

Presentation of Dame-Marie

By Pierre M. Antoine

1-The socio-economic profile

Founded in 1776 during the French colonial period, Dame-Marie is a little town on the western coast of Haiti, in the department of Grande-Anse. By road, it is 327 kilometers from Port-au-Prince, the capital, and 48 kilometers from Jérémie, the departmental capital. Currently, the commune of Dame Marie has about 40,000 inhabitants, including 8,000 in the town. Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the export of cocoa by French and German investors triggered a boom in the development of Dame-Marie. This was the time when the city expanded and saw the construction of large Gingerbread style houses. However, in October 1954, the city was completely destroyed by Hurricane Azèle, and Dame-Marians have since struggled to rebuild their town.



The region has always been known for its greenery, cocoa, marine resources, beaches and ecotourism potential. Yet today, these resources are not properly exploited and the economy remains largely based on traditional activities practiced on a small scale such as: agriculture, fisheries and handicrafts. The majority of Dame-Marians rely on financial support from relatives living abroad, particularly the USA and Canada. In Dame-Marie, steady jobs are scarce and limited to state sectors such as health services, education, justice and law enforcement. The private sector is restricted to petty trading, collection and preparation of cocoa for export, agro handicrafts and the provision of educational and financial services. The lack of major investments in basic infrastructure, tourism, agro-industry and fishing has affected unemployment, especially for younger workers. This causes the majority of Dame-Marians to face poverty issues denying them access to essential services like education and healthcare, despite efforts of various institutions, including AEADMA. To overcome this crisis, we're hoping for the better exploitation of Dame-Marie's resources.

2-AEADMA, the context of its creation and its achievements

In the early 80s, following a long period of economic decline recorded across the country, the situation of the town was particularly difficult. Departmental and local roads were impassable, the city streets totally damaged. Travel to Port-au-Prince was made exclusively by boat and accidents were common. Economically, the price of cocoa, the main cash crop, was at its lowest level and unemployment was at its peak. This caused a strong migration, primarily from the countryside to the city, then from this point to Port-au-Prince and / or abroad. This period marked the area's rapid deforestation and "boat people" phenomenon, where Dame-Marians ventured in the high seas towards the United States. Furthermore, health services were very limited, education stopped at 6th grade in all but one school that offered instruction up to the 9th grade. Those who could not go to Jérémie or Port-au-Prince to continue their schooling saw their education to stop prematurely. This was a rampant problem throughout the country and was not confined to Dame-Marie.

Given the absence of state intervention to curb this socio-economic crisis or offer a minimum of basic social services to the public, local development movements created outside the political sphere sprung up across the country. These community movements elicited a chain of solidarity between citizens living in provincial towns, the capital and overseas. In Dame-Marie, this movement gave birth to the "Association d'Entre-Aide des Dame-Mariens" (AEADMA) in 1984, with branches in Dame-Marie, Port-au-Prince and in all North American cities where there was a strong Dame-Marian community such as New York, Boston, Miami and Montreal.

The renaissance of Dame-Marie dates from this period, seeing its citizens from various regions contributing their expertise and financial aid for the reconstruction of their hometown. The first project organized the reconstruction of the square, a popular public space in front of the town's church. Various other projects were subsequently developed, including the construction of a socio-cultural center, rebuilding of the streets using "adoquins" (concrete blocks), organization of the September 8th festival and the environmental protection and city beautification with flowers gardens. The construction of the landing field, vocational training, and building of a drinking water supply and protection of the seaside were also tackled during this period. In 1990 Electricity was also brought to Dame-Marie, as well as the nearby town of Anse d'Hainault from the combined efforts of AEADMA and CORCA, another local development organization. To date, AEADMA's biggest feat remains its 22 years management of the municipality's healthcare system. This is accomplished through the "Hôpital de la Communauté Dame-Marienne"

(HCDM), following an agreement signed with the Ministry of Public Health and Population in September 1989.

