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HAITI

ONE YEAR LATER

Food security for a nation

While the world focused on the devastation of Port-au-Prince after last January's earthquake, a much different, but no less heart-rending story was unfolding far from the cameras.

"Nearly all the peasants you meet took in some family and friends after the earthquake," says Yvan Girardin, Development and Peace's representative in Haiti. "Households went from five to 12 people overnight, a huge burden when your home is one room with no electricity or running water. But the solidarity of individual Haitians is incredible – they helped one another."

There is almost no one in Haiti who was unaffected by the earthquake. Even if they were far from the epicentre, they now face critical food shortages.

During the colonial period, Haiti was one of the richest islands in the Caribbean, but it suffered tremendous deforestation and agricultural exploitation in order to achieve that wealth, says Mr. Girardin. "It stripped the fertility of the land, created problems of erosion and made crops extremely vulnerable to the weather."

The degradation continues. "Just 30 years ago, the country was practically self-sufficient in terms of food production. But because of poor soil and imports flooding the local market, agriculture has suffered terribly," he says.

Many imported products are subsidized in their countries of origin, so they are sold cheaply on the Haitian market. As a result, local producers can't compete and have had to reduce production of those crops, impoverishing Haiti's large peasant population even further. Climate change is also affecting the country, generating more rain and tropical storms.

With its local partners, Development and Peace, a Canadian organization that has been in Haiti for 40 years, is working toward sustainable food security. It's not easy.

"In the aftermath of the earthquake, we provided for the distribution of seeds so farmers could get back on their feet," Mr. Girardin says. "Many used their seed reserves to feed displaced people from Port-au-Prince. The local seeds we distributed gave people a chance. But then Hurricane Tomas blew through and destroyed their crops."

Haiti has enormous agriculture potential, he says, but growers must use sustainable farming methods and must be more prepared for disasters to protect both people and crops.

about

Development and Peace is a Canadian international development organization working to address the root causes of poverty and injustice in the Global South. Founded in 1967 by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the organization's aim is to reach out to the most poor and vulnerable regardless of race, gender or religion.

Beyond raising awareness of social justice issues among Canadians, Development and Peace works in over 30 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, partnering with local organizations to bring change in their respective countries. It is the Canadian member of the Caritas Internationalis confederation of the Catholic Church and receives program funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

by the numbers

24

Percentage of children under 5 who suffer from chronic malnutrition in Haiti. The UN World Food Program says the figure is as high as 40 per cent in the poorest areas.

80

Percentage of rice in Haiti that is imported. Domestic rice production began to decline in the 1990s with the arrival of subsidized imports from the U.S.



Many peasant farmers in the Plateau Central region of Haiti took in displaced people from Port-au-Prince. They received local seeds to help feed the new people in their households. PHOTO: DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

IRATAM, a local organization, is achieving this through a coffee co-operative in northeast Haiti. "Coffee trees are excellent for preventing soil erosion, and it is a crop that can be sold locally and exported," says Mr. Girardin. "IRATAM helped farmers improve the quality of their crops, which increased the price of their beans. But the coffee production is just one facet of an integrated approach to agriculture that incorporates other food-producing crops to ensure a diversity of produce."

At least 75 per cent of the people in Haiti are peasants. While they can grow enough food to feed the country and make a living doing it, "what they lack is the means," Mr. Girardin says. "We want to pro-

vide them with that opportunity."

For this to happen, he says, the international community must support small-scale farmers. "Industrial farming of crops, destined only for export, will worsen food security in the long run."

The impact of this work promises to be profound.

"Development and Peace's support will help provide peasant women with more income through new (agricultural) activities," says Louisane Nazaire, a co-ordinator of OFTAG, an organization that works with peasant women in isolated areas of Haiti. "They will be able to make more money by selling more at the market. And that will change their lives."

Mouvman Peyizan Papay (MPP, or Papaye Peasant Move-

ment), another Development and Peace partner, is one of Haiti's largest grassroots peasant organizations and one of the most successful at dealing with issues involving food production, land protection and viable peasant co-operatives.

After the earthquake, Development and Peace provided funding so MPP could distribute local seeds to 20,500 people, something that benefited more than 100,000 people.

Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, executive director of MPP, says industrial farming has not helped Haitians.

"The best solution is to return to small-scale farming and family farming," he says. "Peasants can use local products and achieve food sovereignty."

Through local citizens and partnership efforts, Development and Peace is making a difference

ON THE GROUND

OFTAG works with more than 3,000 women in several isolated parts of Haiti, many of whom survive by growing food to feed their families. If there is any surplus, they walk hours to market and save the bit of money they get to send their children to school.

Many of the women travel long distances to take part in meetings, walking barefoot along rocky mountain paths. They learn things like how to cultivate sweet potatoes or keep their soil fertile.

But the meetings are also a place where they can safely talk about the hardships that shape their lives and share their hopes for a better future for their children.

Development and Peace is providing them with seeds, has set up a tool bank and will eventually bring mills to some communities, so women don't have to use valuable time to travel so far for the service.

Etienne Malcaho, 35, rises before the sun to make food for her three daughters and a nephew she is raising. Once the children leave for school, Etienne spends three hours fetching water from the nearest clean source. Then she cleans, cooks, works in the fields and makes trips to the market.

After the earthquake, Etienne took in several friends and family from Port-au-Prince, and her household grew to 13.

"Women peasants are the poorest in this country," she says. "We don't have access to knowledge, and this prevents us from being able to best make use of the riches at our doorstep, but OFTAG is helping us get that knowledge."

OFTAG also gave Etienne seeds to plant to help cope with the extra people under her roof. Soon she will help to tend a chicken coop that has the potential to create a viable source of income for the women in her community.



PHOTO: DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

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ONE YEAR OF SOLIDARITY WITH HAITI

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