



## A Future for Agriculture, A Future for Haiti

Haiti's way forward is tied to food sovereignty and a renewed focus on local agriculture.

by **Beverly Bell**

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*"We plant but we can't produce or market. We plant but we have no food to eat. We want agriculture to improve so our country can live and so we peasants can live, too."*

-Rilo Petit-homme, peasant organizer from St. Marc, Haiti



A peasant group meets to discuss post-earthquake strategies for rebuilding agriculture.

Photo by [Roberto \(Bear\) Guerra](#).

What would it take to transform Haiti's economy such that its role in the global economy is no longer that of providing cheap labor for sweatshops? What would it take for hunger to no longer be the norm, for the country no longer to depend on imports and hand-outs, and for Port-au-Prince's slums no longer to contain 85 percent of the city's residents? What would it take for the hundreds of thousands left homeless by the earthquake to have a secure life, with income?

According to Haitian peasant organizations, at the core of the solutions is a commitment on the part of government to support family agriculture, with policies to make the commitment a reality.

Haiti is the only country in the hemisphere that is still majority rural. Estimates of the percentage of Haiti's citizens who are farmers span from 60.5 percent (UN, 2006) to 80 percent (the figure used by peasant groups).

Nevertheless, food imports currently constitute 57 percent of what Haitians consume (World Bank, 2008). It wasn't always that way; policy choices made it so. In the 1980s, the U.S. and international

financial institutions pressured Haiti to lower tariffs on food imports, leading to a [flood of cheap food](#) with which Haitian farmers could not compete. At the same time, USAID and others pressured Haiti to orient its production toward export, leaving farmers vulnerable to shifting costs of sugar and coffee on the world market.

Eighty-eight percent of the rural population lives in poverty; 67 percent lives in extreme poverty (UNDP, 2004). Things have grown worse for them since the 2008 hurricane season, when four storms battered Haiti in three weeks, destroying more than 70 percent of agriculture and most rural roads, bridges, and other infrastructure needed for production and marketing. At least during the earthquake, only one farming area, around Jacmel, was badly damaged.

There is a direct relationship between the state of agriculture and the earthquake's high toll in deaths, injuries, and homelessness. The quake was so destructive because more than three million people were jammed into a city meant for 200,000 to 250,000, with most living in extremely precarious and overcrowded housing. This is partly due to the demise of peasant agriculture over the past three decades, which has forced small producers to move to the capital to enter the sweatshop and informal sectors.

It is also due, in part, to the fact that government services effectively do not exist for those in the countryside. ID cards, universities, specialized health care, and much else is available exclusively, or almost exclusively, in what Haitians call the Republic of Port-au-Prince, forcing many to visit or live there to meet their needs.

"It's not houses which will rebuild Haiti, it's investing in the agriculture sector," says Rosnel Jean-Baptiste of the group Tèt Kole Ti Peyizan Ayisyen (translated literally, Heads Together Small Peasant Farmers of Haiti). Those interviewed for this article, including dozens of peasant farmers from five organizations as well as economists and development experts, agree that the current moment offers an opportunity to create secure employment for the majority, increase rural development, and [reduce hunger](#). Their goal is resettlement with employment for those displaced from earthquake-hit areas.

If reinforced, agriculture could help feed the nation, which is currently suffering a dire food crisis. More than 2.4 million Haitians are estimated to be food-insecure. Nine percent of children under the age of five suffer from acute malnutrition, and 24 percent from chronic malnutrition (World Food Programme, 2010). That poverty is political in origin, largely due to World Bank and IMF conditions on loans which have squeezed the poor, and [free trade policies](#) which have made it impossible for farmers to grow enough food to meet the needs. Securing adequate and affordable Haitian-grown food is one step toward diminishing that poverty, while another is rejecting IMF prescriptions.



### [Food Rebellions: 7 Steps to Solving the Food Crisis](#)

Alternatives to the trade and "aid" policies that displace farmers and increase hunger.

