

P406

# HAITI

## A People's Struggle for Hope

“The only chance for peasants to get out of what they're in now is 'Tet Ansanm' (to put our heads together) and organize!”

The young Haitian grassroots leader stood with me on the terraced hillside in the fertile Artibonite Valley of Haiti. I was in Haiti to learn more of grassroots development efforts amidst that nation's severe political and economic problems. The grassroots organizer worked with groups of poor peasants in the mountains to show that crafting simple earth, stick and plant barriers along the hilly contours can save precious top-soil from washing away.

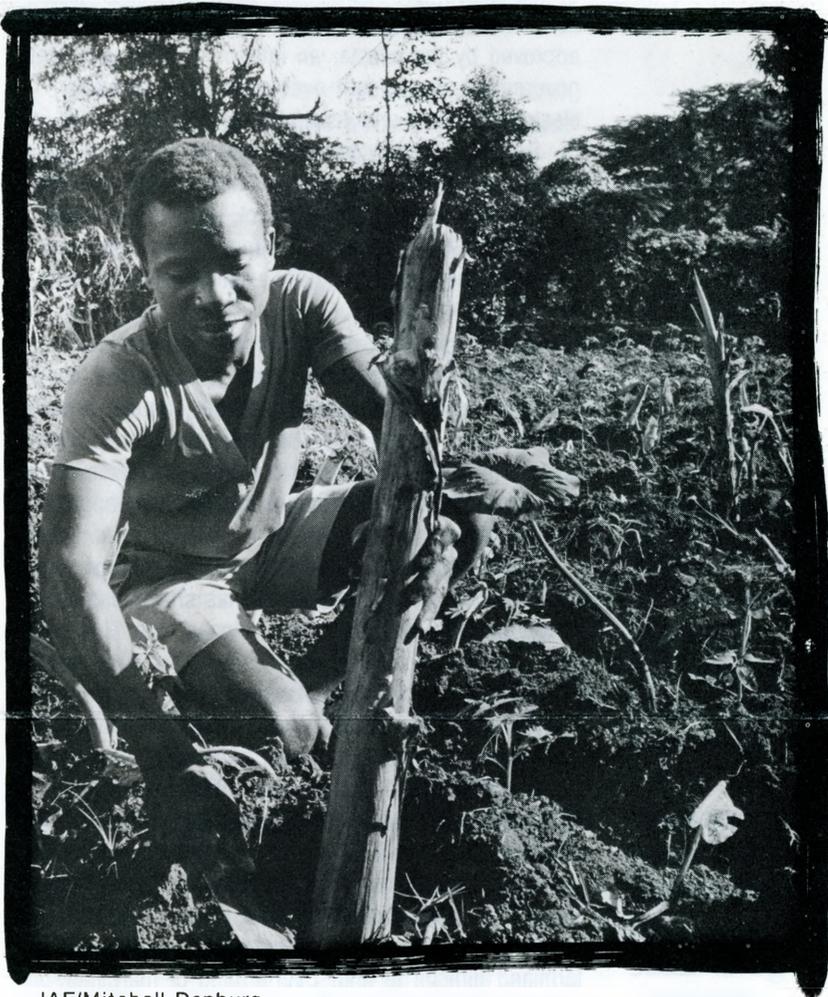
In Haiti, exploitation of resources, deforestation, governmental neglect and several other factors have undermined the rural economy and have made Haiti the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. Yet local "gros negs" ("big shots") tend to see any organizing leading toward a more mobilized peasant movement as a threat to their control. They often try to intimidate grassroots organizers, with the acquiescence of police and military authorities. Oppression, one quickly notes, is a daily reality for many Haitians.

But the spirit of Tet Ansanm, the peasant-led group movement of working together for the common good, holds the key to a political, social, spiritual and economic awakening that could help transform the face of Haiti.

### Haiti in History

Haiti's independence in 1804, following a slave revolt, held a promise of hope for Haiti as the world's first Black republic. Yet most Haitians have continued to suffer both political and economic oppression. Despotic leaders, unconcerned with the needs of poor people, have generally ruled Haiti.

United States Marines occupied the country from 1915 to 1934, leaving a legacy of U.S. domination of the economy and support for the political status quo. More recently, with economic and military aid, the United States often supported the brutal 29-year reign



IAF/Mitchell Denburg

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of the Duvaliers, Francois and his son Jean-Claude.

