

**Trip Report: Ferrier, Haiti**  
**Oct. 28 – Nov 4, 2008**

On October 28 I traveled to Haiti with Susan Trainor, a former WHRI intern who completed her internship in May and has been in dialogue with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) regarding a position in their Haiti program. We spent 3 full days in Ferrier, several days in Port-au-Prince, then Susan spent 3 days visiting the MCC program in Desam while I returned to Waco.

**Rice Project**

Our time in Ferrier was mostly spent either slogging through rice fields or slogging through accounting issues. The improvements and expansion in local rice production were most inspiring. In the past year to 18 months, local producer prices have gone from \$30/100 kg bag to \$60-70/100kg. As a consequence, farmers have been motivated to expand production whereas in the past, depressed prices (due in large part to cheap U.S. imported rice) discouraged both production and investment in infrastructure improvements.

Since August, World Hunger Relief – Haiti President, Jackson Nelson, has been providing operating loans to a group of 10 farmers, GPBM, an acronym which stands for the Peasant Group of Ba Maribawo. Jackson picked a great group of farmers to start with. They appear motivated, knowledgeable and hard working. They are not the poorest of the poor, but neither are they local big shots.



Our first two mornings were spent walking out to rice fields with Jean Jules, a local rice farmer and friend of Jackson's. Because of Jackson's health struggles (diabetes and high blood pressure which resulted in a stroke one year ago) he no longer has the stamina to walk long distances and he had other issues to take care of at the school. In Masak, because of the lack of any roads or decent foot paths, we took off our sandals and walked 3-4 km barefoot through flooded paddys, along the raised bunds between paddys, and through supply canals. The second day, in Lamatri, we kept our feet drier, but still had no roads to follow. In the two days we visited fields of six of the GPBM farmers as well as a large field they have rented and planted in common as a way to raise money for group activities and investment.

It is hard to estimate the quantity of land in production, but each day we walked several kilometers with rice fields stretching virtually as far as we could see. Jackson indicated we may have seen roughly a tenth of the land area planted in rice.

If this is the case, a reasonable estimate of Ferrier rice production would be around 5000 ha, or roughly 10% of the reported rice acreage in the entire country.

I don't claim expertise in rice production, but to both Susan and me these fields looked quite healthy and productive. Reported yields are a respectable 4-6 tons/ha (compared to a 2 ton/ha national average and a 4.5-5 ton/ha average in the Dominican Republic). Most of the farmers we talked to own some of the land they have in rice, but also farm on shares, splitting the harvest with a landlord.



The most common challenge the farmers sited was a lack of consistent access to tillage services. Dominican farmers provide tractor tillage for hire on the Haitian side, but only after their own fields are done. Local ox plows don't do as "clean" a job, take longer to accomplish, and may be more expensive. This year, rains were late, and so many people didn't have water to plant the first crop in January. Both these factors led to later-than-optimal planting dates and meant that many fields stood idle when we conducted the WHR-H evaluation last April.

Seed and pesticides seem to be relatively plentiful (all from the Dominican Republic), but fertilizer has been in short supply. For this reason, the 4 ton shipment of urea Jackson bought with the initial revolving fund money was a big factor in getting the current crop off to a good start. In addition to the GPBM farmers, Jackson sold fertilizer to some 50 additional farmers on a cash basis. The initial purchase was from a government-subsidized shipment, allowing him to resell it at roughly a third of what Dominican fertilizer would have cost.

Poor infrastructure, especially the lack of roads, also limits local productivity. The only way to get the rice out of the fields is on people's heads or horseback, and we saw many worn-out horses carrying two 100 kg bags of rice through muddy fields to get them to town. Partly because of this difficulty, farmers sell the majority of their crop to buyers right in the field. Under current market conditions this works reasonably well, but with lower prices and demand in the past, they often had to sell on credit and were taken advantage of. Even now, with better roads, farmers would be more able to transport and store part of their crop to sell at peak prices.



Harvest and marketing are the only rice-related activities consistently carried out by Ferrier women. I was surprised by this observation since in most other forms of Haitian agriculture, gender roles are fairly evenly distributed. When asked for an explanation, I was told that Haitian women don't tolerate the muddy conditions. In the Dominican Republic, women are reportedly more active in rice production, but they have roads that help keep them out of the mud and mess. Thus, it appears improved access to fields might also allow women to more fully participate in the advantages of expanded rice production.



Misuse of pesticides appeared widespread. Most of these farmers' agronomic advice comes 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> hand, from the Dominican Republic. All the pesticide labels are written in Spanish, which some Haitian farmers speak, but virtually none of them can read. Nonetheless, they seem confident they are using these "poisons" safely and appropriately. "I know everything there is to do with rice production," stated Nalinx Bien-Aime. When asked how he determines how much pesticide to add to a full backpack sprayer, however, he didn't sound very convincing. In

contrast, we also saw evidence of sensible, IPM-like management approaches. One farmer explained that they know when to spray for a common caterpillar pest when they see cattle egrets in a field (feeding on the caterpillars!)

