

# **Balan: Past, Present, and Future**



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## Preface

I visited Balan for the first time in January 2008 as one of the founding members of RESPE: Haiti, a student research and development initiative of the Tufts University Institute for Global Leadership. One of my very first impressions of the town was an overwhelming sense of community that was strengthened by the warm welcome that people in Balan extended to my fellow visitors and me throughout our stay.

RESPE: Haiti, which stands for Research and Engagement Supporting Poverty Elimination, embarked on an initial research trip to Balan to assess the possibility of creating a long-term respectful partnership with a rural Haitian town. The warm and eager response that our group received by everyone in Balan made us confident that we had visited the right town. Through community-guided research and development initiatives, students in RESPE: Haiti have learned first-hand about issues of underdevelopment facing rural Haitians as well as the remarkable strength and resilience of rural communities like Balan.

Balan is indeed a unique community and it has been an honor for me to visit and work in collaboration with residents on joint development initiatives for the past few years. Though there are certainly numerous obstacles facing Balan's development, I have been continually impressed by the strength, resilience, and selfless commitment of people in Balan to their town and country's improvement. In the face of so much hardship, people in Balan rely upon each other for support; a fact that is illuminated by the overwhelming instances of gwoupman, bases, konbit, and microlending that exist for solidarity and mutual support throughout the town.

Having known Hudson since February 2008 when he visited Tufts for a symposium on Global Poverty and Inequality, I have been inspired by his energy, passion for knowledge, devotion to his community, and hopeful vision for the future of his town and country. I applaud his initiative to document the history of Balan, a special town that I believe is an excellent model of community initiative and local ownership of development. It has been an honor to work with someone as committed, kind-hearted, and indefatigable as Hudson and I am proud to call him my friend.

Before my first trip to Balan, I was apprehensive about coming to a country that has been portrayed as dangerous in the news; however, once I arrived in Balan all of my apprehensions were swiftly allayed. The collective warmth and strength of Balan has made me feel welcome, safe, and encouraged throughout my visits and it has been one of my ongoing goals to share Balan's story with the rest of the world.

Thanks to the energy and passion of community leaders in Balan, I found that there was already a significant amount of local momentum for development before my arrival. It has been only by working with visionary community members that RESPE: Haiti has been able to build off of the strong foundation laid by existing initiatives and development goals and I am confident that our partnership with Balan will only continue to develop. Dedicated community members like Hudson are those who will be the driving force behind achieving our ultimate goal of a stronger Balan and a bright future for Haiti.

- Helaina Stein, Co-founder of RESPE: Haiti, Tufts University 2010

## Forward

Located less than ten kilometers from Cap-Haitien, Haiti's northern metropolis, Balan is a community of about twenty-three thousand inhabitants; a number much greater than the 1,325 that comprised the town's total inhabitants in 1983 (information from DIRP bulletin vol. 3, 15 June 1983). Balan maintains commercial relations (formal and informal) with both Cap-Haitien and the country's capital via its inhabitants, however it remains a community whose true identity is unknown by many, including the authorities.

Yet, considering its importance in the country's history and possibilities, Balan is a community that deserves to be known.

Mindful of this fact, throughout **Balan: Past, Present, and Future**, we intend to compensate for this problem by providing answers to questions such as:

Balan, where is it located?  
What is its place in history?

In addition, an enumeration of the area's development constraints and of its possibilities and assets is made.

**Balan: Past, Present, and Future** is a document intended to be useful not only for decision-makers; since a great deal of facts are provided and problems identified; but also for the area's inhabitants who must be the first ones capable of deciding the future of their community.

The historical passage of the document, Balan's past, is addressed to the youth, the generation at present unaware of the past of their hometown.

May this document prove itself to be useful to any person, be they from within or outside of Haiti, who demonstrates the desire to know and understand this community in depth.

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### **Balan's Geographic Location**

Balan is a community of about twenty-three thousand inhabitants belonging to the commune Plaine du Nord and forms a part of the first communal section, Morne Rouge. Balan is located about 10 km west of Cap Haitien, bordered by the Bay of L'Acul on the Atlantic Coast of Haiti and about 45 km to the east of the mythical Tortuga Island.

The principal road that connects Balan to National Route 1 is one that passes through the Moustique intersection.



*This is not a map of Balan, however it allows us to situate Balan in relation to other zones of Haiti, notably Cap-Haïtien. In terms of zones found in Balan, only Normand and Langlaise are mentioned.*

## **II-Balan's history**

### **II-1 :Balan, where does its name come from?**

It seems that Balan owes its name to a former powerful landowner, Balan, who possessed almost all of the area's land.

But little by little, as families wanted to come settle in Balan, he ceded them portions in exchange for sums of money. Once these families were established in the area, they populated it. And the generation of the era decided to name the region Balan.

