

HAITI'S COMMUNITY GARDENERS ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT NUTRITION



WORKING FOR malnourished rural communities affected by Haitian earthquake

WORKING TO improve nutrition, health and lives of vulnerable families

WORKING WITH Médecins du Monde, German Red Cross, local NGOs, Haiti Ministry of Agriculture

WORKING THANKS TO EU



A community garden has become a centre of social life in the tiny municipality of Moron, in Grand'Anse province of Haiti. The garden is a thriving symbol of the success of an FAO project that led the women of several surrounding villages to move nutrition to the top of the list when it came to making decisions about what crops to grow and livestock to rear. In fact, the project has been such a success that project staff refer to the local women who work together in the garden as *mamans lumières* or "light mothers".

The name symbolizes their enthusiasm for what they are learning about nutrition and agricultural production and their willingness to impart their knowledge to other women in their community. They have even written songs and plays to share their knowledge, attracting audiences and creating a ripple effect that has passed on tips on food production and proper eating habits to families throughout the entire region. This in turn has helped alleviate a chronic malnutrition problem in the area.

Only one unpaved road connects Haiti's Grand'Anse province – a finger of land jutting from the country's southwest corner – to the rest of the country. In spite of its remoteness, the population of Grand'Anse has increased by some 120 000 since the devastating 2010 earthquake, due to an influx of refugees from more badly damaged areas. This rapid upsurge in population put serious pressure on the area's resources and food supply, increasing levels of already chronic malnutrition. To prevent the situation from deteriorating further, FAO and partners launched a project that has improved both nutrition and livelihoods for more than 5 000 of the most vulnerable families in the area. The project has provided women with practical hands-on training in homestead food-production techniques, combined with classes that introduce them to the importance of making pro-nutrition decisions about what they plant and feed to their families.

GARDENS FILL NUTRITIONAL GAPS

The project owes part of its success to the strategic decision to go beyond merely introducing techniques that increase yields, and to also tackle the complex issue

of nutrition. In the initial stage, FAO looked at the problems and causes of malnutrition in the area, identified local crops that would fill in the nutritional gaps and developed a plan to improve or increase production of those foods.



The percentage of severely malnourished children has been reduced from 5.7% to 0.8% with FAO community gardening project.

Set up in 12 municipalities of Grand'Anse, the project offers classes aimed at improving production, such as agronomy, livestock rearing and marketing. In parallel, it also introduces women to good practices for hygiene, food handling and child care – while always maintaining a pro-nutrition point of view. The plan included training, workshops, cooking classes and practical experience in applying new farming techniques and cooking skills, all designed to increase the women's capacity to produce food and prepare meals to improve their families' nutrition and health.



Haitian women are using song and theatre to promote healthy eating habits learned in FAO community garden project.

PROCESSING SKILLS MEAN YEAR-ROUND NUTRITION

Mango processing – introduced as a way to deal with seasonality – is a case in point. As with many crops and fruits, mangoes are so plentiful that they are often left to rot on the trees or the ground because the seasonal supply greatly exceeds the demand. The project included mango processing, teaching the women to dry and process mangoes when they are in season. The processed fruits not only provide consumers year-round access to critical vitamin A – the women can also sell their excess production to increase household income. The same is true for other local produce, such as okra and amaranth, leafy vegetables the women did not appreciate for their nutritional value until they attended the FAO training classes.

This concept has been especially important in Grand'Anse. The province was spared the devastation of the 2010 earthquake that struck the rest of the country but had to deal with a population spike when some 120 000 people flocked there seeking sanctuary. The meteoric increase put even more pressure on the area, which already had compromised resources and a population that suffered from

chronic malnutrition, stunting and micronutrient deficiencies.

Women who participated in the project report that their children are healthier, growing faster and stronger since they learned about the importance of nutrition in their family diet and have been able to produce the food they need. In fact, the health centres in Grand'Anse report the percentage of severely malnourished children requiring treatment reduced from 5.7 percent in 2009 to 0.8 percent in the first six months of 2012. Taking on the role of *mamans lumières* has come quite naturally to the women who have benefited from the project, and who have now taken it upon themselves to share what they have learned with friends and neighbours throughout the region.