Poorest in the West: Probing Haiti’s Image in the Wake of the 2008 Hurricane Season

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Abstract

In the fall of 2008, Haiti was hit by a series of tropical storms that caused widespread flooding, hundreds of deaths, and costly damage to farm fields, roads, and buildings. Although a portion of the destruction was attributable to the vagaries of nature, the extent of the devastation and the frequency of such events in Haiti lead to deeper questions about the history of environmental degradation and the failure of development efforts in the country. Internal corruption and external profiteering have each played a role in the country’s economic and environmental collapse since its independence over 200 years ago. Currently, most investors have been scared away by Haiti’s precarious political state, while many non-profit organizations have adopted a narrow focus on surface issues. The failure to address the root causes of environmental destruction in Haiti has resulted in repeated disasters that destroy any development progress made during the intervening years. This report examines Haiti’s past and future in light of the author’s experiences in Gonaïves during the 2008 hurricane season. It also introduces the work of two organizations—one non-profit and one for-profit—that are striving to reshape Haiti’s image through integrated economic and environmental reforms.

Keywords: environment; sustainable development; biofuels; Haiti.

1. Poised for Disaster

When Hurricane Hanna hit Gonaïves, Haiti on September 1, 2008, the word on everyone’s lips was “Jeanne.” As the first drops of rain fell, the city’s residents casually mentioned the name, referring to the 2004 hurricane that claimed over 2,500 of their neighbors in its floods and mudslides. They nervously recalled their experiences with Jeanne as the water from Hanna crept toward their homes. After two days and two nights of rain, they moaned that they were reliving a nightmare.

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1 Death tolls are notoriously difficult to determine in Haiti. Goldenberg estimates Hurricane Jeanne caused over 3,000 deaths throughout Haiti, while Nzirorera estimates the hurricane caused over 2,500 deaths within the city of Gonaïves.
Like New Orleans or Calcutta or Dacca, Gonaives is a city poised for disaster. Much of the city is below sea level, so when hurricanes hit, drenching rains, overflowing rivers, and the surging ocean combine to fill the bowl-like city with water. In poverty-stricken Haiti pumps are rare, so the water stays for weeks or even months. In Gonaives, a drainage system paid for by the German government during the Duvalier regime offered some protection in the past, but the system has been in need of repairs since the mid-1990s.³

2. A History of Environmental Degradation

² It is also notoriously difficult to determine the population of major Haitian cities. Most official sources (see Katz) give a population of around 100,000, but local Haitians suggest it could be as high as 200,000.
³ Gonaives is commonly known among Haitians to be the City of Independence because Jean-Jacques Dessalines read the Proclamation of Independence there on January 1, 1804 (Arthur, Haiti in Focus p. 20). It is traditional for the Haitian president to give a speech in Gonaives on January 1 each year in honor of the country’s Independence Day.
⁴ See Arthur and Dash pp. 154-156 for a description of Gonaives’ role as a “Cradle of Rebellion.” See Farmer pp. 104-106 for a description of the events leading up to the Duvaliers’ fall from power. See Belleau for a detailed list of documented 20th century massacres in Haiti.
⁵ The failure of the drainage canals in Gonaives is a frequent subject of conversation among the Haitians who live there. Morisset provided details of the canals’ history.
Dangerous topography and deficient technology are not the only culprits in the tale of Gonaïves’s tragedy. Centuries of environmental degradation have primed Haiti for dire consequences whenever storms batter the island nation. The degradation renders the term “natural disaster” a half-truth that disguises any human contribution to the disasters.

In the early years of European settlement on the island of Hispaniola, Spain concentrated its operations around the southeastern port of Santo Domingo in the present-day Dominican Republic. In 1697 France took control of the western third of the island through the Treaty of Ryswick. French colonizers soon cleared large swaths of land for cotton, sugarcane, coffee, and indigo plantations. African slaves were imported to work the plantations since the native Taíno population had already been decimated by disease and brutality. The colony was so prosperous at the time that it was known as the “Pearl of the Antilles.”6 By the latter half of the 18th century, it held nearly half of all Caribbean slaves and its revenue exceeded the combined revenue of all thirteen North American colonies.7

The harsh working conditions and gross imbalance between slaves and owners generated a volatile atmosphere that erupted in 1791 with a slave rebellion led by skilled military strategist Toussaint L’Ouverture. After a fierce twelve-year war, the former slaves declared independence as the Republic of Haiti on January 1, 1804. However, France refused to accept Haiti’s independence until 1825 when Haitian