Agriculture could also offer a solution for the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people now residing in rural areas. In interviews with dozens of Port-au-Prince residents who are taking refuge in the Central Plateau, most say they would stay there if they could find a way to sustain themselves. If they could be given the land and resources necessary to begin farming, they would not need to return to city sweatshops, which do not provide a living wage, job security, or health or safety protections. Port-au-Prince could then become a livable city without overcrowded and inhumane conditions, without more than eight out of ten people residing in slums (as suggested by UN Human Settlements Program reports).

"We are meeting with different sectors to construct a Haiti where all Haitians feel like children of the

land,” says Sylvain Henrilus of Tèt Kole. Peasant groups—even those with historic distrust of each other—and other allies are meeting regularly to plan their advocacy and mobilization for reorienting Haiti’s political economy in favor of agriculture, based on the following priorities:

- **Food sovereignty**, the right of people to grow and consume their own food. With trade policies which support local production, Haiti’s levels of self-sufficiency could increase. Chavannes Jean-Baptiste of the Peasant Movement of Papay and the National Peasant Movement of the Papay Congress says, “the country has the right to determine its own agricultural policies, its own food production policies, to produce for family and for local consumption in healthy and simple agriculture which respects the environment, Mother Earth, as the mother of future generations.”
- **Decentralization of services.** The "people outside," as rural inhabitants are known, must have access to services equal to the people of Port-au-Prince. The ability to meet their needs where they are is the right of rural people as well as a way to keep Port-au-Prince from again becoming overcrowded. Rosnel Jean-Baptiste says, “We need to deconstruct the capital, bringing services into the country and helping people find jobs there.”
- **Technical support**, especially for [sustainable, ecological farming](#). Farmers in the region of the Artibonite, for example, stated that their melons, bananas, and tomatoes are not producing well, but they don’t know what the problem is or how to resolve it. They need advice from agronomists. They also need credit to help them buy equipment, as well as support with storage and marketing, reforestation, and irrigation and water management. Elio Youyoute, a member of a community peasant association in the south, says, “We are trying to grow enough food to feed the cities, but we need help from the state.”
- **Land reform.** Those who work the land need secure tenure. Otherwise they will continue to be unable to support themselves on what Haitians call ‘a handkerchief of land,’ plots sometimes no larger than 15 feet square. Land reform must be not just a one-time hand-out, which would quickly revert to its previous concentration as struggling farmers are forced to sell their small gardens, but a change in tenure laws accompanied by technical support. Sylvain Henrilus of Tèt Kole says, “The land reform we need is not what Préval did in his first term, which was to just divide a bit of land into very small plots without any support, but where those who work the land have the right to that land with all the infrastructure and means - not just to adequately feed the people but to export as we used to do, to have our sovereignty in all dimensions.”
- **Seeds**, what Doudou Pierre of Vía Campesina’s coordinating committee calls “the patrimony of humanity.” Haiti’s [seed stock](#) is not going towards the March planting season as intended, but rather toward feeding the flood of internally displaced people. Farmers need help in procuring seed supplies, which they insist not be genetically modified. Chavannes Jean-Baptiste insists that “If people start sending hybrid, GMO seeds, that’s the end of Haitian agriculture.”
- **A ban on food aid** in the medium to long-term. U.S.A.I.D. alone is giving \$113 million in food aid this year, according to an Associated Press article on February 26. Farmers agree that aid is critical in this moment of crisis, but say that the government needs to quickly do everything it can to shore up production so that domestic agriculture can begin replacing the aid. Otherwise, Haiti will grow even more dependent, and multinational food and seed companies will overtake Haiti’s market even more.

The challenges are many. The chief challenge is securing the state’s commitment of the priorities outlined above. The government has a long history of responding not to the needs of peasant farmers but to those of the large landowning class and, more recently, to the desires of the U.S. and other foreign powers looking to dump or sell food in Haiti.

In interviews, farmer after farmer indicated a resolve to work to change this state of affairs, recognizing

that it will be a long haul. Says Tèt Kole's Rosnel Jean-Baptiste, "It's up to us social movements to put our heads together to change the situation of food production and the model of the state in Haiti."

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Beverly Bell has worked with Haitian social movements for over 30 years. She is also author of the book *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance*. She coordinates [Other Worlds](#), which promotes social and economic alternatives, and is associate fellow of the [Institute for Policy Studies](#).

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