

Trip Report: Ferrier, Haiti
July 21-28, 2011

Overview

My primary goal for this trip was to observe the ox training workshop being conducted by our Haitian partner organizations, GRADES and World Hunger Relief – Haiti. I also visited farmers involved in System of Rice Intensification (SRI) promotion and made contacts with several larger international organizations in hopes of attracting resources for infrastructural needs in northeastern Haiti.



Much of the rice-producing area in NE Haiti remains unplanted as farmers recover from two failed crops.

While Ferrier rice farmers have been blessed by good weather since mid-May, they continue struggling to recover from two failed rice crops (due to flooding last fall and drought in the January-May season). The combination of lost revenue and discouragement due to the risks involved in rice production mean many farmers did not plant, even once the rains began. WHR-Haiti extensionist, Eric Jean Baptist, estimates that only 30% of the rice paddies have been planted.

These observations support our contention that reducing risk is the key to increasing food security in this area. Our efforts in the past two years have aimed to do this by lowering input costs (through ox traction and SRI) and improving infrastructure (irrigation, drainage and roads) through partnerships with Haitian and other international organizations.

Ox Traction Project

Twelve local farmers completed the required 10% down-payment and put up collateral in order to receive an ox team and equipment. This number is three short of our original goal, but in the current economic climate, many interested farmers simply didn't have the means to participate. I arrived at the end of the 3rd week of training, and was impressed by the skill level of both the oxen and the farmers being trained to handle them. Most of the ox teams were already following the three basic voice commands (stop, go, and turn). Several animals proved unsatisfactory, and were swapped out for replacements. The farmer-participants all seemed satisfied that they had received good quality animals that would perform well in plowing and preparing fields.



Workshop participants yoke an ox team.

I was impressed by both the knowledge of the trainers and their flexibility as they worked with the farmers. GRADES, who led the training, and WHR-Haiti, who hosted the workshop seemed to work together well. Each team seemed to understand its role, and the different personalities of their leaders should make for an effective partnership as we move forward (their good cop-bad cop dynamic will serve them well as loans begin to come due). Once again, I was very pleased by the level of ownership

exhibited on the part of our Haitian partners. This project is clearly important to them, and my part has been merely to help clarify roles and mobilize resources.

The most moving moment of my visit came after I explained that the funding for the oxen came from farmers in Washington State. One of the participants stood up and stated that “If farmers in the U.S. can be this generous with us, we need to be equally generous to our neighbors who are less fortunate than ourselves!” He challenged all the participants who had received oxen to provide tillage services to at least one farmer who is unable to pay.

One concern raised by the farmer-participants stems from the fact that, as noted above, many of them did not plant a rice crop this season. Their first loan payment will come due at the end of the year, and the original plan was to time their payments to coincide with rice harvests. GRADES personnel stressed the importance of using the ox teams to generate income throughout the year (e.g. custom hire for other farmers) and not to wait until harvest to make payments. They also indicated that we might need to be flexible and allow them to make a smaller initial payment than planned.

System of Rice Intensification (SRI)

As with most area farmers, many of the participants in last year’s SRI workshop did not plant rice this season due to the failed crops described above. For this reason, only three SRI plots have been planted. Nonetheless, interest in this technology remains high. In fact, those who did plant put out much larger SRI plots than anticipated, due in part to the fact that SRI seed and fertilizer costs are considerably lower.



Eric Jean Baptist's SRI plot (r) is taller, darker green & more uniform than his traditionally-planted rice (l).

Eric Jean Baptist planted a 0.4 acre plot with three different rice varieties. At the time of my visit, 23 days after transplanting, we counted many rice plants that had grown from one tiny shoot to 25-30 strong tillers. Neighboring farmers who made fun of Eric for planting his seedlings “too early and too far apart” are now coming to him asking how they can replicate what he has done. When compared to traditional rice planted side-by-side, the SRI plants are taller, darker green and much more uniform. Eric is clearly proud of what he has accomplished, and his efforts will undoubtedly give rise to more farmers adopting SRI next year.

Infrastructural Improvements: Attracting Larger Partners

Following my visit to Ferrier, GRADES President, Jude Regis, arranged for us to meet with the Director of the UN’s World Food Program, Raoul Balletto, in Cap Haitien. WFP began purchasing rice from NE Haiti for their school distribution programs last year, and Mr. Balletto contacted Jude with an interest in expanding these purchases and helping build production capacity. At our meeting, we described the need for expanded irrigation, better drainage and building of access roads. He immediately pledged food-for-work resources to accomplish these tasks, though he stated that WFP doesn’t have the ability to provide the technical guidance (design and engineering) for such work.

We resolved to begin with several high-priority, but simple projects (cleaning drainage canals and building feeder roads) using local labor and WFP food-for-work payments under GRADES oversight. In the meantime, GRADES and WHRI will develop a concept paper outlining the larger infrastructural

needs, and WFP will help shop this around to FAO and other larger players who are capable of providing engineering and technical assistance.

In Port-au-Prince, I meet with several parties vying for contracts in a \$90M, USAID-funded initiative for northern Haiti. The project area includes both Ferrier and the mountainous watershed above it, and due to our long history in the area, and our contacts with local organizations, the individuals I met with seemed quite interested in including WHRI, WHR-H, and GRADES in their proposals to USAID.

Whereas this initiative clearly has the potential to accomplish the infrastructural projects we have identified as critical to the long-term sustainability of rice production in and around Ferrier, there is some risk that the size of the effort could overwhelm the capacity of the local organizations they will contract with to carry out the work. In this context, WHRI may play a critical role of helping shape the initiative in ways that make sense both technically and organizationally. I plan to follow up these conversations in the coming months as plans are solidified and proposals submitted.