

**OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS**

# Haiti Can Be Rich Again

**By Laurent Dubois and Deborah Jenson**

Jan. 8, 2012

HAITI wasn't always the "poorest nation in the Western hemisphere," though it's almost impossible to read about the country today without coming across that phrase. In the two years since the earthquake that devastated it, Haiti has experienced political conflict and its first ever cholera epidemic; hundreds of thousands of the displaced are still living in makeshift tents strewn like dusty flags by the sides of highways. It is easy to forget that, for most of the 19th century, Haiti was a site of agricultural innovation, productivity and economic success.

In the wake of the earthquake, many have talked about the need to lay foundations for a better future. To do that, Haiti should look to the past, and the system of small farms and the decentralized economy that once provided Haitians with dignity, autonomy and wealth.

The slave revolution that ended with Haiti's creation in 1804 led to what the sociologist Jean Casimir dubbed a "counter-plantation" system. As slaves, the islanders had harvested and processed sugar cane, but fed themselves by cultivating their own tiny gardens, for which they developed sophisticated

techniques of inter-cropping — a kind of sustainable agriculture that involved planting a variety of crops close together. Once free, Haitians drew on that knowledge to raise livestock and grow fruits, root vegetables and even coffee for export to the global market. In establishing their own small farms, they forestalled any possibility of a return to the large plantations that had defined the days of slavery.

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This system of agricultural self-reliance provided a better quality of life than that of African descendants anywhere else in the Americas. The country attracted many immigrants, including thousands of African-Americans. And though the United States government didn't officially recognize Haiti until 1862, American businessmen eagerly traded with the island nation.

Haiti's economy was decentralized, organized around 11 largely autonomous regions, each with its own port. There was plenty of conflict in the country, largely over control of the central government, and heavy taxes on exports, as well as the power of foreign merchants, sapped the profits of farmers. Yet the regional economies thrived, and a decentralized political and military system assured many Haitians a great deal of control over their destiny.

In the 20th century, however, this system came under increasing pressure. Outsiders, along with many in the Haitian elite, saw small farms as a barrier to progress. When the United States occupied Haiti, from 1915 to 1934, it worked to centralize the economy in Port-au-Prince. It pushed through a re-writing of the Haitian Constitution to allow foreigners to own land, which the country's

founders had banned for fear of re-enslavement, and worked to replace small farms with large plantations owned by foreign corporations. Many farmers saw their land expropriated.

In the teens, when the countryside erupted in a revolt against the occupation and the use of forced labor to build roads, the United States created a newly centralized gendarmerie to suppress the insurrection. Violence and economic decline in the countryside forced many Haitians to flee to the cities or to plantations in neighboring Cuba and the Dominican Republic. In the years since, the countryside has continued to experience environmental and economic degradation as well as exodus, while the big cities, especially Port-au-Prince, have become overcrowded. Today, about half of Haiti's food is imported.

The flow of ideas and money to Haiti that followed the earthquake provides an opportunity to restore the system of small farms that was a pillar of Haitian society after independence. Michel Martelly, Haiti's new president, has talked of the need to decentralize the economy, and nongovernmental organizations have begun projects to help farmers. But far more can be done.

Municipal governments should construct properly equipped marketplaces for the women who sell rural produce. The Haitian state should develop trade policies aimed at protecting the agricultural sector, and take the lead in fixing roads and ports, confronting deforestation and improving systems of water management. Foreign organizations working in the country can help simply by making it a policy to buy food and other goods from local producers.

The return on the investment in the rural economy would be self-reliance, the alleviation of dangerous overcrowding in cities and, most important, a path toward ending Haiti's now chronic problems of malnutrition and food insecurity.

**As Haitians look to rebuild in 2012, the best blueprints will come from their own proud and vibrant history.**

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 19 of the New York edition with the headline: Haiti Can Be Rich Again