

Haiti: World Vision's Targeted Food Program Questioned - Food Aid is "More Negative than Positive"

By [Haiti Grassroots Watch](#)

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A food distribution program aimed at expectant and new mothers and their babies may have increased the number of girls and women getting pregnant in and around the town of Savanette, located in Haiti's Centre *département*(province).

That's the perception of many residents and even beneficiaries of a USAID-funded World Vision "Multi-Year Assistance Program" (MYAP), running from 2008 through September 2013 here and in a number of communities in Haiti. As part of the MYAP, World Vision distributes food to pregnant women and mothers of children six to 23 months old (so-called "1,000 day programming"), as well as to vulnerable populations such as people living with AIDS, orphans, and malnourished children.

"There are some people getting pregnant every year" in order to get free food, claimed Carmène Louis, a former beneficiary. "That's why there are more children around. If you want to get in the program, you can't unless you are pregnant... You see youngsters [getting pregnant at] 12 or 15 years old! I think it's a real problem for Savanette."

But she also admitted that some of her neighbors were hungry, saying "things are getting worse, not better."

While the lack of up-to-date statistics prevented Haiti Grassroots Watch (HGW) from verifying whether or not the birthrate had indeed risen in Savanette, an investigation carried out over the course of a year discovered that many in this village near the Dominican Republic border - including respected elders, community radio members, an agronomist, and several beneficiaries - believe the MYAP has caused girls and women to resort to pregnancy in order to receive the bulgur wheat, beans, vegetable oil, and flour at monthly distributions.

A USAID-funded report on food aid programs in Haiti appears to confirm the perception. Evaluators for the 2013 USAID-BEST Analysis noted "a rise in pregnancies in one rural area and the possibility of this phenomenon being linked to public perceptions of 1,000 days programming," although the report did not name which "rural area."

Like many others questioned, agronomist Ruben Louis Jeune swore to the phenomenon and expressed concern.

"There are people who get pregnant on purpose," he said, noting that often "youngsters are making babies. The population is growing, people are having children but they will not be

able to afford to take care of them or pay for school.”

Asked about the possible increased pregnancies, Haiti’s Secretary of State for the Revival of Agriculture said that, while he was not familiar with the case, it was not out of the question.

“I have worked in the Central Plateau for 15 years,” he told HGW. “If I talk to you just about the perverse effects of the programs I myself have seen in front of my eyes... there are so many!”

The World Vision MYAP program also provides pregnant women and young mothers with prenatal care as well as support for vegetable gardens, “Behavior Change Communication” education, and other benefits via “Mothers Clubs.” In addition, the program has many other aspects related to helping Haitian farmers improve their animal husbandry or crop output, including technical assistance and training for farmers associations, distribution of seeds and livestock, support for improving irrigation, and other help.

HGW did not look at those aspects of the program. Journalists focused only on the food aid and its real or perceived impacts in and around Savanette.

The food assistance program is an attempt by USAID to target vulnerable populations, especially children.

The Haitian government and foreign agencies say at least 21% of all children suffer from “stunting,” meaning they are under-weight and under-height for their age. Some provinces are worse than others, and rural children generally have a higher stunting prevalence.

Beginning in 2008, USAID funded MYAPs to be run by World Vision, ACDI/VOCA and Catholic Relief Services in three different regions of the country, providing money as well as food: about 14,000 metric tons (MT) of food aid per year during the 2011-2013 period. (The organizations received and distributed higher amounts in 2010 and 2011 as part of the earthquake response.)



Elderly woman picks up beans off the ground after a March 2013 World Vision food distribution in Savanette

World Vision received 4,275 MT for FY2012 and approximately 3,830 MT for FY2013, which ended on September 30. The U.S.-based agency also received almost US\$80 million for the grant, to which they added some of their own funding. The program cost over US\$90 million for 2008-2012 and was extended for one year. (HGW could not find the cost of the additional year.)

World Vision’s food distribution programs on La Gonâve, the Central Plateau, and parts of the Artibonite province cost about US\$4.5 million per year, according to the agency’s

communications officer Jean-Wickens Méroné.

According to a World Vision evaluation of its own work, published in 2012, the food aid has had positive effects. During the first three years of the MYAP, the internal report says, the amount of “stunting” dropped for children aged six to 59 months went from 23.5% to 6%.