## **II-2 Balan until the 1950s.**

### **II-2-1 Transportation**

Incredible but true; towards the end of the 1940s the few inhabitants of Balan were living there without a navigable road that might connect them to National Route 1 and to neighboring zones. One who wanted to travel to Cap-Haïtien, for example, was required to travel along the path leading to the Moustique intersection on foot or on horseback (depending upon his financial status) before even getting to the national road.

### **II-2-2 Education**

To receive the bread of instruction one had but two choices: Go to the strong National School of Morne Rouge founded in 1922 or be home-schooled, and it all depended upon one's means. Two of the schoolmasters, Montrévil Joseph and Davilien Joseph, both resided in Morne Rouge.

### **II-2-3 Health**

If a member of the community was not well and was in need of medical care, s/he needed to be accompanied by close friends or relatives and be taken to the health center of Vaudreuil that was established by missionaries of the 4VEH.

And since many inhabitants regularly frequented the market at Acul du Nord to get foodstuffs and commodities, a fair amount of people took advantage of the chance to receive health care.

### **II-2-4 Administrative and institutional organization**

This was a case of total dependence of our community vis-à-vis the commune of Plaine du Nord. For example, in the case of a death, even after the accomplishment of the act of the civil state (death declaration), the burial had to be carried out at Plaine du nord; there was no cemetery in Balan.

It was even such that when people wanted to fulfill religious duties, there was not a single church in the area.

However, during and even after the Duvalier period and until the rise of Jean Bertrand Aristide to power in 1990, one could observe the presence of **Rampa** Duvaliéristes and militia members or servicemen of FAd'H (Armed Forces of Haiti). For example, there was one to whom the responsibility of the section was entrusted, the "Section Chief;" and in different dwellings there were the "Deputies."

It is necessary to point out that in Balan during a certain time next to the side of Larry, at the home of one named Gabriel, he had the habit of keeping people in view, which become void with the dissolution of the FAd'H.

## **II-3 Balan after the 1950s**

**"Pote Kole,"** a non-governmental organization (of American root), in agreement with the Haitian government decided to support the execution of several important projects in this area.

**"Pote Kole"** functioned in this manner: if one wanted the organization to accomplish something in his area, it was necessary, as the name "pote Kol" indicates," to pledge his participation depending upon the extent of his abilities.

Through the Community Action Council, having been established in the area by leaders such as Félix Léon Jean, Matthias Jean, Richesta etc... the following accomplishments were achieved:

## **II-3-1 Accomplishments of the Community Action Council:**

### **II-3-1-1 Transportation (Road)**

The determination of the leaders and members of the Community Action Council and the good will of each community member, added to the financial support of “Pote Kole,” gave as its first result a navigable road connection the area to National Route 1.

### **II-3-1-2 Education (School)**

In 1957, a new step was undertaken, people wanted to endow Balan with a school. Members of the community were led to bring their contribution in the form of rocks, sand, water, etc...

And following financing from **Pote Kole**, Balan would have a school, the **Community School of Balan**, which has today become the **National School of Balan**.

### **II-3-1-3 A Cemetery**

In 1960, the Community Action Council had set as a fundamental objective **obtaining** relevant land from the public domain of the State.

And finally, it was in Nemours where the council would find some. Once found, this land was transformed into a cemetery.

For the record, Dorcius Jean, someone who lived in port-Français, was the first to be buried there. The Baron was buried there.

### **II-3-1-4 Other Accomplishments of the Community Action Council**

In partnership with the ODN (Organization for Development of the North), the council worked to ensure that the population would have access to potable water. The water catchments in Nordman and Grand Bassin carry the mark of the Council.

## **III-Balan: Present**

### **III-1 Layout of the area**

Balan is divided into the following different localities: Moustique, Langlaise, Labbé, Nan Bank, Bréus, Bois Savane, Bois-Caiman, Normand, Nemours, Monts Voisins, Mahaut, Godin, Bas Balan, Dos petit Morne and Port Français, a locality found in the hills and who owes its name to having welcomed French boats to its seafront during the period of French colonization of Haiti.

### **III-2 Administrative and institutional organization**

Administratively, Balan depends on the commune of Plaine du nord. Nevertheless the more or less constant presence of authorities in the community is consequently marked by a three-member Council of Administration of the Communal Section (Morne-Rouge), the seat of which is found in the same community and the Assembly of the communal section constitutes nine members.

No Justice of the Peace in the community, no records office, no around-the-clock police presence. However, policemen, alone, or in the company of a judge of the peace, can intervene depending on need or summoning.

There are different organizations and associations in Balan, such a FAGCOP (Federation of associations of Balan community groupman), ODECOMOBA (Balan Organization of Community Development), RESPE Balan/Haiti Organization (Research and Engagement Supporting Poverty Elimination), etc... and one non-governmental organization, World Vision.

