

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine  
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African Americans and the African world.

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## **Health Care Reform Demands U.S. Food Policy and Agricultural Reform Dantò's Note**

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*"Lance Armstrong serves on the President's Cancer Panel, which released a report this year concluding that processed forms of corn and soybeans - heavily subsidized commodity crops- are known contributors to obesity and chronic diseases, including cancer. The upcoming reauthorization of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act ([the Farm Bill](#)) provides an opportunity that must not be missed to strongly increase support for fruit and vegetable farmers."*

There is a connection between farm subsidies, health and food security - in both the United States and in countries like Haiti. The US government's food policies and profit priorities harm the planet as well as the people who eat processed foods, which are full of contaminants such as pesticides from production, additives, and bacteria from processing. This non-green diet makes us sick and the chronic diseases it causes drive up health care spending.

"That's why our success in bringing health care costs under control ultimately depends on whether Washington can summon the political will to take on and reform a second,

even more powerful industry: the food industry.” ([Big Food vs. Big Insurance.](#))

Too many people have had family members die of cancer or know someone very close who died of cancer. It’s an unspeakable experience. It certainly makes your faith in scientific advancement falter.

Here’s a case in point. For many Haitians living abroad it’s extremely ironic to see that the generation of our grandparents and great grandparents actually lived longer than our own parents and relatives who immigrated, work and live in the US all their lives. It happened and is happening in this writer’s family.

Both my grandmothers, who lived their entire lives in a rural town in Southern Haiti, and many of their generation survived or are surviving into and past their 80s. My grandmothers lived longer in Haiti than my mother who immigrated to America. So many folks in America are dying young from cancer, stroke, diabetes, and/or heart disease. Part of it is the American diet.

In great grandma’s Haitian countryside meat was a luxury indulged in just occasionally and dairy was not a daily staple. The old Haitian diet was organic and there was no [US government](#) “trying to help the defense industry move over to a civilian use of their nitrate explosives which became fertilizer, and their nerve gas, which became herbicides and pesticides.”

That’s why taking on the medical cost of health care is one thing, but there is something seriously wrong with the Western food diet, not to mention the US domestic and international harm done by farm subsidies that force US farmers to grow commodity crops such as rice, soy, corn, sugar and tobacco, and use toxic fertilizer that harms the environment, seeps into the river system and kills the fish.

In the article [The Carbon Trade](#), Janet Gilles makes the point, *inter alia*, that:

- “The government pays to pollute the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. The United Nations Environmental Group says nitrate pollution is the greatest threat to our fisheries worldwide.
- In exchange for cheap corn fed beef, fish, chicken, and pork, which have little nutritional value as the animals are no longer getting the rich assortment of greens from their natural diet, we are killing the wild fish.
- Right now, farmers are paid for the number of acres under cultivation for “commodity crops”, which are crops that go to a manufacturer, such as Archer Daniels Midlands, before they go to the table.
- Real foods, fruits and vegetables and nuts, are not subsidized. In fact, if a farmer getting his \$200,000 a year for growing soy or corn decides to grow a few acres of food for the table (specialty foods in the legislation), says he loses his entire \$200K.
- No more crop rotation. Only industrial agriculture gets the subsidy.” ([The Carbon Trade](#) by Janet Gilles, Sept 11, 2009.)

US farm subsidies don't just hurt US citizens, our children, US food security and the environment, but of course, also other nations these toxic foods are shipped to, like Haiti.

US subsidized rice is inferior to the organically-grown Haitian rice and is actually killing Haitians in Haiti. Here's an example:

In Haiti, the little food that is given to prisoners at the National Penitentiary is U.S.-processed rice. The subsidized US rice that is flooded into the Haitian market destroyed much of traditional Haitian farm life which was the soul and lifeblood of our grandmamas' Haiti. Free trade with its sweatshop factory jobs and subsidized rice pushed farmers off their land and into Haiti's capital in search for factory jobs in the 70s and 80s, eventually creating slums, like Site Soley, in Port-au-Prince when the factories closed shop and left Haiti in the late 1980s.

Sweatshop jobs at free trade wages created the slum of Site Soley that 9,000 UN soldiers are now in Haiti to "stabilize." (See: [UN troops to remain in crisis-ridden Haiti.](#)) Today's indefinitely warehoused UN prisoners at Haiti's national penitentiary mostly come from Site Soley, practically all of them have never been convicted of any crime. But, in addition to the inhumane conditions in the overcrowded prison, the abuse and catching infectious diseases that incubate in crowded prisons like HIV, tuberculosis and malaria, many are dying of Beriberi because of the lack of nutrition in the US rice they are fed.

"Beri-beri appeared to be devastating the overcrowded prison population... Packed together in squalid conditions and provided meager, irregular meals, Haitian prisoners were fed a diet of rice that ...had lost its natural B1 vitamin/thiamin content, leading to the ultimately harmful (Beri-beri) effects. All the Haitian rice production, which Haitians traditionally grew and consumed as a staple, was a healthy, whole-grain, vitamin B-packed, and native crop. But, due to U.S. policies since the early 1980's preferring U.S. rice producers over Haitians' own sustainable agriculture, tariffs were forced to drop, and U.S. rice flooded the Haitian market." ([HAITI: Mysterious Prison Ailment Traced to U.S. Rice.](#))

Sustainable US health care reform also demands agricultural and farm policy (subsidy) reform and food system reforms. But so far, food system reform has not figured in the national conversation about health care reform. It doesn't make sense for the US to promote and subsidize universal health care while subsidizing the consumption of high-fructose corn syrup that causes diabetes and heart diseases or nitrate-glazed foods and nutrition-free rice that causes beriberi. US agricultural and food system policies should encourage food whose nutritional value promotes health rather than disease.

US policies should support wholesome domestic agriculture in Haiti, in the US, and elsewhere. Green food that is produced in an environmentally sound manner - that add nutrients to the soil, that mitigate climate change, that use less nonrenewable resources, that give us better air to breathe and water to drink - helps the planet.

In this interconnected world that we live in, US subsidies to US farmers for growing organic foods, fruits and vegetables would reduce health care spending, benefit the

environment, and improve people's health while also benefiting the long term food security interests of both the US nation and storm-ravaged Haiti.

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