At least three different water sources are used for irrigation, and a German organization is currently upgrading the largest of these sources with an improved diversion dam. We heard very few reports of conflict of over water usage (although we observed one fight first hand!) suggesting that even in its relatively unsophisticated state, the water supply is not being overtaxed. As more land is brought into production, this situation may well change, and other infrastructure improvements (both dams and canal improvements) will become more critical.

On the morning of our 3<sup>rd</sup> day we met at Jackson's house with seven of the 10 group members. The discussion covered many subjects, but the biggest chunk of time was spent discussing what each



member had borrowed. We had hoped before the meeting to calculate interest and balance due for each member so that we could present them to the whole group. Because the contract reads that the rest of the group will make good on any member who defaults, we wanted to be certain they all knew what was owed and were prepared to support each other. In calculating individual balances, however, it became clear that some members had picked up fertilizer or cash for other members, or for the group garden. After extensive discussion

all but one of these transactions was sorted out, and everyone agreed that in the future it was important for each member to pick up and sign for only things they took for themselves.

Jackson explained the credit scheme which is a bit more complicated than they realized (2.4% interest calculated each month on whatever inputs they had received to that date). The members agreed this was more favorable than what they had anticipated (they thought they would pay 12% on whatever they borrowed over the five-month growing season) and far better than the 20% they've been getting from Dominican money lenders. This system encourages them to only borrow money as they need it, and thus lessens the temptation to use the loan for other purposes. I was impressed that none of the farmers have borrowed up to the limit they were given. They seem to be approaching the idea of taking on credit with appropriate caution. Including two individuals outside of the group, a total of roughly \$4,000 has been loaned to date.

We discussed the importance of group members supporting each other, not only financially, but also in sharing ideas, helping with labor, etc. They enthusiastically agreed that it is God's will for people to work together in this way. We also asked what they intended to do with the profits from the common garden. Although they haven't decided definitively, this discussion led to talk of further loans to the group for tillage equipment. We made no promises, but



pointed out that if the garden produces as expected, there are tillage options will be within reach of the group without loans from us (e.g. ox plows). Jackson pointed out that once they demonstrate success and gain recognition as a group there may be government resources available as well (e.g. the Banque de Credit Nationale gives loans to producer groups with a 30% down payment).

For these initial loans, we decided to set January 31, 2009 as the final due date, though we'll encourage members to avoid interest accrual by paying them early. All loans need to be repaid in full before they'll be eligible for additional credit. Future loan dates will be determined as we gain experience, but since planting dates of each producer are staggered over several months, our initial idea of a distinct five-month loan period may be difficult to adhere to.



The accounting and record keeping challenges described above reinforce my concern that a project like this really calls for skills and resources beyond what World Hunger Relief, Haiti has readily available. I continue to feel he needs someone else to help with accounting, and was surprised to discover that Eliaquin Nelson, the CAF (school) Director and brother of Jackson, is close to finishing a degree in accounting. He would undoubtedly be willing to help by reviewing records & possibly carrying out book keeping procedures. I agreed to help simplify the accounting process by getting him simpler record-keeping forms, and Michael Schapiro is working on a laptop-based system that he's willing to donate to the cause.

The more I discuss our efforts with others involved in micro-credit, the more I realize we may have made a mistake in beginning by loaning operating funds. For the time being we are committed, and I'm eager to see our repayment rate come January 31. Fortunately we've started small and cautiously. My hope is that Jackson's wisdom in selecting trustworthy farmers to begin with, and his general awareness of the economic realities of Ferrier rice production, will help us avoid the problems others have encountered with similar schemes.

If operating loans prove misguided, there are other ways we can use the revolving fund to address the major challenges farmers tell us they face (i.e. tillage and fertilizer). Our discussion with GPBM illustrated the need for capital loans (e.g. for ox plow teams or hand-operated tillers that would reduce their dependence on unreliable Dominican custom operators). Funding such investments by farmer groups with a proven track record (i.e. those who have managed to raise significant funds themselves) might also allow us to reach a broader group of farmers than we can by providing operating loans. Continued use of the fund to purchase fertilizer in bulk, and resell it with and without credit, will also provide benefits to a large number of producers, especially if it allows us to take advantage of government-subsidized inputs such as the urea purchased in August. Rice purchasing, storage, and resale might help producers avoid the worst market price swings. We should begin discussing these options with Jackson soon.