### **III-3 Economic System**

Agriculture plays an important role in Balan's economy. It provides the largest number of jobs and ensures, by its diversity, local consumption.

Nevertheless, it faces numerous constraints that hinder its development: a lack of seeds, an absence of means of conservation and product processing, lack of credit and technical management, and absence of appropriate tools for cultivation.

Besides agriculture, which includes livestock farming, there is also fishing, undertaken most by those people living near various seafronts (Godin, Mahaut, and Port Francais).

### **III-4 Industry/Artisans**

The entities of small-scaling processing of local products are composed of two cassava plants and of many bakeries. With regards to artisans, although the artisans are on the premises, they face enormous constraints in terms of infrastructures and promotion of their art objects.

### **III-5 Tourism**

From a tourism standpoint, Bois Caïman attracts many people each year from August 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> to its traditional festival recreating the ceremony held in this location by the Boukman Voodoo priest, a ceremony that had marked the starting point of the slave revolt.

October 7<sup>th</sup> of each year features the festival of employers of the zone (Our Lady of Victory), attracting a good number of pilgrims coming from every direction.

Furthermore, the touristic site of Labadie is separated by sea from Balan when passing through Port Francais by only a small zone named "Bay Sitron."

However there are enormous constraints, for example at Bois Caiman there has been no monument of Boukman erected there, not a single welcome site has been put in place.



*Partial view of tourist site Bois-Caïman*

### **III-6 Commerce**

The community of Balan maintains commercial links with Cap-Haïtien, L'Acul du nord, La Plaine du nord and the country's capitol via the "Madan Sara."

On Tuesday and Friday of each week, merchants convene at the market, "kenèp," coming from neighboring villages.

Besides the "kenèp" market, there is the "Titwa" market, which functions in a more or less permanent manner, and the Bréus market.

In Port Français, there is a market at the main intersection, "Gad," there is also one at Bois Caïman.

Commerce faces enormous problems in Balan. Even when people speak about market, in reality these are markets in parentheses, that is to say, the places are there but there is nothing built there in the way of construction.

Among other problems there is the low development and promotion of local products and the poor condition of the roads.



*A day of activities at the Kenêpe market*

### **III-7 Education**

With regards to education, there are about seventeen schools, of which fifteen are private and two are public, one primary school and one high school. There is also a private university institution, the Christian University of the Faith.

A library and a research center sharing the same locale complete the educational infrastructure in Balan.

There are no technical or professional institutions.

Schools face a number of problems: the majority of the institutions do not satisfy the MENFP (The Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training) standards, and there is a lack of teacher training.



*View of a section of the pharmacy of Balan's dispensary*

### **III-8 Health**

On the health front, there is only a rudimentary dispensary on the grounds of the Church Our Lady of Victory.

The staff and personnel are currently comprised of two Cuban nurses, assisted by Haitian nurse's aids and a pharmacist.

However, located at the Moustique intersection is the CERASO-LAB CAP, a center of radiography, radiology, and sonography.

The following are constraints affecting the community's health and healthcare: There is no way of carrying out laboratory exams on site, when there is an urgent need people are obligated to travel to Saint François de Sales, Vaudreuil, or to the Justinien Hospital in Cap Haitien.

### **III-9 Potable water and purification.**

Certain localities like Bois Savane, Dos petit Morne, Bréus, and Langlaise benefit at times from a water conveyance from the cisterns at Bois savane and Bassin Carré feeding the faucet of their households. But at the present, these cisterns are dysfunctional.

The service of solid waste collection is not present in Balan. This aspect of cleanliness is kept thanks to the precious support of Balan's inhabitants.

### **III-10 Transportation**

Balan is linked to the National Route 1 by a road leading to the Moustique intersection.

It is a dusty and beaten road whose suitability for motor vehicles is uncertain during periods of rain.

It remains a change for truck drivers and motorcyclists.

Some localities can only reach the road by footpaths.



*View of Balan's road*

### **III-11 Communication**

People in Balan pick up some radio stations broadcast from the country's capital as well as radio stations from Cap Haitien.

Balan is totally covered by the telephone networks of Voila and Digicel.

And thanks to the services offered by the communication center Richard Sales of Balan, inhabitants of the region stay in community with their parents living abroad via the Internet or telephone.

### **III-12 Electricity**

Balan currently is not electrified. There are only a few particular people, due to their economic means, who have been able to procure private transformers.

### **III-13 Markets/Butcheries**

There is no market functioning every day at our disposal.

There are no butcheries in the zone.

### **III-14 Sport/Leisure**

In terms of recreation and leisure, Balan only has one library, four unregulated clearings for soccer, one standard court for basketball and volleyball, several obstacles, and beaches are currently being developed.

There are no public places, no movie theaters, and no playhouses in the area.