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6 Arthur provides a brief history of Haiti’s colonial period in *Haiti in Focus* pp. 15-17.
7 See Farmer p. 56 for details about the slave-based economy in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, present-day Haiti.
President Jean-Pierre Boyer agreed to pay 150 million francs for the property losses suffered by the French colonists.\textsuperscript{8}

The deal was a desperate attempt by the Haitian elite to receive diplomatic recognition and thereby rejoin the international trading community. As the self-declared first black republic in the world, Haiti found itself isolated among its slave-owning neighbors, including the other young American republic, the United States. Southern U.S. politicians campaigned aggressively against recognition of Haiti’s independence in spite of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, which declared U.S. support for other newly independent American nations.\textsuperscript{9} As a result, the U.S. did not acknowledge Haiti’s independence until 1862 when the Civil War forced northern states to seek an alliance with Haitian cotton growers.\textsuperscript{10} Nonetheless, U.S. merchants secured nearly 45 percent of Haiti’s import market within the first two decades of the country’s unrecognized independence.\textsuperscript{11}

The price of international recognition for Haiti was high, both in terms of direct payments and skewed trade deals. The Haitian government frequently had to bribe German, French, British, and American warships that threatened to bombard the capital city of Port-au-Prince if not reimbursed for outstanding debts claimed by their nations’ merchants.\textsuperscript{12} Such payments put a severe strain on the new nation, most notably preventing investment in agriculture and severely diminishing the country’s natural capital. For example, throughout the nineteenth century, millions of mahogany and other hardwood trees were logged off Haiti’s mountain slopes and exported to raise funds.\textsuperscript{13}

Like a slow burn beneath the blazes of plantation agriculture and logging, the Haitian peasants also chipped away at the nation’s forests to clear land for subsistence farms, converting the cleared trees into charcoal.\textsuperscript{14} A 1986 study by Haiti’s Federation of the Friends of Nature reported that 72 percent of energy needs within the country were met by wood or charcoal, with 7.5 percent met by bagasse, 3.5 percent met by hydropower, and 1.5 percent met by petroleum. The lush forests that once covered Haiti’s mountainous landscape covered only 23 percent of the nation’s surface area by 1923, and by 1986 that figure had plummeted to 1.5 percent. It remains below 2 percent today.\textsuperscript{15}

Charcoal is not simply used by rural Haitians to meet their own fuel needs. It is also an important source of supplemental income for Haitian peasants, who sell the charcoal to the growing urban populations. The importance of charcoal to the survival of peasant families escalated in the 1980s when the fear of African Swine Fever prompted the U.S. government to oversee the extermination of Haiti’s Creole pig population in collaboration with Jean-Claude Duvalier. A planned pig repopulation program failed when the imported American pigs languished in the hot climate and harsh terrain of Haiti, conditions to which the indigenous Creole pigs had been well adapted. Faced with the loss of their pigs, which had served as a

\textsuperscript{8} Arthur offers an overview of the Haitian revolution in \textit{Haiti in Focus} pp. 18-21.
\textsuperscript{9} See Farmer pp. 67-69 for an analysis of foreign interference in post-revolution Haiti.
\textsuperscript{10} Arthur, \textit{Haiti in Focus} p. 22.
\textsuperscript{11} See Farmer p. 68 for a description of early U.S.-Haitian relations.
\textsuperscript{12} Farmer p. 68 and pp. 75-78.
\textsuperscript{13} Arthur, \textit{Haiti in Focus} p. 9.
\textsuperscript{14} Arthur, \textit{Haiti in Focus} pp. 9-10.
\textsuperscript{15} See Arthur and Dash pp. 101-103 for the full report.
source of economic security, Haitian peasants turned to cutting trees for charcoal.\textsuperscript{17}

Ironically, but tragically, when the dwellers of cities like Gonaïves burn charcoal to cook their food, they are burning their own flood protection. With the mountain slopes around Gonaïves stripped of trees, there is nothing to slow or diminish the onslaught of water into the city. The rain rolls easily off the bare, compacted ground, gathering strength as it pours into the overtaxed rivers, which quickly burst their banks and spread across the land.

