

HAITI ADVOCACY WORKING GROUP (HAWG)

HAWG is a working group of international development, faith-based, human rights and social justice organizations advocating on issues related to U.S.-Haiti policy.

Towards Food Security and Resilience in Haitian Agriculture: A Call to Action

Summary

As food insecurity, exacerbated by two recent disastrous storms and a long period of drought, threatens the fragile progress achieved in Haiti since the 2010 earthquake, now is a decisive time for the donor community to refocus its agriculture and food security policies and help the Government of Haiti implement programs that **mitigate the impact of natural disasters on Haitian agriculture and meet the food security needs of the nearly 2 million Haitian children, women and families** who are going hungry in Haiti today. Such policies and programs must be established through **extensive consultations with Haitian farming communities**, particularly women farmers, with the goal of helping them **produce sustainably grown crops for the local markets, including reserves to be used in post-disaster emergency situations**. This Call to Action synthesizes the impact of the recent storms on Haiti's agriculture sector, and makes policy and program implementation recommendations to both the international donor community and the Haitian government, to begin the process of rebuilding that vital sector to Haiti's reconstruction and development.

Introduction

Haiti has suffered for many decades from chronic food insecurity. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), one third of the population is 'food insecure', that is, lacking a nutritious and calorie-sufficient diet because they lack the monetary or non-monetary resources necessary to purchase or produce food. Women are particularly vulnerable as they tend to have less access to financial and other resources necessary to feed themselves and their children. Disaster struck Haiti again this year, with an intense drought in the earlier half of the year, tropical storms Isaac in August and Sandy in October of this year. Their impact on the agricultural sector has been estimated by the Government of Haiti (GOH) at \$254 million, affecting the livelihood of nearly 2 million people. Over the last few months, large demonstrations have erupted throughout the country to protest the sharp spike in food prices, and are disrupting Haiti's fragile political stability. The Martelly-Lamothe administration has declared a State of Emergency and on November 6, 2012, the GOH and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) launched a joint appeal, seeking \$74 million dollars to help the agricultural sector recover from the recent damage. But without targeted and concerted action, food security will continue to deteriorate for most Haitians, will cost thousands of lives and upset the country's fragile stability. This brief offers recommendations, in light of the recent natural disasters, for supporting Haitian farming communities in sustainable agriculture, and alleviating food insecurity for Haiti's vulnerable populations.



The state of Haitian agriculture: dependency and rising food prices

Haiti's land supports a variety of crops, including the staples maize, beans, rice, yams, cassava, millet and sorghum. Around 60 percent of the Haitian workforce works in agriculture, accounting for more than a quarter of Haiti's GDP. Haiti's food insecurity results largely from a macroeconomic climate focused on export-driven industrial growth, food imports and entrenched neglect of the agricultural sector, particularly for smallholder farmers who grow most of the Haitian food, and account for a large percentage of the food insecure populations. Beginning in the 1980s, international financial institution-mandated structural adjustment programs imposed sweeping trade liberalization measures on Haiti as conditions of loans. Then, in 1994, the US government conditioned support to Haiti on the complete elimination of the tariff on imported rice. With substantial reductions in Haiti's import taxes, US and other food imports flooded the country, further undermining rural Haitian farmers.

As widely reported, in January 2010, a massive earthquake destroyed much of Haiti's infrastructure. According to the Office of the UN Special Envoy to Haiti, international donors have since pledged over US \$303 million to the agriculture sector. Around 45 percent of this sum has reportedly been disbursed. However, many donors prioritize industry-for-export, favoring large infrastructure projects such as roads and ports that support agro-business investments for export crops like coffee, chocolate, and mangoes, with little investment in restoring Haiti's environment and in sustainable agriculture that benefits small farmers and helps feed local communities. Another potentially damaging trend is the plan to grab large swaths of land with access to water from smallholder farmers for the construction of export-oriented industrial parks, where Haitians will be employed for \$3 a day, an amount that by all accounts cannot help lift them out of poverty or promote long term food security within their households. Furthermore, with the exception of France, the principal donors to agricultural development in Haiti do not provide their assistance in the form of budget support to the Haitian Ministry of Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Rural Development (MARNDR), despite donors' acknowledgement of the importance of country ownership to effective development. Instead, most aid goes via (mostly international) nongovernmental organizations and consulting firms.



Annual agricultural production is far below average this year, compounding the problem. MARNDR and the United Nations Humanitarian Mission in Haiti estimate a loss closer to 90 percent of crops relative to the seasonal average. As reported by USAID's Famine Early Warning System Network, this was due to poor rainfall in May and June. But, just at a time when Haitians are seeking food on the market, staple food prices have increased. Due to droughts in the United States and Eastern Europe, corn and wheat prices have increased globally by 23 percent and 22 percent since June 2012, respectively. In Haiti, a pot (*marmite*, about 5.75 pounds) of rice now costs 150 gourdes (US \$3), 50 % more than last year. Imported cornmeal now costs 100 gourdes (US \$2) a pot, up 50 gourdes over last year. Beans are also pricier, costing 210 gourdes (US \$4.10) per pot compared to 150 gourdes last year, according to USAID.