The legacy in hunger and misery is clear: Haiti's infant mortality rate is 123 per thousand live births; the average life span is 55 years; per capita income is \$330; and the literacy rate is less than 25 percent. More than three-quarters of the rural population lives in poverty, and just 12 percent of the people have reasonable access to a safe water supply. Conditions like this, coupled with fears of political oppression, helped push many thousands of poor Haitians to seek refuge in the United States and other nearby countries.

For a brief moment recently, however, some light shone through this darkness. Haitians still speak of their "revolution"—the ousting of Jean-Claude Duvalier on Feb. 7, 1986. A widely-supported popular uprising sent the dictator and his family into exile in France. Duvalier's leaving, in part orchestrated by the United States, set in motion a two-year Haitian flirtation with democracy. Under a constitution overwhelmingly approved by the people, an interim, military-controlled government was to turn over power to a popularly-elected president and Assembly by February 1988.

But the euphoria soon changed to bitterness. In mid-summer 1987 the military tried to seize the electoral process from civilian control. Although unsuccessful, the military, with aid from Duvalier loyalists, disrupted the November 1987 national elections with widespread violence.

The military then proceeded with its own version of elections in January 1988, but by June their hand-picked president had overstepped his bounds, and the military again seized power in a bloodless coup. The military government's first acts were to threaten those who opposed it and to tear up the popularly-approved constitution.

Haiti's struggle for democracy today mirrors the economic and social turmoil that has characterized the nation's history.

### **An Economy in Jeopardy**

Because about three-quarters of Haitians live in rural areas, peasant agriculture remains the basis for future development in Haiti. Agricultural development efforts, however, have not significantly improved peasants' lives.

Access to at least a modest plot of land to farm is usually not a serious problem for Haitian peasants, but Haiti's steep, mountainous terrain has made prime farmland difficult to find. Overfarming of marginally productive hillsides and excessive cutting of trees for firewood, charcoal and houses have led to severe deforestation and erosion. Even when peasants are able to grow enough to sell, powerful intermediaries often control the means to market and export agricultural products, keeping returns to producers low.

During the 1980s, some outside aid donors, including the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development (A.I.D.), have strongly encouraged the Haitian government to emphasize increased

export production rather than grow more food for Haitians. Under this plan, Haitian farmers would use more land than they are now to produce coffee, cacao, cotton, fruit, cut flowers and other crops for export. Some analysts fear this would divert land from use to feed Haitians and would increase reliance on imported food. These critics point out that the United States has given food aid to encourage the shift to what they see as a risky food security strategy that makes Haiti dependent on imported food and hostage to world commodity prices.

Meanwhile, assembly industries controlled by foreign (particularly U.S.) companies, producing baseballs, textiles and electronics, have grown up near Port-au-Prince, luring peasants off the land and bloating the capital's already overcrowded slums. The \$3 a day in wages that workers receive in many of these jobs is not enough to lift workers above poverty. Yet those who promote and profit from these industries say that keeping wages low is necessary to make Haiti competitive with other nations that offer cheap labor to attract industry.

Haiti's economy is also harmed by contraband goods, from the United States, the Dominican Republic and other countries, that undercut rice production and lower market prices for pig products on which many peasants rely for income. The threat of widespread drug trafficking through Haiti is also an emerging concern.

### **Where Is Hope?**

Many Haitians are frustrated and confused after years of governmental oppression and neglect of



grassroots development. They often see U.S. government aid and export-oriented approaches to development as a serious problem rather than solution. With democratic national elections still an unfulfilled dream, and with its economy constantly at risk, where is hope in Haiti?

Many Haitian grassroots leaders remain worried about the future, uncertain and fearful of reprisals for the organizing work they do. I saw a community grain silo that had been firebombed, and I met organizers who had been jailed for their activism—testimony to the reality of those fears.

Others maintain hope. As one Catholic leader said, "We're at the edge of a precipice, and discouragement tempts us more and more. The situation in this country is an insult to God. Our faith can bring us a solution. . . . We are not an abandoned people."

It is at the grassroots that the seed of long-term hope remains. Peasants constantly point to the potential for change through the techniques of Tet Ansanm and the mutual support of local groups.