3. Hurricane Hanna\textsuperscript{18}

Such was the case on the night of September 1, 2008 as three rivers near Gonaïves—Trois Rivières, Rivière LaQuinte, and Rivière Bayonnais—exploded with the burden of water streaming down from the mountains. Residents of the city and the surrounding farms awoke shortly before midnight to find water rising in

\textsuperscript{16} Arthur, \textit{Haiti in Focus} p. 42, and Arthur and Dash p. 102.
\textsuperscript{17} Arthur, \textit{Haiti in Focus} p. 42. Although the account given here matches the history of the pig extermination and repopulation program given in most texts, the author encountered a former Peace Corps volunteer in Port-au-Prince who disputed the claim that the pig repopulation program was a complete failure. He commented that journalists overreported the failures and underreported the successes of the program. He said the program was actually successful in breeding and distributing pigs and that most farmers were happy with the pigs they received.
\textsuperscript{18} Portions of this passage first appeared on the author’s blog: http://haitirelief.wordpress.com.
\textsuperscript{19} The names of these rivers were provided by Morisset.
their homes. As the water steadily mounted hour by hour, the people gathered what they could carry and moved to their rooftops, wading through muddy floodwaters and getting soaked by driving rain. Yet the rain kept falling, and the rivers kept rising. Those who could waded or swam through the waters again, this time to seek higher ground. Those who could not evacuate found themselves on top of their roofs in waist-deep water with no way to leave through the swirling floodwaters.

I had arrived in Haiti less than one month prior to Hanna. With the support of a Compton Mentor Fellowship, I was setting out to participate in and document a pilot biofuels project at Eben-Ezer Mission on the outskirts of Gonaives. As part of the fellowship, I would be helping to cultivate jatropha, a tropical tree native to the Americas that has gained much attention in recent years due to its oil-filled seeds, which can serve as feedstock for biodiesel production. The endeavor combined my recently earned degrees in English and Earth and Environmental Sciences and satisfied my desire to step away from the classroom for a while.

During the flight into Haiti, my mind whirred through statistics about my destination: poorest country in the western poorest hemisphere, over 98 percent deforestation rate, 70 percent unemployment rate, average life expectancy of sixty

20 Barta offers a report on the growing global popularity of jatropha biofuels. Benge provides a scientific analysis of the properties of jatropha and its potential as a biofuel source. Smucker pp. 101-126 presents an assessment of the potential for biofuel production in Haiti, including an extensive section on jatropha.
21 Farmer, p. 102.
22 Arthur and Dash p. 102.
23 Arthur, Haiti in Focus p. 41, and World Factbook: Haiti.
years. Yet these numbers flew out of my head when I caught my first glimpse of “Ayiti.” The land was wrinkled with row after row of rounded mountain ridges that flattened out only at the jagged edge between earth and sea. The brown and yellow hues of the mountain slopes, much like the desert mountains of the southwestern United States, jarred with the blue Caribbean waters.

As the weeks passed, I began to grasp the meaning of the statistics that had raced through my mind during the plane ride. I heard it in the voice of a young man who told me that education meant nothing because only those who were already rich could find jobs. I saw it in the bare, calloused feet of an old man who hobbled across the gravel roads with the aid of a cane to get to church. I experienced it as I tried to purchase simple gardening supplies and realized that money is of no help when the supplies simply do not exist. Yet I did not understand the true tragedy of life in Haiti until Hurricane Hanna hit. I watched the floodwaters flow up and over our first 1,000 jatropha seedlings. Along with my neighbors, I woke in the night to find water rising in my house. I joined my new friends in evacuating with whatever we could carry.

Over 1,500 people gathered on an island of dry land at the center of Eben-Ezer Mission. Just west of the mission, the walls of an orphanage collapsed. The children were evacuated on the backs of adults who waded and swam through the water to dry ground. Southeast of the mission, a great lake formed, covering a two-mile stretch of National Highway Number One and cutting off access to Port-au-Prince.

The situation in the city was even worse. Michel Morisset, who founded Eben-Ezer Mission in 1969 and today describes it as “a hatchery for institutions: churches, schools, health centers, and credit unions,” explained the conditions in the city with a vivid illustration from his family’s personal experiences: “The father of my wife passed away at the Government Hospital in Gonaives while everybody was carrying their sick people up to the second story. The first floor was quickly flooded to the ceiling. Right in front of the eyes of my two sisters-in-law, people were throwing the dead into the flood. The public and private morgues sent messages saying that they were flooded as well and couldn’t receive anyone. My sisters-in-law embraced the body of their father to prevent others from throwing him away.”

