big landowners and give it to peasants to work." And, once they have land, the farmers will need support from the authorities. "The state has to give us credit and technical support and help us store and manage water."

Once these structural changes have been implemented, proposals abound as to how peasant farming could be supported. The Centre for Economic and Policy Research wants international donors to agree to purchase Haiti's entire rice crop for the next two years. It says that, with this incentive,

local farmers would be able to produce almost as much rice as would be provided in food aid, and the devastated peasant sector would be put on the road to recovery. Another group is calling for the government to get schools to buy all the food they need for school meals from local small producers.

The government has given no indication that it will accept any of the proposals put forward by peasant organisations or think-tanks linked to them. It is scarcely surprising that Chavannes Jean-Baptiste and his fellow protesters are angry.

Interview with Chavannes Jean-Baptiste

Chavannes Jean-Baptiste heads the MPP, Haiti's largest and oldest peasant organisation. He gave this interview to GRAIN shortly after the march on 4 June.



"It is our way of struggling"

It is well known that Haitian agriculture has been severely damaged over the last few decades. Is it still possible to build food sovereignty? Can Haiti produce all the food it needs?

The situation of Haitian agriculture is very serious. We produce only about 40 per cent of the food that the population needs. We depend on food from the United States and the Dominican Republic. Haitian soils have been destroyed by erosion, because we have only 2 per cent vegetation cover. Less than half the land can be cultivated.

Despite this situation, however, the country is capable of producing enough food to feed its population of ten million, and to export some produce. Our problem is a political problem. The country doesn't have a plan for developing agriculture.

The first step is to decide what kind of agriculture we want. The government doesn't want to develop peasant agriculture. It wants to hand over the country's land to multinationals who want to produce agro-fuels and fruit for export and to send the rural population to work in the export industries. Only 4 per cent of the national budget goes to agriculture. And 85 per cent of this money is used to fund the ministry of agriculture itself!

What we need before anything else is agrarian reform. And then a policy of food sovereignty so that the country has the right to define its own agricultural policies. We need to grow healthy food in a way that respects the environment and Mother Earth.

We have 300,000 hectares of land that could be irrigated, but only 25,000 hectares benefit from irrigation. Today there are ways of using drop-by-drop irrigation in the mountains so that many families could benefit. If a family had a little water, it could take advantage of agro-ecological techniques, of permaculture, so that, with just 2,500 square metres of land, it could produce enough food to feed itself and sell enough crops to be able to send its children to school, to buy clothes, and so on. With just 100 square metres, a person can earn over US\$1,000 year by sowing papaya and vegetables.

Do you have support among the peasant community for your alternative vision? Aren't they seduced by neoliberalism, with all its promises of money and modernity?

You just have to look at the response we had to our call for a march on 4 June. With very little time to organise, 10,000 people came on the march. I am the spokesman for the MPP and for the Mouvement National des Paysans de Congrès de Papaye (MPNKP). When I speak, I speak directly in the name of 200,000 peasants – men and women. We can easily mobilise 100,000 people. All we need is a bit of time and some resources.

We have been carrying out programmes of popular education for many years. Peasants – men and women – are well aware today that the neoliberal project spells death for the peasantry. That is very clear from the organisations. Of course, there are some people who are going to believe in the false promises of neoliberalism.

Why did you decide to burn Monsanto's seeds?

It was, of course, a symbolic gesture. It was a way of saying a very firm "no" to the company and the government. Monsanto is trying to use the reconstruction effort to introduce hybrid seeds. We got the government to stop the GM seeds they first suggested, but even hybrids, which have to be bought from the company every year, are a very strong attack on small-scale farming, on farmers, on biodiversity, on creole seeds, and on what is left of our environment.

We have found that direct action works. Some years ago we burnt an American pig in front of the agriculture ministry to protest against the destruction of our creole [native] pigs. As a result, the authorities consider us a violent organisation, which isn't true. But it doesn't matter. If the government decides to attack us, it will only mobilise people and make our movement stronger. We succeeded in getting the creole pigs back. That is what matters. It is our way of struggling.