### Other Ferrier Activities



Thanks in large part to support from Mission Waco sponsorships, the *College de L'Avenir Ferrier (CAF)* has nearly doubled its student enrollment since the last term. Because of the resulting need for space, work on rehabilitating the school buildings is going ahead full force despite a continued lack of resolution on land ownership. The local judge gave Jackson permission to do everything but dig foundations for new buildings. There has been significant vandalism of buildings during the period since the land was putatively sold. We're hoping that CAF's renewed activity will force the other party to quit avoiding Jackson, and to negotiate some sort of settlement.

Part of the urgency in upgrading school facilities stems from a recent government edict pledging new funding for schools. Qualifying public and private schools will begin receiving monthly stipends for all first grade students in the coming year, and this payment is to be extended to one additional grade each year until all 12 grades are covered. If this policy is actually enacted, it will make a huge difference in access to schools for Haitian children and in sustainable funding for CAF.

We again discussed expansion of the WHR-Haiti membership. We came up with a list of seven individuals we are comfortable contacting about membership. Jackson will draft a letter, and send it to me for suggestions. He has reservations about moving ahead too quickly, and thus I suggested we invite

the nominees to begin meeting as provisional members over the next few months. After we've seen their level of commitment, we'll invite them to join formally and elect new officers.

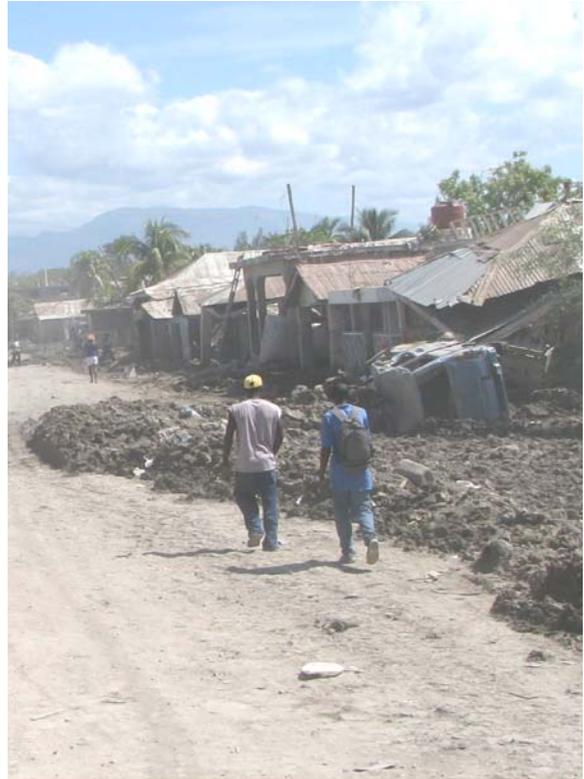
This issue is, of course, critical in light of Jackson's continued health problems. He *does* appear to continue gaining strength. However, he ran out of both insulin and blood pressure medication recently, and has not been able to replenish them. We need to discuss this situation with the Mission Waco-related physicians who have been working with him and come up with a plan to keep him supplied on a consistent basis.

### **Other issues**

Friday morning we were up at 4:30 am to catch a public pickup into Cap Haitien, then another bus from Cap to Port-au-Prince. What took us 20 minutes by plane on Tuesday took us 8 hours by bus on Friday!!

Fortunately, though, we got to see a lot of country that we wouldn't have otherwise, including the devastation in Gonaives and other areas that have been hit by recent hurricanes & flooding. I think my back side was hurting worse than Susan's by the time we pulled into the MCC guest house that evening. She's been a real trooper.

In Port-au-Prince, in addition to MCC, we met with several other groups and individuals. Brian Flannigan works in LeKay with International Organization on Migration including, among other things, a large contract for rice irrigation infrastructure upgrades. He offered to help us identify agronomic resource people who might be helpful in identifying production constraints and solutions in Ferrier. Cantave Jean Baptist, head of World Neighbors, Haiti is interested in collaborating on water resource development, community organization/training, etc. Brigitte Hudicourt, a former classmate of mine at Goshen College, is an Opthomologist in Petionville. She invited us to join her for the Port-au-Prince Rotary International Club meeting where our discussion included approaches to garnering Rotary Club support for a project in Ferrier.



The U.S. election was a hot topic everywhere we went in Haiti, and helped us gain an appreciation for how profoundly this event may affect the reputation of the U.S. in the developing world. Everyone we met, from peasants in their rice fields to physicians and wealthy businessmen at the Rotary Club, strongly supported Barak Obama and had harsh words for the outgoing administration. When pressed for reasons, most people cited the war in Iraq as the Republicans' biggest blunder. With remarkable insight, a vendor in the Petionville marketplace explained that the killing of thousands of innocent people was senseless, and that all the money spent on the war could have been used to help poor people. No one we spoke with mentioned race as a reason for their support of Obama. "Barak Obama isn't just a candidate for Haiti, he's a candidate for the world!" expressed one man on our bus from Cap Haitien.