On Tuesday morning, the rain slowed and people emerged from their shelters to survey the damage. Fallen trees and flipped cars bore witness to the power of wind and water. The streets had turned to rushing rivers, but they were crowded nonetheless with people retrieving what they could carry from their homes, checking on friends and relatives, and simply contemplating their losses.

But the storm was not over. Hanna had stalled over northern Haiti, and in the afternoon, the rain picked up again. The floodwaters mounted throughout the night as people sought shelter once more. A 23-year old woman, Jezula Preval, gave birth to a son on Tuesday night shortly after moving to a crowded school building at Eben-Ezer Mission. The news of the “hurricane baby” spread quickly the next day.
Sporadic showers on Wednesday and a driving downpour in the middle of the night gave the impression that the rain would never end. In Morisset’s home, where over 40 people had gathered, crying children could be heard amidst the sound of rain drumming on the tin roof. In response, older voices joined in song, trying to counter the fear that was rising with the waters.

4. The Calm between the Storms

At two o’clock in the morning on September 6, the heat was palpable inside Morisset’s home where I had sought refuge. Children sprawled across bunk beds, armchairs, and sofas. Those who couldn’t find a bed slept on blankets spread over the concrete floors. Tossing and turning in the thick heat, the residents of the home tried to get some rest at the end of a traumatic week.

Outside, the white light of stars was visible for the first time in days. Clear skies had finally arrived the previous day, and the hundreds of people living on the patch of dry land around Morisset’s home had took advantage of the reprieve from the storm to make repairs, retrieve belongings from flooded homes, and hang laundry out to dry. Despite the misery all around, a sense of regularity had returned to life as people went about the daily tasks that must be completed in even the worst of circumstances. One woman, talking on her cell phone to a friend, described the people’s morale, “Some cry. Some laugh. That’s how Haitians are. When they don’t

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know what else to do, they laugh.20

A technician arrived by boat from Saint-Marc to repair Eben-Ezer Mission’s satellite Internet system. By three o’clock in the afternoon, the system was running. A few mission leaders and I waded through thigh-deep water to reach the office, where several inches of water covered the floor. We set up our laptops and spent the next six hours sending messages and photos to communicate Gonaives’ needs to the world beyond the floodwaters.

Many people had not eaten since Monday, and a sense of urgency prevailed among the community leaders seeking aid for the city. The window for relief efforts was narrow with Hurricane Ike swirling over the Atlantic Ocean to the east of Haiti. However, swollen rivers and destroyed bridges blocked the major routes into Gonaives, so the city was largely left to its own devices as Ike closed in.

5. Hurricane Ike30

In the late evening of Saturday, September 6, the first rains from Hurricane Ike descended on Gonaives, a city still sitting in the waters left by Hanna. The storm continued most of the night, intensifying just after midnight. The peals of thunder sounded like the roar of jet engines, and the clatter of wind-driven rain on tin roofs resembled the steady hum of helicopter blades, creating the atmosphere of a war

20 This comment was overheard by the author.
30 Portions of this passage first appeared on the author’s blog: http://haitirelief.wordpress.com.
scene. Occasional flashes of lightning in the black skies offered the residents of Morisset's house their only glimpse of the rising water in the yard. By daylight, the rain had slowed, although occasional outbursts continued throughout the morning. All day, the home's residents watched the floodwaters slowly but steadily creep across the yard. By late afternoon, the waters had settled, encircling the house but not high enough to enter.

Gonaives was a defeated city. The shattered spirit of the place was visible on people's faces as they wandered through waist-deep water trying to decide where to go and how to survive. Over the subsequent weeks, aid slowly trickled into the city, brought by boats, helicopters, and eventually trucks once alternate routes were established to bypass the ruined bridges and flooded roads. The immediate food relief staved off starvation for most, but disease ravaged the people—mosquito-borne malaria, vaginal infections from wading through filthy water, severe allergies from the mold, and infected cuts on bare feet. “As I have become more and more conscious of what has happened to us, I have come to realize that this is an act of war of the powers of death against life,” wrote Morisset in a letter to friends of Eben-Ezer Mission one week after Ike.\textsuperscript{31}

Although the Gonaives death count from the direct effects of Hanna and Ike, estimated at 500,\textsuperscript{32} was lower than that of Jeanne, the local people quickly declared that the extent of the flood damage was “pire,” or worse. Despair reigned, and long-term efforts at environmental restoration and economic development were pushed aside in the face of the immediate need for food, water, and medical aid.

