

Haiti-Environment: from the « Pearl of the Antilles » to desolation

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On 19 September 2004, TV screens around the world showed apocalyptic images of Haiti under flood waters. The poorest country in the Americas had been struck by Hurricane Jeanne, one of the worst tropical storms in its history. Torrential downpours shed rivers of water and mud on the city of Gonaïves killing almost 3,000 people, most by drowning. The city was devastated, totally submerged under water, and in some areas, the flood waters reached 3 metres. A state of emergency was declared by the Haitian government and the international community was mobilised to relieve the population.

Four years on, Gonaïves has again been hit by two successive tropical storms - Hanna and Ike - on 2 and 7 September 2008. Although the number of deaths is lower, over 600, the city has been more severely affected than in 2004: it has again been submerged under water and the destruction of access roads means that it is isolated from the rest of the country.

Although Gonaïves stands out as a martyr city, Haiti as a whole has been devastated by four hurricanes in one month - Fay, Gustav, Hanna and Ike. Nine departments out of 10 have been severely hit and the UN estimates that 800,000 people, about 10% of the Haitian population, are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) calculates that the situation is catastrophic and the entire harvest has been damaged. On 10th September 2008, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) appealed to donors to provide 107.7 million dollars in order to ensure the survival of hurricane victims over the next six months.

Sadness, desolation and shock could not adequately describe the situation. The poorest country in the Americas needs to be completely rebuilt and a state of emergency has been declared in the whole country. The dramatic situation that Haiti is undergoing reflects the tragic image of a state in denial, revealing its lack of governance in the face of overwhelming events. This tragedy is in fact the price being paid for two centuries of administrative carelessness worsened by deforestation dating back to the 18th century.

Haiti was once the richest French colony - the Pearl of the Antilles -but today it has been stripped of its resources: 98% of the national territory has been deforested, increasing the vulnerability of a population impoverished by years of dictatorship and violence. Vulnerability is a combination of many factors that determine a system of vulnerability. In order to better understand the ecological disaster faced by Haiti today, this commentary proposes a global, holistic and systemic analysis, outlining the myriad factors that have led to the current level of vulnerability, which is further threatened by climate change.

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The birth of an ecological drama

The systematic logging carried out in Haiti is not a recent phenomenon. When Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492, over 80% of the island was covered by lush vegetation. Most researchers agree that logging began in the late 17th century when the French levelled thousands of hectares of virgin forest to plant sugar cane, cotton and coffee. During this period, the environment was “systematically destroyed”, because “in order to operate the brickworks, kilns and tanneries, wood was used that was not replanted”.¹

However, according to the agro-economist and geographer Roger Michel, “the greatest attack on the balance in the ecosystem happened under the American occupation from 1915 to 1934 under the policy of concentrating landownership which disregarded the land-holders who were either evicted or became hired farm workers.”² Before the American occupation, forest cover represented 60% of the total land surface in Haiti. By 1945 forest cover had been reduced to 21%. Burns quoted by Erlich (1985) estimates that forest cover had declined to 8 or 9% in 1954.³

While Roger Michel maintains that the Haitian ecological disaster stems from this period, it is also evident that the destruction of human and natural resources, and the absence of state action and government will to tackle the Haitian ecological crisis, have largely contributed to the vulnerability the country now suffers.

In fact, throughout the history of Haiti, marred by division and violence, no importance has been attached to preserving the natural environment and its rehabilitation has never been a priority. Worse still, the 30-year Duvalier dictatorship exacerbated the situation, initially under the bloody regime of François Duvalier, alias Papa Doc. To consolidate and extend his power, he conscripted thousands of peasants living in the country who were taken in truckloads to Port-au-Prince to proclaim allegiance to the dictator during ostentatious public ceremonies. However, their return to the provinces was not funded by the regime so the peasants settled in Port-au-Prince. This led to the deforestation of the outskirts around the capital and the first shantytowns appeared. This phenomenon became more marked under the regime of the dictator’s son, Jean-Claude Duvalier. Small farmers were totally abandoned by the government and lived in “the outside country” - as so aptly described by Gérard Barthélémy⁴ - and only dreamt of settling in the capital: the massive rural exodus had begun.

