

Land Tenure and Agroforestry in Haiti: A Case Study in Anthropological Project Design

Gerald F. Murray

Department of Anthropology, University of Florida

Background

Having done anthropological fieldwork on the evolution of Haitian peasant land tenure, I was invited by USAID/Haiti in the late 1970s to carry out research exploring possible linkages between land tenure variables and the failure of most tree planting projects to motivate Haitian peasants to plant trees. I was specifically asked to assess the degree to which land tenure insecurity served as the principal disincentive to peasant tree planting.

Problem diagnosis

My investigation of some 15 reforestation and soil conservation projects produced the following suggestions:

1) In most project regions the land tenure situation was characterized by the same internal heterogeneity that is characteristic of most of rural Haiti: mixes of inherited plots under individual control, purchased plots, agriculturally marginal land owned collectively by kin groups, State owned land, sharecropped plots, rented plots, and others.

2) Though tenure on some categories of land was insecure, tenure on owner operated plots was quite secure. Peasants regularly invested several hundred dollars (the equivalent of household annual income) in the purchase of such plots. Projects failed for other reasons; and "land tenure insecurity" should not be used as a whipping boy to deflect blame for project failure away from its proper objects.

3) Reforestation projects had traditionally emphasized State land or agriculturally marginal land as the proper site for tree planting. This policy appeared misguided both ecologically and anthropologically. Ecologically the land least "at risk" to erosion from cultivators was agriculturally marginal land, i.e. these plots were low priority plots on which to carry out the "soil conservation" that was so central

a theme of many projects. Anthropologically a peasant planting trees on such State land or kin owned land has absolutely no right to prevent others from cutting down the trees which he plants. Projects were, in short, targeting the wrong tenure categories of plots.

4) Of equal damage, however, were the *technical* choices which conventional projects were making. Fruit trees (with little market value and marginal nutritional value) were being emphasized over wood trees. Those projects planting wood trees emphasized slow growing species. And above all, projects universally resorted to cumbersome polyurethane containers for nursery production, creating formidable transportation barriers.

5) But the most serious program errors were in the *institutional* domain. Funds were routinely entrusted to Haitian public sector ministries which had proven their inability to implement agreed on projects, or to refrain from reallocating project funds to other agendas. Even technically and economically sound projects stood little chance of success if entrusted to the wrong institutional custodians.

Conceptual reorientation

I proposed several basic conceptual themes which would, I predicted, lead to the voluntary planting of millions of trees.

1) *Emphasize economy, not ecology.* Messages concerning the ecological advantages of trees tend to leave Haitian peasants unmoved. Not only do they already know the ecological advantages of trees, they are less interested in nutrient flows or soil flows than in desperately needed *cash flows* into their domestic coffers. Tree projects must be structured in such a way that the planting of trees shows promise of producing a flow of cash into peasant households. Ecological improvements are best pursued in Haiti, I argued, as a *secondary side effect of behaviors in which the peasant engages primarily for economic reasons.* The most promising theme, in this light, would be *wood as a cash-crop.*

2) *Strive for a linkage between two pre-existing anthropological patterns.* The planting of wood trees could be conceived as an evolutionary linkage between two pre-existing economic habits among Haitian peasants, rather than as a new behavior. They are already cash-croppers--much of their food produce is consigned to the internal market system. They are already wood-sellers--they know that there is a

vigorous market for both lumber and charcoal, and many peasant communities derive income from this market. What is missing is a linkage: why not create a project in which, for the first time in their history, they would cash-crop wood?

3) *Use pre-existing land tenure and crop-tenure patterns.* I argued against trying to introduce new tenure or crop ownership arrangements. If the transition to wood cropping were to be smooth, it would have to take place on the same types of plots (as defined by tenure) as the ones on which peasants grow their current cash-crops. And their ownership, relation to the trees should be the same as their ownership control and harvest rights over the other crops which they plant. Most cropping in Haiti is done on individually owned plots whose crops are owned by the individuals who plant them. This means that projects should avoid, in the beginning, exhortations to plant trees on commonly owned kin-land (which is used currently only for grazing) or on State land. No peasant in his right mind plants food crops on either of these tenure types. And projects should avoid, at least in Haiti, the "village woodlot" model. The peasants would have no more confidence in personal income from a village woodlot than they would from a hypothetical "village food-lot".

Program measures

The above concepts were embodied in a project which adopted the following operational measures.

Technical measures

- The higher commercial value of wood led to a choice of the wood tree rather than the fruit tree.
- Fast growing, rather than slow-growing, trees were used: *Leucaena leucocephala*, *Cassia siamea*, *Azadirachta indica*, *Casuarina equisetifolia*, and *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*.
- Border-planting and intercropping techniques were taught to make wood growing compatible with continued food growing on small holdings.
- Most importantly, seedlings were produced in small containers rather than bags. Our pickup trucks could carry, not the standard 250 seedlings, but some 20,000 seedlings ready for transplanting. And an individual peasant could carry 500 trees.