\textsuperscript{31} Personal conversation and correspondence with Morisset.
\textsuperscript{32} Delva and Goldenberg.
“The damage to buildings from Jeanne was for the most part reparable,” wrote Morisset in a December letter. “Hanna and Ike have left a situation where everybody is helpless. The government authorities are still talking about relocating the city, except they don’t know where to take it.”

Shortly after the storms, the leaders of Eben-Ezer Mission compiled a report of the damage. The Federation of Protestant Schools of Haiti has approximately 165 schools in Gonaïves, serving 18,500 students. Of these, Morisset estimated that 80 percent were damaged by the flooding, and 35 percent of those were completely destroyed. However, the destruction of school buildings was only the start of the concerns. Thousands of homes and agricultural fields were also ruined, while tens of thousands of farm animals were drowned.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do,” said Roseline Corvil, the director of a local school. “We can’t ask the families to pay, but the teachers are in the same position as everyone else. They can’t work without pay.”

6. Preventing Another Nightmare

In the wake of the 2008 hurricane season, the greatest cry in Gonaïves is an anguished demand to know how this could happen again, only four years after the terrors of Jeanne. The greatest fear of the Gonaïves people is that nothing will be done to prevent another nightmare in one, two, or three year’s time.

After the hurricanes, Morisset frequently discussed the future of Haiti with the relatives and neighbors who had taken up residence in his home. One evening, he told the story of an American teacher he had as a child, who taught him that students must first have an education and then choose a vocation. However, Morisset put forth his own theory that vocation must come before education in Haiti. His rationalization was that Haitian students must have a source of income in order to afford education and to give a sense of purpose to their studies.

Morisset’s theory of putting vocation first could be applied to many aspects of Haitian society since the country’s feeble economy inhibits the advancement of many social causes. With formal unemployment languishing at 70 percent,37 most citizens lack the economic means to pay for services, such as medical care and education. In fact, over one million Haitians rely on food aid,38 indicating that they do not even have the means to meet basic survival needs. The government, with total annual revenues of less than 1 billion U.S. dollars,39 also lacks the funds to pay for these services. Corruption also plays a significant role in the government’s inefficacy. As a result, medical care is provided largely by foreign aid.40 Many Haitians delay seeking treatment for weeks or even months so they can attend the free or low-cost clinics offered by teams of foreign volunteers. As a result, the local Haitian doctors, where

33 Personal conversation and correspondence with Morisset.
34 See the link listed under Eben-Ezer Evangelical Mission of Gonaïves for the full report.
35 Personal conversation with Corvil.
36 Based on the author’s attendance at these community discussions.
37 Arthur, Haiti in Focus p. 41, and World Factbook: Haiti.
38 Arthur, Haiti in Focus p. 49.
39 World Factbook: Haiti.
40 Arthur, Haiti in Focus p. 32.
they are available at all, often face low patient numbers during the intervening periods.\textsuperscript{41} Foreign support in the form of food aid and medical care is necessary to alleviate the immediate suffering of millions of people, but these actions do little to reverse the long-term economic conditions that foster starvation, illiteracy, and disease. Until more Haitians have a reliable source of income (in Morisset’s words, a “vocation”), the country will not be able to support key social services, such as health care and education.

Similarly, the countless attempts to reforest the country will continue to fail unless the Haitian peasants who rely on charcoal production are provided alternative income-generating activities. Currently, these peasants are caught in a cycle, in which poor agricultural yields lead to charcoal production, which in turn leads to declining agricultural production due to erosion, flooding, and seasonal drought.\textsuperscript{42}

Unfortunately, decades of corruption and political violence have turned foreign investors away from Haiti. From the late 1950s through the 1980s, the father and son dictators, Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier and Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, controlled the country by means of the infamous private militia, known as the “Tontons Macoutes.” Under Papa Doc alone, as many as 30,000 people were killed for ostensibly opposing his rule. Both father and son Duvalier stole hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid, allowing Haiti’s debt to pile up while development

\textsuperscript{41} Based on the author’s observations at a clinic offered by foreign medical workers in Thiotte, Haiti and on conversations that the author had with Haitians, including the administrator of the Sacred Heart Health Center in Thiotte.

\textsuperscript{42} Arthur, \textit{Haiti in Focus} p. 42, and Arthur and Dash pp. 101-103.
projects lived only on paper and the number of people in extreme poverty skyrocketed.