From 1986 to 2008: alarming vulnerability

Today, the Haitian environment is considered to be an ecological disaster and it is not within the scope of this commentary to deal with the numerous factors that intensify the Haitian people’s vulnerability: deforestation, soil erosion, water shortages, urban insalubrities, loss of biodiversity, anarchic exploitation of quarries, degradation of the marine ecosystem, urbanisation, encroaching shanty towns, demographic pressure and poverty. Over a hundred years of adversity have led to an almost insolvent situation.

¹ Roger Michel, *L’espace caféier en Haïti : déclin et espoir*, pages 70 and 71, Éditions KARTHALA, 2005

² Roger Michel, ‘Le drame écologique d’Haïti : genèse du désastre’, *Alterpresse*, 6 February 2005

³ Carmel André Béliard and Jean Max Dimitri Norris, ‘Dégradation de l’environnement en Haïti’ (Manifestations, Causes, Conséquences et Alternatives), Document Programme d’Éducation Écologique, page 4, 1996

⁴ Gérard Barthélémy, ‘Le pays en dehors, essai sur l’univers rural haïtien’, Éditions Henri Deschamps/CIDHICA, 2nd edition, 1989

In 2008, only 1.5% of forested land remains,⁵ and the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti reveals the striking differences in environmental management between these two countries that share the island of Quisqueya: the Dominican forests stop suddenly giving way to naked soil on the Haitian side.

Deforestation in Haiti accelerated during the embargo imposed by the UN from 1991 to 1994. Kerosene and petrol were among the products affected by the economic blockade and the people had no choice but to cut trees desperately to satisfy their cooking and lighting needs. Since then, with no state intervention to find an alternative to these fuels, logging has continued unabated and is in danger of increasing as Haitians face up to the oil price surge on international markets. Peasants have even been driven to cut down fruit trees in order to survive. The international Convention to Combat Deforestation (CCD), signed by the Government of the Republic of Haiti in 1994 and ratified by parliament in 1996, aims to fight against desertification (land degradation) and abate the effects of drought and/or desertification by taking effective measures at all levels, within the framework of an integrated approach. With the support of international cooperation and partnership agreements, the intention is to contribute to establishing sustainable development in affected areas. However, these measures have remained a declaration of intentions and no tangible measures have been taken to fight against deforestation and desertification.

At present, businesses in the cities (e.g. restaurants, bakers and distilleries) cut down over 53,300 trees a year so their businesses can operate. Over 80% of the Haitian population has no access to electricity and over 90% uses wood-based charcoal for their daily cooking needs (Haitian Institute of Statistics 2007). The state has not made the environment a priority. Worse still, the Ministry of the Environment is one of the poorest ministries with only 2.1% of the total budget.⁶ Thus, despite the many cries of alarm by environmentalist since 1986, the figures are increasingly worrying:

- between 10 and 20 million trees are cut down each year
- the annual reforestation rate is 0.7%
- average income of Haitian peasants is \$ 115 per year
- annual GDP per capita is \$ 450
- Haiti is the only country on the American continent on the Least Developed Countries (LDC) index and is ranked 146th on the Human Development Index.

Other indicators bear witness to the very poor level of human development, such as life expectancy at birth (53 years), infant mortality (80 per 1,000), maternal mortality (523 per 100,000 live births), adult illiteracy (50%), the consolidated rate of primary and secondary schooling (29%) and the lack of schools, unemployment among the active population, (around 60%) and only 28% of the population has access to adequate sanitary facilities. The total population is estimated at approximately 9 million inhabitants, of which 60% live in the country, and some estimates point out that the population is expected to double by 2035, totalling 16 million. The vulnerability of the population is very high, with 65% of the population living below the poverty threshold.⁷

⁵ 3rd National Report of the Republic of Haiti on the implementation of the convention against the fight against desertification, page 4, June 2006

⁶ Budget of the Republic, financial year 2007-2008

⁷ 3rd National Report of the Haiti Republic on the implementation of the convention on the fight against desertification, page 3, June 2006

A unique patrimony in danger

The Indian name for the island is Ayiti, which means “land of high mountains”. The mountains stretch over 80% of the national territory and form a backdrop for life and culture, and they are also a significant ecosystem in the Caribbean and in the world. Today these mountains are at risk. For example, the damage caused by excessive logging in Macaya Park is calculated at over 19 million dollars annually, according to researchers at the University of Florida.⁸ “The uncontrolled logging of trees in Macaya Park is beginning to have a negative impact on neighbouring areas. Randel, an adjacent village, is now threatened by a catastrophe similar to the one that hit Gonaïves in September 2004”.⁹ Moreover, after the forest guards were disbanded in 1990, the Haitian state completely withdrew from protecting the park and Macaya Park is not a lone example - the trend is spreading to other parks and the entire national patrimony is now in danger.