## Desarm

I (Susan) arrived in Desarm Tuesday afternoon on a bus from Port-au-Prince. Using the little bit of Creole I had learned thus far, I was able to find the MCC Office with out too much trouble. Upon arriving at the MCC office I was warmly greeted by Jean-Rémi Pierre, the head of the Desarm team as well as Sharon and Bryan, two ex-patriots from Philadelphia who joined the team in September. I was then introduced to the rest of team which includes six more Haitian men and one Haitian woman.

My interactions with the team (excluding Bryan and Sharon whom I spoke to in English) were all in French and Creole; they spoke to me in Creole and I responded in French. By the time I left Desarm I feel that I was able to follow conversations in Creole fairly well and understand about 80% of what was being said.

Shortly after my arrival, I was invited to join them for a team building exercise with the group called a "Circle Reflection." During this two hour session I became better acquainted with the members and was able to observe their interactions as a group.

On Wednesday morning I sat in on their weekly team meeting which lasted for about four hours. The meeting started off with a lengthy discussion about the election results. Most people seemed pretty excited about the outcome. During the meeting they took time to introduce me to their program and figure out what I could do while I was visiting them. I all ready knew a bit about the program from a presentation a few of their team members had given at last year's ECHO conference. The MCC Team in Desarme is involved in two programs: an Environmental Education Program and a Reforestation Program.



The Environmental Education Program is currently working with 15 schools in the area (it was 16, but one of the schools shut down after being flooded). Each year they expand the program by including two additional schools. Four times throughout the year the Environmental Education Team holds a training session for the teachers in which the team presents/goes over the curriculum for the next few months. Twice a month members of the Environmental Education Team visit each school to observe a lesson. These visits allow

them to encourage the teachers and provide suggestions for improvement. During my stay in Desarm, I visited one of the schools, unfortunately due to some scheduling issues the lesson was just ending when we arrived. We were able to talk to the students for a few minutes and see the compost pile the students had made earlier in the year.

The Reforestation Program is currently working with 21 tree nurseries in and around Desarm. These tree nurseries grow a variety of trees and then sell them to people in the community. The trees use to be given away, but it was determined that people were more likely to take care of their trees if they paid for them. The price of the tree varies by type. Trees grown for fire wood are sold for 1 gourde (~ 3¢). Most fruit trees are sold for 5 gourdes (~13¢) and key lime trees for 10 gourdes (~25¢)

I was able to visit two different nurseries while in Desarm. When we arrived at the first nursery we were greeted by four Haitian men, the president, vice-president, and treasurer of the nursery as well as another member of the group. November is a really slow time for tree nurseries in the area and they really don't have too much going on. When we arrived the men were busy preparing sacks for tree planting. Throughout the country one can purchase water in small plastic bags. The tree nursery collects these bags, cuts the tops off,



pokes some holes in them and then plants trees in them. The men did show me the compost pile they had recently made which they would eventually use as part of their potting soil for the trees. They also showed me the trays and root trainers they would eventually fill with seedlings. The only trees they had planted were key lime trees. These trees are able to withstand the dry season so can be planted earlier than all of the others. The second tree nursery I visited was run by women. When we arrived there were three women working with the key lime trees that had recently sprouted. They were separating the bags in which the seeds had sprouted and the bags in which no seeds had sprouted. Eventually they will transplant trees from the bags where multiple seeds had sprouted into those bags where none of the seeds had sprouted.

During my time in Desarm I was able to visit the home of Franklin, one of the team members. Franklin just built a house for his wife and two daughters, Serina, age 4 and Fragina, age 28 days. After sitting around and talking for a little, Franklin showed me the trees he had growing in his yard. He must have had over twenty species of trees; trees for wood and fruit. He had avocado trees, mango trees, key lime trees, orange trees, grapefruit trees, tropical cherry trees, banana trees, acacia trees and many other varieties. He took me around to each tree and told me about the variety. He showed me the trees he had grafted and told me about the root stock and the graft. He talked about the irrigation system he had just begun to set up. He also explained the companion planting of his banana and avocado trees. The banana trees are really good at finding water and so initially the avocado trees benefit from being planted next to them. Then by the time the avocado tree is mature and bearing fruit, the



banana tree will have died. His excitement and enthusiasm was amazing!!



I have been accepted to work for Mennonite Central Committee and was hoping to work in

Desarm for a year through their Service and Learning Together Program (SALT). Due to a knee injury and the consequent surgery, I was unable to participate in the program this year. I have continued to pursue a position with MCC, but currently there aren't any positions that fit my skills and interests. Part of my visit to Desarm was to encourage the team to write a position for me so that I can go down and work with them.