Threatened by increasing popular unrest, Jean-Claude Duvalier left Haiti for France in 1986.\textsuperscript{43} Following the collapse of the Duvalier regime, a series of military governments took control while attempts at democratic elections were disrupted by protests on the part of anti-Duvalierists and bloodshed unleashed by the former Tontons Macoutes. When elections were finally held in 1990, the unexpected winner was Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a Catholic priest who rallied the marginalized members of society with promises of government reform. Yet Aristide’s term was cut short when the Haitian military, backed by the elite, ousted him in a coup d’etat. Years of violence and suppression followed. Aristide was eventually returned to power with the support of the U.S. and the U.N. However, it became clear that the underlying tensions between Haiti’s masses and its elite remained when Aristide was ousted in a second coup d’etat in 2004.\textsuperscript{44}

During this time, key agricultural industries, such as the sugar and coffee industries, underwent dramatic declines due to their monopolistic control by a few elite families. In the case of sugar, these families decided that greater revenues could be made by importing foreign sugar to Haiti, and in the case of coffee, they paid the small farmers impossibly low prices for coffee beans. These problems have been further exacerbated by the distribution of land in Haiti, where powerful landlords have taken over fertile valley lands from the state, leaving peasants to farm erosion-prone mountain plots. Many of the best pieces of land are left idle or are rented out by sharecroppers, who have no incentive to use farming techniques that promote the long-term health of the soil since they do not own the land.\textsuperscript{45}

In response to past instances of inaction and corruption, many Haitians are determined that things will be different this time. Morisset envisions a rehabilitation effort involving a variety of stakeholders from the Gonaives community—farmers, teachers, and ministers—rather than just politicians. He is president of a newly formed interdenominational organization, the Service of Mutual Aid and Cooperation of the Gonaives Churches (known by the French acronym SELEEG). The organization, which boasted 350 partners representing tens of thousands of people within one month of its founding, seeks to draw the people of Gonaives together to accomplish a series of economic, environmental, and social reforms.\textsuperscript{46}

These reforms will require capital far beyond the limited resources of the Gonaives churches. Morisset hopes that SELEEG can convince foreign donors that its projects will bypass the usual avenues of corruption and instead put money directly in the pockets of the Gonaives populace by hiring local Haitians to reconstruct their city and reforest their landscape. However, even such lofty goals are only first steps. The SELEEG leaders emphasize the importance of profit-making enterprises to provide long-term employment. Words such as “micro-finance,”

\textsuperscript{43} Arthur, \textit{Haiti in Focus} pp. 23-24 and 48, offers an overview of the Duvalier regime. Farmer pp. 90-120 provides a more detailed look at the period of Duvalier rule in Haiti.

\textsuperscript{44} Arthur, \textit{Haiti in Focus} pp. 24-26, provides a summary of Aristide’s initial election, the 1991 coup, and Aristide’s return to power in 1994. Throughout \textit{The Uses of Haiti}, Farmer delves much more deeply into the events surrounding Aristide’s presidency and the 1991 and 2004 coups, including the controversial U.S. involvement in Haiti during that time period.

\textsuperscript{45} Arthur, \textit{Haiti in Focus} pp. 42-43 and 53-54.

\textsuperscript{46} Personal conversation and correspondence with Morisset.
“credit unions,” and “cooperatives” are frequently used in their meetings and reports.47

The community is also eager to examine new technology, such as jatropha biofuels—the project that brought me to Haiti. Jatropha biofuels have been highly touted in India, Africa, and other developing regions. Jatropha, a shrubby tree that produces oil-filled seeds, is viewed as a promising source of biofuels because it grows on marginal lands, helps control erosion, and offers high oil yields.48 In Haiti, one hope is that jatropha oil could be paired with biofuel stoves as an alternative to charcoal49—a potential breakthrough in reforestation efforts, allowing Haitians to have their trees and burn them, too. However, jatropha biofuels are still an emerging technology, so research is necessary to develop cultivation and processing methods that are environmentally and economically sustainable.50

7. When Haiti was Still Haiti

On a mild November evening, the Valme family sat around a patio table in a modest Miami neighborhood. In one corner of the yard, a small but hearty jatropha tree grew. Georges Valme, who emigrated from Haiti to the U.S. at the age of

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47 Personal conversation and correspondence with Morisset, as well as the author’s work in translating some of SELEEG’s documents into English.
48 See note 20.
49 Valme, Georges has been pioneering efforts to introduce biofuel stoves in Haiti.
50 See note 20.
seventeen, started Florida-based Haitian American Agro Industries in March 2008. The company’s goals include the production of biodiesel in Miami from waste vegetable oil and the development of a jatropha biofuels industry in Haiti as the first step in revitalizing the economy and reforesting the mountain slopes of Valme’s native country.\textsuperscript{51}

