

With women comprising more than half of Haiti's population, and nearly 40 per cent of all citizens under the age of 14, women and youth must play vital roles in Haiti's reconstruction and future. Efforts are now helping them address challenges and build capacity.

HAITI

ONE YEAR LATER

Empowering women and youth

Women make up more than half the population of Haiti, and almost 40 per cent of the population is 14 years of age or under. The empowerment of women and youth is imperative if Haiti is to rebuild and stabilize in the aftermath of last January's earthquake.

Toward this goal, Development and Peace, a Canadian non-governmental organization, works with local organizations in Haiti.

"Women are the backbone of Haiti," says Debra Bucher, a Development and Peace programs officer for Haiti. "Many families are raised by women on their own, and women carry out a very large proportion of the farming work. Haitian women are responsible, committed, engaged and dedicated – they're very impressive."

But violence against women, always an issue in Haiti, has become more prevalent since the earthquake. "There's very little protection in the tent camps," says Ms. Bucher.

With the help of Development and Peace, Fanm Deside, a local women's rights organization based in Jacmel, is providing counselling and judicial services to women who are victims of violence, as well as organizing security patrols in camps in Jacmel.

Fanm Deside, founded by the Montreal congregation Institut des Soeurs de Notre-Dame du Bon-Conseil in 1988, educates women, police and judges about laws to protect women. The group's efforts recently resulted in the adoption of harsher penalties for rape convictions.

In its cash-for-work program, supported by Development and Peace, the group is hiring women for a project to enrich the country's agricultural capacity. The project is adopting measures to reduce erosion and regenerate soil to improve farming productivity, Ms. Bucher says. "Through our tree nurseries, women are strengthening their capacity to grow crops, using composting and natural pesticides."

Fanm Deside coordinator Marie-Ange Noel, notes that "the women make money, but they also learn skills and do something for the environment, by preserving the soil." The six nurseries are already profitable, and some participants have used money they've earned to buy their own seeds, she says.

Another Development and Peace partner, the Mouvement Peyizan Papay (MPP, or Papaye Peasant Movement) promotes higher education for peasant women, enabling many to achieve master's degrees overseas and serve in senior management positions in the

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).

organization. "The management of the organization now consists of more women than men, which is quite an achievement," says Ms. Bucher.

For Haiti's youth, education is the primary challenge, despite being one of the best hopes for a better future for the country. There is virtually no public school system, so most schools are run by religious organizations. The Montreal-based Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, for example, runs eight schools across the country, including the Mother Delia Institute, an all-girls school in Port-au-

Prince that has grown to 850 students from 140 when it opened in 2002.

The institute lost its primary school in the earthquake, but with help from Development and Peace, work is underway for a new 10-classroom school featuring anti-seismic construction.

"We wanted to aim higher," says school director Sister Josette Drouinaud. "Parents want to give their children a quality education, so we want to make the school bigger so they have that opportunity," she adds, noting the new school will be where the Sisters' Mother House was before it col-

lapsed in the earthquake.

"We want the girls to feel a sense of belonging here, that this school is not just a place where they come, but that it is theirs, and they need to contribute to its beauty and its atmosphere. They will carry that with them into their own communities and throughout their lives."

Development and Peace has also helped children affected by the earthquake re-integrate into classrooms, including 1,200 students at Marie-Esther School and Saint-Antoine School, both run by the Sisters of Saint-Anne congregation.



Students at Saint-Antoine School, an all-girls primary school in Port-au-Prince, were able to return to school thanks to the support of Development and Peace. PHOTO: DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

by the numbers

2.8

The average years of schooling an adult in Haiti has (UNESCO)

200

The number of women Fanm Deside employs in its cash-for-work program

80

Percentage of women victimized by domestic abuse (local human rights group estimate)

ON THE GROUND

In a country where violence against women is pervasive, Fanm Deside spreads the word about women's and children's rights.

The group, which was founded in 1988 by the Montreal-based Institut des Soeurs de Notre-Dame du Bon-Conseil, organizes meetings of women to explain to them what constitutes violence against them and what recourse they can take. Fanm Deside's trained staff members accompany women who have been assaulted to the hospital and to the police, and work with local police and judges to sensitize them to the plight of women and to the laws that are there to protect them. Frequently, local police will refer women to Fanm Deside so they can get the help they need.

In the tent camps, the organization holds weekly meetings to talk to women about what they are experiencing and to create a sense of solidarity among them so

they can look after one another. To support economic independence, Fanm Deside launched six tree nurseries where women learn to cultivate fruit trees.

Maximée Mariani, 35, has walked at least an hour to the offices of Fanm Deside. A group meeting was to take place at the camp where she lives – Camp Pinchinat in Jacmel, where long rows of tents without electricity disappear into shadow as the sun sets – but was cancelled when Hurricane Tomas hit.

In other weeks, women at the camp, often more than 100, come together in a safe environment at the Fanm Deside meetings and talk about their lives.

Like many of the women here, Maximée sees little hope of leaving the camp anytime soon. She does not own any property and is unemployed. But Fanm Deside is giving her a glimpse into the pos-



PHOTO: DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

sibility of a better future. "I am learning things that I didn't know, especially on violence against women," she says. "It gives me hope. Their words are encouraging to me because they show me what I can do as a woman, what I can become."

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So·cial Jus·tice \ expression of hope \ today, this woman has enough food to feed her family

Development and Peace

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