Food aid is “more negative than positive”

Some in and around Savanette are undernourished. In the last two years of FEWSNET reports, the Savanette region is pretty consistently considered “stressed,” which is #2 on a scale of #1 to #5, #1 being “no food insecurity” and #5 being “catastrophe/famine.”

“There is hunger here,” agronomist Jeune noted. “The distribution of food is not in and of itself a problem. It has a small positive impact, but when you investigate, you see that it is more negative than positive.”

Like Jeune, farmers and residents of Savanette have many questions about the program, which comes on of decades of food aid.

In addition to the real or perceived pregnancy increase, HGW also discovered that farmers and agronomists are convinced food aid has helped create a culture of dependence, discouraging people from working all of their plots and planting formerly important grains like sorghum. It has also encouraged consumers to buy imported rice rather than buy or grow sorghum, corn, and other crops, as in the past.

Even beneficiaries raised questions about the program. In the fall of 2012, HGW journalists queried 25 beneficiary families. All of them said they had land and were farmers. Two-thirds said that – given the option – they would prefer to receive seeds to food aid. (Some beneficiaries said they did receive a one-time donation of vegetable seeds.)

Merilus Derius, 71, said he thinks the younger generations do seem to want to farm, and he added that they not value some the foods he grew up eating.

“People are neglecting their fields!” the farmer told HGW. “Before, we used to be able to live off our land.”

While Derius admitted that environmental degradation and other factors have contributed to decreased agricultural output he also blamed the invasion of food aid and cheap foreign food, which people buy instead of local products.

“Now we have this food called ‘rice husks.’ In the Dominican Republic, they give it to animals. In Haiti, people eat it! But before, farmers grew sorghum and ground it. They grew Congo peas, planted potatoes, planted manioc. On a morning like this, a farmer would make his coffee and then – using a thing called ‘top-top,’ a little mill – he would crush sugar cane and boil the sugar cane water, and eat cassava bread, and he would have good health!” he said. “When you lived off your garden, you were independent... But when your stomach depends on someone else, you are not independent.”

World Vision does not believe its program creates dependency because most of the program is concerned with helping farmers improve their production.

“It is a program that encourages resiliency and independence, after a certain period,” World

Vision's Director of Operations, Lionel Isaac, told HGW.

Indeed, it would be unfair to blame the World Vision program for all of Savanette's woes. Jeune, other agronomists, and farmers like Derius hope that the plethora of recently announced government and foreign agricultural projects will help their region, which is capable of producing sorghum, corn, many kinds of vegetables and fruits, tubers, and livestock products like milk. The area has a lot of potential, Jeune said, but archaic farming methods, with few or no agricultural inputs, keep it from being self-sufficient.

"All of the communes produce food," Jeune noted. "If farmers had technical assistance, they would make more money and the quality would improve also."

Questions About a Food Distribution

On March 18, 2013, HGW journalists observed a food distribution that raised questions about how beneficiaries are treated.

Food was handed out to people who had stood in line for many hours, sometimes to groups who would divide it up. Journalists witnessed shoving and even fighting, as well as older women sitting on the ground, picking individual lentil beans.

"At a lot of distributions, you see pushing," Jeune told HGW. "Old people are sometimes hurt. Even if food is being handed out, basic principals should be respected."

Questioned in 2012, about one-third of 25 beneficiaries said they had been mistreated during food distributions.

World Vision workers did not want HGW to videotape the March 18 distribution where – at the end of the distribution – some food had not been handed out.

"You can't film here!" one of the men yelled, shoving the journalists. Along with others, he tried to force journalists to turn off their camera and leave.

Members of the community radio station and other bystanders protected the journalists, who were eventually allowed to continue their work. World Vision officials in the capital later apologized for the attack, saying they had disciplined the employees.

Haiti Grassroots Watch is a collaboration of two Haitian organizations, Groupe Medialternatif/Alterpresse and the Society for the Animation of Social Communication (SAKS), along with students from the Faculty of Human Sciences at the State University of Haiti and members of two networks – the network of women community radio broadcasters (REFRAKA) and the Association of Haitian Community Media (AMEKA), which is comprised of community radio stations located across the country. This series produced by HGW is distributed in collaboration with [Haïti Liberté](#).

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