I first met Georges in June of 2008 just after I began my year-long fellowship focused on biofuels in Haiti. He had agreed to serve as my mentor for the fellowship, and during my first visit, he took me on a tour of the back alleys of Miami, where we collected waste vegetable oil from restaurants owners who had agreed to either give or sell Georges their oil for his biodiesel operations. In August, Georges travelled with me to Haiti, where he spent a few days introducing me to Morisset and the other leaders of Eben-Ezer Mission, which had signed a partnership agreement with Georges’s company. When I returned to the U.S. in November, I visited Georges again to discuss the post-hurricane situation in Gonaives and develop revised plans for moving forward with the jatropha project.

A fiery man with a penchant for quite literally wearing rose-colored glasses, Valme is a withering critic of non-profit organizations, emphatically declaring that they have turned Haiti into “a nation of beggars.”\textsuperscript{52} Instead, he firmly believes that profit-driven ventures will benefit both his native country and his much-beloved adopted nation. After all, with an ample labor force in close proximity to the U.S., Haiti was once seen as a natural location for the manufacture of American garments, sporting goods, and electronics. Haitian workers famously made all major league baseballs until the collapse of the corrupt Duvalier regime, which stole millions in foreign aid and left behind a seething nation void of economic or political infrastructure. Although these manufacturing operations provided much-needed employment in Haiti, they were also criticized for poor working conditions, minimal wages, and low levels of capital investment in the Haitian economy.\textsuperscript{53}

In contrast, Valme envisions not simply an export economy but also an internal market among the more than nine million residents of Haiti.\textsuperscript{54} He plans to provide employment opportunities at every step in the process: cultivating jatropha trees, harvesting the seeds, processing the seeds into fuel, using the nutrient-rich seedcake as organic fertilizer, manufacturing biodiesel stoves, and selling the fuel and the stoves.\textsuperscript{55} These jobs could augment the revenue of small farmers and replace jobs lost in the charcoal industry. In addition to providing jobs and reversing deforestation, a Haitian biofuel industry could combat a significant cause of respiratory disease—the inhalation of toxic fumes from cooking with charcoal.\textsuperscript{56} Valme is not concerned about finding a market for his products within Haiti. Caribbean telecommunications operator Digicel has already proven that a Haitian market exists for properly targeted products. Within 18 months of its May 2006 launch in Haiti, Digicel had reached 1.8 million customers in the country.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{51} Personal conversation with Valme, Georges.
\textsuperscript{52} Personal conversation with Valme, Georges.
\textsuperscript{53} Arthur, \textit{Haiti in Focus} pp. 24, 46-47, and 51, and Haggerty.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{World Factbook: Haiti}.
\textsuperscript{55} Personal conversation with Valme, Georges.
\textsuperscript{56} Smucker pp. 10-11.
\textsuperscript{57} “Digicel Haiti Foundation Delivers Promise of 20 Schools in Year One.”
During my November visit, Georges sat on his daughter Valerie Zabal’s patio and pronounced that the next time he traveled to Haiti he would take Zabal’s daughter, Julie Grenon, with him. The seventeen year-old looked up from her salad with a cautious smile at her doting grandfather. Her mother set off on an animated narrative of how Haiti had changed between her earliest visit as a child, when she and her parents visited sparkling Caribbean beaches and stayed at faux-colonial hotels, to her most recent visit, when she traveled to a Gonaives still downtrodden by Hurricane Jeanne to plant jatropha with her dad. She was quick to add that she had seen poverty on the first visit, too—her child’s mind had been imprinted by the experience of distributing a load of used clothes among near-naked peasant children. Nonetheless, the early trip was clearly a relic from the time when Haiti was considered a vacation destination for more than just missionaries and medical workers.

“Yes, I visited the country when Haiti was still Haiti,” agreed Zabal’s French-born mother, Catherine Valme, who has not been to her husband’s native country in over two decades.