Over the last decade, peasant and religious groups, such as IDEA in Cap Haitien, ITECA in Gressier, and Centre Emaus in Papaye, have been training "animateurs," men and women who learn group formation and mobilization techniques to expand peasants' consciousness about their situations. Animateurs, usually selected by their rural peasant groups, are trained in courses such as community health, development, sociology, cooperation, agronomy and problem solving. They then return to help their groups analyze the causes of their problems, find solutions, and develop ways to implement them. The

key is to "animate" groups to think and act for themselves, not to dictate decisions from outside.

Often, through cooperation and self-help, the solutions are at hand. They may include forming local production and marketing cooperatives or revolving credit funds to help pay for seeds, tools or feed for livestock. Peasants may collaborate in building anti-erosion ramps and planting trees on each others' hillside gardens.

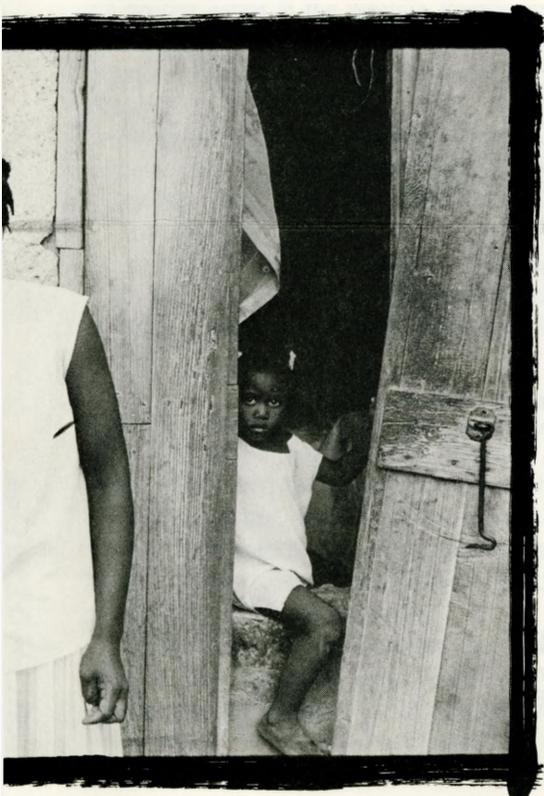
At other times, groups may decide that outside financial aid and technical assistance are vital. Some outside organizations, including private voluntary organizations (PVOs), are working to respond to peasants' needs in ways that are sensitive to people at the grassroots and to long-term development strategies. Two such organizations I observed are the Inter-American Foundation and the Mennonite Central Committee. Their work includes aid for reforestation, erosion control, literacy, group formation, health, agricultural techniques, cooperatives and credit programs.

Haiti cannot be totally self-sufficient, so a sound development strategy includes producing some goods for export. For example, one PVO, the Mennonite Economic Development Association (MEDA), has helped organize Haitian cacao producers into marketing cooperatives that sell directly to Hershey's and other buyers, eliminating profits that normally go to marketing and exporting intermediaries. The co-op has grown into the third largest cacao exporter in Haiti. In urban areas, MEDA runs micro-enterprise projects for small-scale entrepreneurs, such as shoemakers and tailors, to provide jobs and income.

Yet all aid is not good aid. Haitians receive much "help" that does not lead to Haitian control and that perpetuates poverty. Food programs too often create disincentives to local production; credit and other resources can fall into the hands of "big shots" rather than help poor people; some projects, such as craft production, are begun by outside donors but cannot be sustained when external financing ends. One Haitian church leader told me that an outside agency once built some dams for irrigation but would not help establish the groups needed to decide how to apportion water rights: "The distribution of water was anarchic. . . . A community irrigation system that doesn't rest on a solid base of community organization has no viability at all. Cement yes, but organization first," he said.

In addition to grassroots initiatives that are supported by effective external aid when needed, another key to hope is the church. The "Ti Legliz" (little church) movement in the Roman Catholic Church offers a local, small group approach to helping Haitians understand and use the Gospel to confront their problems. The Catholic Church also created a grassroots literacy and consciousness-raising program called "Misyon Alfa," responding to the nation's 75 percent illiteracy rate. Although the bishops suspended the program in April 1988, under what many disappointed observers felt was political pressure, the bishops and

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donors recently have begun efforts to revitalize the literacy effort with a broader base of support.