*Young football players on a field in Monts-Voisins*

### **III-15 Resources**

The principle resources of the area come from agriculture, commerce, and education (primary school and of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle). These sectors alone provide almost all of the jobs in Balan.



*A farmer on a rice plantation*

## **IV The Balan of Yesterday and the Balan of today**

Contrasting the Balan of yesterday with that of today, on certain points, despite multiple sustained efforts, whether they be by predecessors or by the present generation, we are still far from what we hope to see this community become.

For example:

If previous inhabitants of Balan lived without electricity, it isn't too far from how today's inhabitants live in 2009.

And the problem of health infrastructure that Balan faced yesterday and that persists still today is a challenge that must be surpassed as soon as possible, for it is ridiculous, even inconceivable in 2009 to see a community with such an imposing number of inhabitants living without any real hospital center.

According to the DIRP Bulletin Vol. 3 No. 32 of 15 June 1983, the population of the Plaine du Nord communal section in 1971 was estimated at two thousand three hundred twenty three

inhabitants (Information provided by inquiry of the Haitian Institute of Statistics and Data Processing this year)

While today, Balan's population herself is bordering twenty three thousand inhabitants. However not a single provision has been made from an institutional point of view. On this point it can be said straightforwardly that we are on the statistical level.

### **Education**

If in the Balan of days past, it was truly difficult to find a way to be educated, in today's Balan, for primary schools and third cycle schools it is even harder today.

Quantitatively it seems that the problem is resolved, but qualitatively efforts must be undertaken to bring Balan up to speed.

Secondary schools, higher education, and professional and technical schools are still sought for.

### **Transportation**

If we return to the years past leading up to the 90s, we can quickly remark that some have attracted transportation as others have lost.

Trying to reach Cap Haitien directly from Balan becomes a headache for inhabitants of Balan, even if we notice that the traffic becomes much more manageable during the scholastic periods and particularly with the comings and goings of secondary school students from the zone to Cap Haitien.

Aside from the few pick-up trucks, there are motorcyclists who provide travel for the trip. They transport their passengers from Balan to the crossroads of Plaine du Nord before these last embark on board a van for the destination of Cap Haitien.

Rapid transit poses a problem, and the solution for this problem must first come by improving infrastructure for road transport.

### **Agriculture**

In recent days, we are in the middle of witnessing a decrease in agricultural production in the zone and a scarcity of certain product, with rice in particular.

In the past, our farmers' production sufficed and even exceeded what we needed to feed ourselves to the extent that we had some to offer to other zones. However, today, agricultural yield reveals itself to be insufficient.

The purchase of certain products from the market at Dajabon by merchants of the zone is proof of this.

## **V Balan: Future**

### **IV-1 Main constraints to Balan's Development**

#### **Agriculture :**

- Weakness of the agricultural sector's output
- Lack of irrigation infrastructure
- Lack of appropriate tools for cultivation
- Lack of technical agricultural supervision
- Lack of industry to transform primary commodities
- Migration of planters from the zone towards the cities
- Lack or insufficiency of certain staple goods, like rice
- The sale of fertile lands for construction

**Education :**

- The buildings do not satisfy the standards of MENFP (The Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training)
- Degradation of scholastic buildings.
- Absence of vocational schools and of higher education in the area.
- Lack of training for teachers.
- Lack of appropriate materials for training.

**Health**

- Absence of a health center/hospital in the area or a place where medical tests can be conducted on site.

**Infrastructure**

- Issue of road infrastructure
- Issue of electrical infrastructure
- Absence of public spaces
- Absence of a welcome site for historical places, for example Bois-Caiman.

**Superstructure**

- Institutional weakness.

**IV-2 Balan's Potential and Assets.**

- Diversity of economic activities (Agriculture, livestock farming, commerce, etc...)
- Large availability of water resources in both surface and underground
- Good plant cover despite logging for the preparation of wood coal
- Good geographic situation.
- Availability of human resources assembled around local base organizations

**Conclusion**

After reading about the history of Haiti, no matter who the author may be, readers are always left wondering if Haitian society was composed during a certain time of solely generals, monarchs, and heads of state, given the fact that a large part of its history is dedicated to them. The existence of the other class of the population is thus left in silence.

And that has left to Haitians like an inheritance this negative manner of thinking "To be at the vanguard of a movement aimed at development one must be an authority."

Yet, in the historical pages of this piece, **Balan and Its Past**, we can see that the concentration is made on key characters, simple citizens who are neither generals nor heads of state. However, they have been able to accomplish work and development in their zone that is worthy.

This retrospective glimpse has allowed to everyone to realize how ridiculous it would be to live in the Balan of yesterday; but at the same time, one must realize that such would be the case if our predecessors, particularly those of the Community Action Council, had stood idly by. Today in 2010, can't we reckon that despite the efforts offered here, there still remains a lot of work to be done? Isn't it time that we ask ourselves the question: what can we do for Balan?