Most of the mountains close to urban areas have been destroyed by anarchic exploitation of sandpits. In the hills over Port-au-Prince, “over fifteen sandpits are being exploited excessively, disregarding the environment, road planning and the surrounding landscape”.¹⁰ Morne l’Hôpital and Morne Garnier, the last natural ramparts of Port-au-Prince, have been almost completely converted into shantytowns, and the chaotic building could lead to a large-scale human and natural catastrophe in the capital. Despite legal provisions, the Haitian state has always been absent, leaving the way open to spoilers of all sorts. The Ministry of Planning and External Cooperation (MCPE) is responsible for land management. Measures have been taken recently by the Haitian state with a view to closing the sandpits, but these measures have not yet been enforced.

Aggravating impacts

Degradation of the environment and the absence of state authority have a huge impact on the lives of the Haitian people. The numerous factors involved cannot be detailed in this commentary. However, the most significant are outlined below:

- Last year, commanders of the Haitian National Police (HNP) admitted for the first time that out-of-control building and the constantly growing shanty towns comprised a major obstacle in the fight against criminals, particularly kidnappers. According to Frantz Thermilus, commander of the Central Direction of the Judicial Police (DCPJ), “most of the abducted people are kidnapped in difficult areas”, such as the shantytowns.¹¹ Kidnappings are a major challenge for the HNP and MINUSTAH. Although the forces of order and stabilisation have dismantled the main gangs that controlled the large bidonvilles of Cité Soleil, Bel Air and Martissant; “the kidnappings, accompanied by the rape, torture and murder of children, have multiplied since the beginning of the year creating a climate of fear that causes graduates to flee and scares away investors”.¹² The State’s non-management of spatial issues and the environment therefore has a direct impact on insecurity and investment in Haiti;

⁸ Jean Pharès Jérôme, ‘Le parc Macaya, un trésor en péril’, *Le Nouvelliste*, 25 July 2008

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jésusla Prophète, ‘Kenscoff : une verdure en voie de disparition’, *Panos Institute Caribbean*, 23rd January 2007

¹¹ ‘L’urbanisation et la bidonvilisation font obstacle au travail de la police’, *Alterpresse*, 27th November 2007

¹² Jean-Michel Caroit, ‘L’insécurité à Haïti entrave l’essor économique de l’île’, *Le Monde*, 1st July 2008

- Degradation of the physical and social environment in cities has led to insalubrity, housing shortage, proliferation of shantytowns, dormitory towns and villages with no town planning regulations. On the other hand, residential areas tend to become commercial areas. Other closely related factors need to be taken into account: water drainage, erosion, the collection and disposal of domestic refuse and waste-water management. These problems also have a serious impact on people's health. The recent reappearance of *chique*¹³ is a worrying case.¹⁴ This illness which had long since disappeared from Haiti has re-emerged because of the widespread lack of hygiene throughout the country. Large cities such as Cap-Haitien, Cayes, Gonaïves, Saint-Marc, Jacmel (...), have lost their former economic-administrative importance (...) and are now only dormitory towns owing to the lack of economic activity. Furthermore, rich agricultural land has become isolated while agricultural production is not sufficient to feed the population.¹⁵ At the beginning of April, violent demonstrations racked the country as a result of the food crisis and led to the fall of Prime Minister Alexis' government. Degradation and the lack of environmental management have therefore contributed to the political instability over the last four months while attempts have been taking place to form a new government;