### U.S. Policies That Make Sense

U.S. policy must respond to both the political situation and the development needs in Haiti. Grassroots leaders with whom I spoke advocated two short-term policies for the United States to follow:

1. The United States should not provide military or economic aid to the Haitian government until there is popular participation in electing that government and in ongoing democratic institutions in Haiti.

Officially, the United States cut off aid to the Haitian government after the November 1987 election debacle, and that firm stand should continue.

2. The United States should increase pressure on the military government so it will move as quickly as possible to democratic elections, controlled by independent civilian authorities, and to enhanced respect for human rights, including open political expression.

Two bills introduced in the 100th Congress, H. R. 4152 and S. 2170, support these two essential policies.

Meanwhile, longer-term humanitarian and development needs are urgent. The United States and other donors should increase development aid that is channeled through non-governmental organizations committed to working with grassroots groups, to aid in erosion control and reforestation, potable water and irrigation projects, pig repopulation efforts (see box), literacy, animatuer group formation and education, and health care. Efforts must continue to build the capacity of local groups to use aid effectively.

If the United States provides food aid, which was widely criticized among peasants I met, it should do so only in carefully targeted programs that do not disrupt peasant agriculture or create dependency.

Also, the United States needs to encourage Haiti to adopt a development model that is based on self-reliance and will meet the peoples' basic needs, rather than a model that increasingly emphasizes exports as a solution to Haiti's problems.

One young Haitian animateur, frustration and bitterness in his voice, spoke frankly to me:

"I've never known democracy. I've never been free. These past years we've been fighting to reach freedom, and we've not only not succeeded, it's as if the rope around our neck is tighter. Tell me whether I'll ever be free, or whether I'll spend my whole life without knowing freedom!"

The answer lies in large part with the Haitian people and their willingness to struggle against seemingly long odds. But the United States, a key factor in Haiti's history and in its situation today, must find ways to support that struggle, not frustrate it through a narrow sense of self-interest. Our sisters and brothers in nearby Haiti, so long tied to brutality and repression, need support as they seek a better future. As representatives from the Ti Legliz movement have

## PIGS—A CASE STUDY IN DISASTER

The small, black "cochon planche" (rustic pig) was the backbone of the Haitian peasant economy—a source of food, a means for peasants to dispose of garbage and maintain hygiene, and an insurance policy for school, wedding or medical expenses. When African swine fever came to Haiti in 1978, fear that the disease would spread led the Haitian government, with U.S. urging, to slaughter the entire pig population, with inadequate recompense to peasants. Some claimed the swine fever threat was overstated, but the decision was made, not by peasants but by governments—and peasants suffered. Further exacerbating peasants' powerlessness, new U.S.-bred hogs introduced as an alternative often proved too costly for peasants to maintain and were susceptible to disease. To fatten up properly and produce their customary big litters, the U.S. hogs needed special feed and, ideally, concrete houses—better living standards than most Haitians can afford for their families. Many peasants were outraged and defiant, demanding justice—sentiments still heard today. The possibility that peasants could earn more by selling the larger U.S. hogs was not enough, when the risks along the way were so high.

Today, projects are underway to distribute the U.S. hogs along with credit to pay for higher costs. The hogs are adapting, some contend, and can meet the needs of some peasants. Meanwhile, other programs aim to reintroduce types of smaller, more adaptable pigs to Haiti, so more peasants will have a choice about which pigs would be better to raise. Peasants still need aid to help make affordable pigs available to them.

proclaimed: "Jesus Christ is with us to help us continue the mission he entrusted us with, 'to preach good news to the poor, to make the blind see and the deaf hear, to release the captives...' (Luke 4:18). Together we seek the light, together we raise hope. We are already organizing ourselves to this end."

### Resources

Josh DeWind and David Kinley, *Aiding Migration: The Impact of International Development Assistance in Haiti*, 1988, Westview Press, 5500 Central Avenue Boulder, CO 80301.

*The Haiti Beat*, newsletter published four times a year by Washington Office on Haiti, 110 Maryland Avenue N.E., Washington, DC 20002, \$6 per year for individuals.

Mary Evelyn Jegen, *Haiti: The Struggle Continues*, 1987, Pax Christi USA, 348 East Tenth Street, Erie, PA 16053, \$2 plus shipping.



### Bread for the World

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