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As Haiti Gears Up to Boost Declining Agricultural Sector, International Cooperation Supports Efforts

By George Rodríguez

Agriculture provides a livelihood for more than 1 million of Haiti's 9.7 million people and is the source of some 50% of jobs nationwide, yet its productivity is among the lowest in the Latin American and Caribbean region.

Agriculture is a key economic factor in this impoverished nation in the French-speaking Caribbean, despite its downward slide for the past two decades, mainly in yields of major crops including coffee. The situation was worsened by the magnitude 7.0 earthquake in January 2010, which devastated Haiti's capital and other areas, killing more than 200,000, displacing another 600,000, leaving 1.5 million homeless, and collapsing more than 80,000 buildings.

Among its top priorities for Haiti's farming sector, President Michel Martelly's administration is set on modernizing the country's institutions and updating policies through reforms to increase productivity and improve competitiveness. Food security in Haiti is a top concern, and international cooperation is coming to the rescue, with millions of dollars.

Agriculture ministry given stronger role

Changes include giving more muscle to the country's Ministère de l'Agriculture, des Ressources Naturelles et du Développement Rural (MARNDR). The aim is to improve the ministry's budgeting, managing, monitoring, planning, and programming capabilities, including creating a unit made up of experts in managing funds coming from the government as well as donors—headed by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), whose grants worth more than US\$200 million have been funding agricultural projects in this country.

The projects cover areas such as farming-technology transfers, irrigation, land ownership, and rural value chains. Reforms also include advising farmers, through updating the country's agricultural research system, as a means to broaden access to better farming technologies.

Another issue to be tackled is that of land management, including ownership, in a country where approximately 60% of parcel owners have no property title. Haiti's agricultural health system is beneath international standards, and a plan to improve it is to be drawn up.

Supporting the Martelly administration's move to improve Haiti's agriculture, the IDB, along with other donors, is providing both funding and technical assistance. The continental bank has approved a US\$15 million grant for the effort, funding to be complemented by the Haiti Reconstruction Fund (HRF), with an added US\$7 million.

IDB provides grant to modernize energy sector

The IDB has also approved a grant worth US \$12 million to fund modernization of the country's energy sector, including affordability of energy in this poverty-stricken Caribbean nation where income for 78% of the people is less than US\$2 per day.

The Washington-headquartered IDB is Haiti's top multilateral donor, having approved some US \$534 million in grants after the 2010 quake, almost US\$400 million of which have been disbursed for sectors including agriculture, education, energy, health, and infrastructure.

The HRF is a partnership between the international community and the Haitian government with the aim of helping fund reconstruction after the earthquake. The HRF mobilizes, coordinates, and allocates contributions from donors, whether bilateral or otherwise, to fund high-priority projects and to provide budget support.

The IDB, the UN, and the World Bank are also involved in the HRF, with the purpose of ensuring that international standards for financial management, good governance, and quality are met in the process.

The bank announced last week that the Swiss multinational company Nestlé is getting ready to become a party to a coffee value-chain project supported by the IDB's Multilateral Investment Fund (FOMIN) and aimed at improving income as well as economic opportunities for some 10,000 small-scale coffee growers in Haiti.

The Switzerland-headquartered food company will provide in-kind technical assistance worth US \$300,000 to the initiative, which is also backed by the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the Federación Nacional de Cafeteros de Colombia (FNC), and the Institut National du Café Haïtien (INCAH).

Nestlé's role in the project, through its branch in neighboring Dominican Republic, is focused on recovering coffee plots, supporting know-how transfer, improving productivity, and supplying coffee seedlings aimed at replacing aging coffee trees on small-scale farms.

One of Haiti's top agricultural export goods until 20 years ago, coffee sales abroad dropped in the 1990-2009 period from 191,000 bags to 16,000 bags, and the project is aimed at helping the country recover its world-class status as a coffee producer and exporter.

Latin American countries also provide help

Besides the multilateral approach to helping Haiti, the country has been getting bilateral and trilateral support. An example of this is the decision made last month by Argentina, Cuba, and Venezuela to come in Haiti's aid, the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina (PL), reported last month.

Regarding Argentina and Venezuela, the idea is to boost the development of Haitian agriculture through development programs for that productive sector, while Cuba and Venezuela offered to build a hospital in the area of Corail, a coastal town in southern Haiti.

During the 42nd General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), held last month in the central Bolivian city of Cochabamba, the need to improve food security throughout the continent was stressed by several participants.

Consensus was reached on this, after close to a dozen speakers—including Haiti's Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Laurent Lamothe—referred to the issue. Food security is "undoubtedly one of the major goals we have set ourselves in our country, together with the elimination of poverty and inequalities that affect our population," the Haitian official told the continental meeting.

Lamothe also said that, with massive aid from the international community after the 2010 earthquake, "we are now beginning to sense a new breath of life in Haiti. The government...has set itself a basic priority of fighting extreme poverty."