To the modern observer, it is hard to believe that Haiti was ever a holiday destination for the likes of Jackie Onassis, Irving Berlin, and Mick Jagger. Yet these famous tourists are just a few of the hundreds of thousands of foreign visitors who vacationed in Haiti in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1979 alone, cruise ships brought more

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58 Personal conversation with Zabal.
59 Personal conversation with Valme, Catherine.
than 173,000 tourists to Haiti’s shores. However, since the 1980s, the Haitian tourism industry has been decimated by political instability and the false assertion put forth by the U.S. Center for Disease Control that HIV/AIDS originated in Haiti. Negative media coverage of the country caused a precipitous decline in tourism, with the numbers dropping from 75,000 travelers in the winter of 1981-82 to fewer than 10,000 in 1982-83. The country fell into a downward spiral with slashed tourism revenues leading to an ever-deepening level of poverty, which in turn, deterred tourists.

The Valme family offers a glimpse into the extensive Haitian diaspora in the U.S., which struggles to find its way in a new country while fighting almost universally negative depictions of its home country. Like Georges Valme, many Haitian emigrants have mixed feelings toward Haiti, harboring a desire to help the poor of their native country while detesting the nation’s corruption and resenting its reliance on foreign aid. Georges sums up his political philosophy with an aphorism, “The tighter the tie, the less you trust the man,” which he always accompanies with a motion of his hand to indicate the straightening of one’s tie. Yet despite his cynicism regarding politics and non-profit organizations, Georges is an idealist at heart with a clear vision of how his country could be transformed in the next thirty years through a combination of environmental restoration, social entrepreneurship, and a lot of hard, hands-in-the-dirt work.

8. Re-imagining Haiti

The interplay of environmental calamity, economic failure, and government corruption in Haiti weave a complex web that will be difficult to untangle. The Haitian government must prove that the nation has the political stability and honesty necessary to permit international investment. For example, until Haiti is removed from the list of countries under a U.S. State Department Travel Warning, few business leaders and even fewer tourists will venture to the island. Furthermore, the Haitian elite must release their monopolistic stranglehold on the nation’s economy, which has long stifled entrepreneurial activity and permitted a feudal-like landholding system to persist into present times. In return for such efforts among the rich and powerful within Haiti, the international community must move away from historically dubious development plans, such as the Structural Adjustment Program of the 1990s, which exempted foreign corporations from Haitian taxes, provided little capital investment to stimulate the domestic economy, saddled Haiti with ever more foreign debt, and removed import tariffs, decimating the Haitian rice industry by inundating the market with cheap foreign commodities.

Ultimately, the public, private, and non-profit sectors of both Haiti and foreign nations must agree to address the roots of the country’s prolonged misery. This will mean a coordinated effort to implement policies that reverse environmental

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60 Arthur, *Haiti in Focus* p. 44-45.
63 U.S. Department of State.
64 Arthur, *Haiti in Focus* pp. 50-52.
degradation, reform land use, promote job creation, and increase infrastructure investment. Potential policies in each of these areas include:

- **Environment**: place bans on the harvesting of trees from sensitive areas, such as the buffer zones around streams and the mountain slopes above population centers; mandate environmental education as part of the national school curriculum; implement sustainable tree harvesting programs, in which farmers manage tree groves in such a way that at least two trees are planted for every tree that is cut; create a national plan for biofuel development, including the elimination of fuel taxes for biofuels that are grown from sources that do not compete with food production.

- **Land reform**: provide tax credits or stipends for land use methods that preserve and restore soils, such as terraces, living fences, and crop rotation; develop laws to protect the land tenure rights of sharecroppers; create incentives for the conversion of idle land to agricultural, forestry, or tourist uses.

- **Job creation**: provide tax incentives for businesses that create new jobs and maintain those jobs over a certain minimum period of time; require foreign businesses to make a certain minimum amount of capital investment within Haiti in order to qualify for tax incentives; pass laws requiring a livable wage for workers in businesses that employ more than a certain minimum number of workers; develop a national plan to promote the natural beauty and culture of Haiti among adventure travel companies.
• Infrastructure: invest in road systems that link agricultural regions with population centers and airports with tourist sites; invest in drainage systems that direct floodwaters away from population centers and agricultural fields; invest in irrigation systems that increase the productivity of agricultural fields; use the existing wireless phone networks to notify people of impending natural disasters and to coordinate response to those disasters.

Perhaps more than anything, Haiti’s future relies on re-imagining the Caribbean nation. As Haiti embarks on its third century as an independent nation, will it be rediscovered as an exquisite island nation with a vibrant culture and untapped economic opportunities or will it be relegated to an endless cycle of disaster, emergency aid, and pious hand-wringing over the dire fate of this “poorest country in the western hemisphere?”

9. Bibliography