- Soil erosion and deforestation have already created many environmental refugees in Haiti. In 2007, the torrential October rains affected the lives of 700,000 children and 1.4 million Haitians, according to Véronique Tavau, spokesperson for UNICEF in Geneva. There were forty-five deaths recorded and 7,000 families left homeless. A few days later, Noël struck the island of Kiskeya, leaving in its wake 62 deaths, 16 injuries, 105 missing people and 10,226 homeless families. Over 18,500 people were forced to live in refuge shelters and 1853 cabins were destroyed and 8735 damaged.¹⁶ The eco-catastrophe in Haiti is in danger of deteriorating in the future owing to climate change. This threat could generate instability, not only nationally but also on a regional level, with massive migration from Haiti towards other countries such as the Dominican Republic, French Guiana, the Bahamas and the United States;

- The metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince has grown from a population of 120,000 in 1950 to over two million today. This demographic pressure, intensified by a high birth rate with no national birth-control policy, has direct consequences on the environment in general and deforestation in particular. "This situation, which is largely the result of several decades of centralisation, has transformed the character of poverty in Haiti into a mainly urban reality. Urbanisation in Haiti is the result of a socio-economic explosion with a common denominator for all cities, that of a society that expanded dramatically in the sixties giving rise to a defined urban structure, with a significant influence on the typology of the habitat."¹⁷ Therefore, the absence of environmental management has a direct influence on economic and demographic indexes.

¹³ The *chique*, « *Tunga penetrans* » is a small insect that burrows a few centimetres under sandy or dusty soil in flooded or wet tropical regions. The pain caused by its presence makes it difficult to walk and it can become impossible if bitten several times. Complications can also arise such as septicaemia, gangrene and tetanus.

¹⁴ Radio Kiskeya, 'Dangerous reappearance of the *chique* in several regions of the country', 6th August 2008

¹⁵ Jean Mercier Prophète, 'La problématique de l'aménagement du territoire en Haïti', Colloque de Trois -Rivières /Québec, August 2002

¹⁶ Nancy Roc, 'Les réfugiés environnementaux : une menace réelle en Haïti', *Alterpresse*, 14 November 2007

¹⁷ Vario Sérant, 'L'espace haïtien face au péril de l'environnement et aux Incertitudes économiques et démographiques', *Alterpresse*, 31st July 2007

Conclusion

The new Préval/Pierre-Louis government is faced with an environmental situation which is practically irresolvable. Over 80% of the State's budget depends on the international community and the little infrastructure that existed in Haiti has disappeared under the torrential waters of the four hurricanes that have hit the island since the beginning of the month.

It is of vital importance that the Haitian state makes the rehabilitation and protection of the environment a national priority. On 14th September, President René Préval appealed to his compatriots to become more aware of the degree of environmental degradation suffered by the country. However, this bid to raise awareness must stem from a genuine political will to effect change in order to make this reflection possible. The solution to environmental problems in Haiti is necessarily linked to the eradication of poverty, controlling the demographic curve and the reduction of inequality.

Realising these objectives requires the implementation of development policies that take into account the connections between these issues. The demographic explosion which is intensifying the country's vulnerability should be at the centre of national policies. To achieve this, the government needs to have the courage to take drastic measures, even if they are unpopular, such as combating uncontrolled building in the shantytowns and fighting against the mafia who control the sandpits and the logging of pine trees in the national parks. The struggle to rehabilitate the Haitian environment must therefore incorporate the fight against corruption. A new environmental strategy must take into account the management of natural resources and spaces. However it must also feature measures to tackle the population's energy needs so that the people are not forced to use charcoal.

In order to deal with environmental issues, the Haitian authorities, in collaboration with the international community, should specifically combat deforestation, pollution and the sedimentation of the coastline; protect natural forests and water planning; and manage solid and industrial waste and the erosion of biological diversity. Although development agencies have devoted substantial funds to restoring democracy, the Rule of Law and good governance, it is evident that in the absence of a genuine environmental policy, sustainable development cannot take place.

Environmental education, both on a formal basis and through the mass media, is urgently required to reorder priorities and to change people's mentalities, attitudes and behaviour, by convincing each and every Haitian that today they have no choice: protect the environment or die. In the same vein, the current government, and those to come, must also understand that the country's ecological catastrophe forces them to make a choice: to act or to die. The environmental action plan (PAE), legislation on the environment, workshops on biodiversity, orientation documents and the mobilisation of resources to tackle the issue of climate change are just a few of the numerous initiatives that have been taken by environment institutions in recent years. Many have come to almost nothing: now, action must be taken for the sake of the Haitian environment.

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