Microeconomic measures

- A contract was made with peasants: they would agree to plant a specified number of trees on their own holdings. In return they would be given the seedlings for free, they would be full owners of the trees, and would be able to harvest and sell the wood whenever they wanted, without project permission.
- The minimum number of trees was 500. Planted at 2m x 2m (to permit initial intercropping of food), this would occupy only a fifth of a hectare. (The average holding is about 1.25 ha.)

Institutional measures

- Absolutely no financial, logistical, or operational link was established between the project and the Haitian government. The funds were channeled entirely through non-governmental organizations. Major grantee NGOs funneled seedlings, technical assistance, and data gathering forms to villages through localised NGOs.
- The central NGO signed arrangements with these localized NGOs. The latter identified local farmers who were trained and served as "animateurs". They explained the project to kin and neighbors, recruited tree planters, organized pre-planting meetings, coordinated the delivery of the seedlings, and gathered follow up survival data on every plot on which trees had been planted.

Results

1) The project hesitatingly agreed to plant three million trees on peasant land between September of 1981 and September of 1985—hesitatingly, because it was all founded on untested anthropological predictions about peasant tree planting behavior and institutional behavior. The hypotheses have been totally validated: as of this date (May '85) already more than 15 million trees have been planted by some 30,000 Haitian peasants. Other approaches to tree planting run into the problem that peasants will not plant trees, which then die in nurseries. The main problem of the Haiti Agroforestry Project, in contrast, is that it is difficult to produce seedlings fast enough to satisfy the demand that has been created. Cases were reported in which peasants who were not recipients of project trees actually uprooted and stole samples of newly planted seedlings

from other villagers' plots. The project has managed to touch an economic nerve in Haitian peasant villages.

2) Though survival rates of the trees have not been precisely calculated yet, it is clear that in moist areas survival rates are high. In arid areas they are low. What is important is that mortality is due, not to human carelessness (e.g. livestock depredation, poor care) but to ecological conditions. Peasants are according to the trees the same degree of protection which they accord to their crops, which was a central project goal.

3) Final planting decisions were left to the peasants. The vast majority of trees have *not* been planted on marginal land, but rather border planted or intercropped on plots where the peasants are simultaneously growing crops. The reasons underlying this behavior lie less in the labor-saving hypothesis of some observers ("the peasant achieves two crops with one ground-preparation") than in land tenure dynamics. Agriculturally marginal land is generally left by kin groups in undivided blocks for common grazing purposes. Only agriculturally productive land is subdivided into individually controlled plots. This means that the tenure relations prevailing on marginal land are such as to impede clear tree-tenure rights. No matter who plants a tree, any kinsman with collective rights in the land can cut the tree down. Thus land tenure dynamics create a situation in which land whose commercial value could be increased by trees (marginal land) will not be planted in trees because of the tree-tenure insecurity that would affect such land.

4) The impact of this project on the behavior of institutions varies according to the type of institution. The participating NGOs have changed their approach to tree planting in a manner that is probably irreversible. It is unlikely that they will revert to the less effective models that prevailed before this project. In addition a Swiss donor organization (Helvetas) made a major financial contribution to the project after viewing its operation. Such international support opens the possibility that applicable features of the model may spread to other world regions.

5) Public sector institutions, in contrast, cling to old patterns. The Haitian government has given no indications that its own tree planting procedures will be influenced by the successes of the Agroforestry Project. The only response forthcoming from the Ministry appears to be continued irritation that the funding was channeled through pri-

vate organizations, thus violating its sovereign right to squander donor funds. USAID, the major funder of the Agroforestry Project, also gives evidence of returning to the old ways. Discussions are under way for a multimillion dollar "Watershed Management Project," to be funneled through the Haitian government, using organizational and operational tree planting models that have already failed spectacularly in Haiti. The behavior of these two governmental institutions is to be attributed less to institutional stupidity than to the possible attachment of some decision makers to agendas which have little to do with tree output.

6) Former accusations of land tenure insecurity as the major cause of tree planting failure in Haiti have been rendered untenable. A land tenure system, rather, with its internal heterogeneity, can be seen as a "menu". The goal of planning is to target that subset of plots which can serve as the stage for unleashing the same economic energy toward wood cultivation that human populations have for some 12 millennia channeled in food cultivation. If planners fail to discover the potential linkages, it is their fault, not that of the "land tenure system". There may be regions where such wood planting is truly hindered by land tenure. But I suspect that many more cases of failure are due more to the mediocrity of the planning and management process than to inadequacies or insecurities of the land tenure system.

Land, Trees and Tenure

**Proceedings of an International Workshop
on Tenure Issues in Agroforestry**

Nairobi, May 27-31, 1985

Sponsored by the Ford Foundation

edited by

John B. Raintree

**ICRAF and the Land Tenure Center
Nairobi and Madison
1987**