The AEADMA experience is an example of a community development initiative. Its local and international members returning from the town's yearly celebration, the Feast of Our Lady of Nativity, relayed their experiences to their fellow Dame-Marians in their city of residence. This led to an increase in real estate investment from returning Dame-Marians and others who were planning to retire in their hometown

3-Antoine Foundation, the context of its creation and its sphere of action

The Antoines are native Dame-Marians closely related to their community through involvement in their family foundation. Pierre Michel Antoine, the President of the foundation, is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Community Hospital of Dame-Marie (HCDM). From 1988 to 1998, he was also the President of the Port-au-Prince branch of AEADMA. His father, Marcel Antoine (1909-2004), a former judge and educator, was the first president of the Dame-Marie branch of AEADMA. His grandfather, Pressoir Antoine (1882 -1970), was mayor of the city. His grandmother, Mercile Livette (1880 – 1882) and his mother, Ninote Renois Antoine (1919-2003), were known throughout the community for their great heart and sense of sharing. His wife Bérangère, a public health nurse, established in



1992 the community health program of the HCDM and trained many staff members in this field. His older sisters, Claire-Marie, Georgette and Liliane, career educators, have formed at a catholic school in the city several generations of Dame-Marian girls. His younger sisters, Nina, Beatrice and Yolène, although they live in Port -au-Prince, continue to provide direct and / or indirect support to social movements in the community.

In 1992, when the country was facing a serious political crisis following the military coup

against President Aristide, the international community imposed to the new regime important sanctions such as the suspension of development aid programs and a trade embargo, which have significantly weakened an already fragile economic base. The political crisis was then transformed into a socio-economic disaster. The embargo led to high inflation and the loss of many jobs in the assembly industry and tourism. The most vulnerable segments of the population became more impoverished and the phenomenon of boat people peaked during this period, with Dame-Marie being one of the main ports of embarkation. This caused many children to be left out of the school system since their parents were either being held at Guantanamo Base or became unable to meet the tuition fees. Many patients also had difficulties to cope with the healthcare costs. Foundation Antoine was born in this context to help the poorest of Dame-Marie's society. Since 1992, The Antoine Foundation School has been welcoming the municipality's most vulnerable children. Scholarships were offered to young people at secondary level. In 1996, the Foundation supported the construction of the hospital's upper surgical floor. This allowed locals to remain in their hometown for advanced procedures instead of seeking treatment in Jérémie. The Foundation is also involved in reforestation efforts and beautification of the town.

4-The Partnership between:

AEADMA-HCDM / Antoine Foundation / Saint Francis International Medical International

The medical mission conducted at Dame-Marie's hospital from February 12 to 17, 2012 by Saint Francis International Medical Mission has opened the door to many possibilities. This affiliation could allow for the development of community specific projects and are as listed:

4.1-AEADMA-HCDM

First and foremost, the goal is to expand medical services such as surgery, internal medicine, ophthalmology, dental care, laboratory and medical imaging. This would, in short, make HCDM the referral hospital for the sub region servicing a population of approximately one hundred thousand inhabitants. It is then essential to obtain funding for:

- Employment of two Haitian doctors, a general surgeon and a gynecologist. This would ensure the continuity of services in their respective fields.
- Maintenance and updating of existing essential medical equipment
- Organize regular rotations of SFIMM specialists in the fields mentioned above
- Provide technical assistance to HCDM staff
- Build a mission house to accommodate essential staff
- Establish a fund to support medical care for the poor. A (sliding scale) financial contribution would be required from beneficiaries of this program to allow some cost recovery and revenue generation.

4.2-The Antoine Foundation

To aid the Foundation in its efforts to continue its current social programs and the launch of new economic projects, medium and long term goals are listed:

a) Medium term goals

- Completion of the Foundation Antoine School that will offer vocational and technical programs.
- Look for mentors that will sponsor the education and training of students
- Search for scholarships to American universities and technical schools for deserving young Dame-Marians. Higher education will enable them to better participate in the economic and social development of their community.

b) Long term goals

- Look for partners and organizations interested in investing in tourism, fishing, the recovery and processing of our organic products (cocoa, coffee, breadfruit, cassava, various fruits). This would promote economic and social development by creating a productive and stable work force.

5-Conclusion

While having a primarily strong health component, this program is not limited to humanitarian works. Its goal is also to break the vicious cycle associated with a chronic under development. In due time its implementation will open new opportunities to the community of Dame-Marie and surrounding areas.

The Antoine Foundation will provide the necessary support to the Saint Francis International Medical Mission for its integration into the area and the execution of its mission. The Foundation will also donate the land necessary to build the mission house for its staff. This is intended and expected to be a joint project.

Photo Gallery

The Catholic Church and city square



The main streets



Protection of the seaside



Before



During



After

Dame-Marie's friends



Proposals for the mission house

