

Small miracles

Some of God's tiniest creations—seeds—are producing big changes in Haiti.

By Jessica Reid



HELPING PEOPLE FEED THEMSELVES: Farmers play a key role in Haiti's recovery.

A seed can sustain life by producing food. Cultivating seeds can enrich the land. But a seed can also be dangerous.

Seeds can create dependency, destroy family businesses and poison the land. Seeds can even exacerbate poverty and hunger. How can something so small have such a big impact?

What's in a seed?

After natural disasters, including the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, nongovernmental and relief organizations often are urged to send seeds to help local farmers produce enough food for those left hungry. Often those seeds are genetically modified or are not from the region where they are being sent. This leads to several problems.

Even if the seeds are given freely at first, farmers must later buy patented, high-priced seeds because the donated seeds will not continue to produce the same quality or quantity of crop in subsequent years. Genetically modified seeds have become big moneymakers for some corporations, and their use has driven small farms that use native seeds out of business throughout the world. Hybrid seeds may seem a good choice because they combine the best traits of two plants. However, plants grown from hybrid seeds typically do not produce seeds that can be used to grow the same type of plants, and can even produce seeds that will not grow at all.

Although hybrid seeds are supposed to produce larger yields,

What do they grow in Haiti?

Papaya, Haitian pumpkin, moringa (a flowering plant grown in tropical climates that produces leaves, seeds and oil filled with nutrients used for food and fighting disease), eggplant, garlic chives, parsley, masoko (an edible root that forms above ground on a vining plant), corn, beans, coffee and more.

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that often depends on increased water, expensive equipment and other costly changes. In fact, these seeds rarely are able to feed the population for the long term.

Donating seeds purchased outside the country in need does nothing to stimulate that country's economy. One of the quickest ways to help people recover from a disaster is to get their businesses—including the selling of seeds and farm tools—running again.

Industrial cultivation tools such as large farm equipment or strong pesticides may not be practical or available in the country receiving the donated seeds. In addition, many of these “industry standards” can lead to increased carbon emissions.

“If you visit a place like Haiti, it might be easy to say, ‘Get that farmer a tractor and make it easier on him or her,’” says Ruth Farrell, coordinator of the Presbyterian Hunger Program. “But the industrial model is not necessarily effective. What we need to do is help farmers be more productive on a scale they can sustain, build up the local food economy and build up their local food reserves.”

Helping people feed themselves in the farmlands of northern Haiti, Presbyterian mission worker Mark Hare has worked with a group called the Farmers Movement of Papaye (known by its Creole acronym, MPP) since 2004. An agricultural technician, he helps Haitian farmers grow significant amounts of food on small plots of land.

When the earthquake struck Haiti, thousands of people fled metropolitan areas like the capital, Port-au-Prince, due to the sudden lack of food and other necessities. Many ended up in agricultural areas like Papaye and Hinche.

“The leadership of MPP sat down and began thinking of the strategies they could use to help the people receiving the refugees,” Hare says. “The first strategy was to try to find food aid. And then the next step was to produce more food so that as the crop season began, families could feed themselves and the people that had come from Port-au-Prince.”

The farmers’ group established seed programs that not only helped feed people in the short term but also addressed long-term problems. More than 10,000 families received indigenous seeds and tools purchased in Haiti with donations to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. Buying the seeds and tools locally stimulated this rural economy, ensured that the seeds would reproduce again and enabled Haitians to feed themselves and thousands of displaced people.

“With the seeds MPP gave us, we’re able to do more with our land,” says Clemancia Phillipe, a Haitian farmer. “I can feed my family when they’re hungry and also send them to the doctor when they are sick. And we’re able to save seeds in the silo, so when we need extra money, we can sell that seed.”

“I was able to send my kids to a better school,” says Ysleine Maxime, who also farms in the Papaye area,

SEED BANK: Funds donated by Presbyterians following the 2010 earthquake were used to purchase tools and indigenous seeds, giving a boost to Haiti’s farmers and the local economy.

“and it’s through the seed program that I could do that.”

Building eco-villages

The Presbyterian Haiti Response Team, formed to ensure that funds donated for recovery in Haiti were spent on sustainable projects, recently approved the funding of four eco-villages through a new program with the Farmers Movement of Papaye. These small, environmentally friendly communities will provide housing and farmland for families displaced by the earthquake. The villages will be built by those who will live there. Residents will receive agricultural training so they can feed their families and others in need and develop a livelihood.

By helping Haitians grow more food with less work, in small, intensively managed spaces near or around their homes, Hare and leaders of the farmers’ movement are strengthening Haiti’s rural communities.

“The programs are about providing people options so they can recover themselves,” Hare says. “We have the opportunity to see what kind of people Haitians are and realize how God is working with them and in them in incredible ways.”

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