Despite its favorable growing climate, Haiti now imports at least 60 percent of its food, benefitting global food trading companies and a small cartel of Haitian food importing firms (three companies

control the vast majority of the rice import market). Except arguably in cases of natural disaster, where they may help alleviate hunger over a very short period of time, spanning from a few days to a couple of months, for rural Haitian households that spend an average of 60-70 percent of their income on food according to the WFP, dependency on food imports leaves them vulnerable to growing global food price volatility.

The impact of natural disasters on Haitian agriculture and food insecure populations

Major tropical storms hit Haiti regularly and wreak havoc on its fragile agriculture. In late October 2012, Sandy killed at least 54 people in Haiti, displaced thousands, flooded the entire Nippes department (province), and caused major damage in 5 other departments. Peasant grassroots organizations have reported that the country's plantain and breadfruit harvests have been decimated by the storm. Haiti's extreme deforestation and soil erosion have caused it to suffer by far the most severe loss of life and destruction of infrastructure of all the Caribbean countries in Sandy's path. Less than two months earlier, another major storm, Isaac hit Haiti on August 25th 2012, killing at least 24 people, destroying hundreds of homes and displacing thousands. Affecting 81,250 hectares of farmland nationally (8% of the total arable land), Isaac left no part of the country untouched by either washing or blowing away crops, trees and livestock. MARNDR has released the following assessment:

- Total damage to staple crops important for domestic consumption (rice, maize, sorghum, millet, and beans) is \$205,951,190;
- Banana and plantain crops sustained \$619,000,000 in damages;
- 4,297 heads of livestock were killed totaling a loss of \$50,000,000;
- Nationally agricultural infrastructure sustained \$150,100,000 in damages, including damage to 10 small irrigation networks and 72.5 km of road;
- Overall, the agricultural sector lost nearly \$1 billion in crops, livestock and infrastructure; including extensive damages to export crops such as coffee and mangoes.



A devastated agricultural sector has a ripple effect throughout the national economy. For farmers, it means a severe loss of food for household consumption, as well as any marketable surplus to earn income; difficulties securing seeds for the next planting season; and serious shortages of money for sending children to school and for health expenses. Children, especially girls, are removed from schools or sent to work as 'restaveks' or unpaid domestic servants to better-off households; families sell their precious assets like livestock or property for artificially low prices. With agriculture no longer providing

the means to live for a season or more, farmers migrate to find employment. This can lead to climbing unemployment for all and, for women, increased levels of dependency on male providers and prostitution.

For the general population, the farm losses exponentially increase the price of food, forcing difficult decisions on people with limited to no access to financial resources. Entire families reduce their caloric intakes precipitously. Prolonged food insecurity can lead to chronic illness – Haiti continues to have one of the highest rates of infant malnutrition in the Latin American region, and according to the WFP, 59 percent of Haitian children aged between six months and five years suffer from anemia – and leaves weakened immune systems vulnerable to diseases like malaria and cholera. This represents a double blow to families whose children’s health becomes compromised at a time when they cannot purchase necessary medicines. As a result, the vicious cycle of poverty continues with a new generation that is undernourished, undereducated and unable to take care of its basic needs.



According to local news sources and announcements from the Martelly-Lamothe administration, there was a concerted effort to prepare high risk urban centers such as Port-au-Prince and Jacmel for these latest storms. Emergency kits were distributed and the locations of emergency shelters were relayed using all available media. In the aftermath of Sandy, the Martelly-Lamothe government has also announced plans to revamp the agriculture sector, implement agrarian land reform, and increase Haiti’s capacity to meet its food security needs to a self-sufficiency rate of 60% over the next five years. However, the GOH continues to have limited resources for disaster preparedness and management for the agricultural sector. In addition, with the support of the donor community running thin, and the deafening absence of peasant grassroots communities and organizations in the process, fears are mounting that this latest crisis will only worsen.

Recommendations

The international donor community, particularly the United States government, which has proudly led reconstruction and development efforts in Haiti, must now refocus its efforts on supporting the GOH’s efforts to help Haiti feed itself, and be better prepared for climate-related disasters such as Sandy and Isaac. The ensuing programs will help generate jobs for half of the Haitian population that still depends on the agricultural sector to earn a living.

Tropical storms and hurricanes are a seasonal reality for Haiti from June through November. Also, because of widespread deforestation throughout the country, hurricane season carries the risk of excessive flooding, landslides and soil erosion. However, while hurricanes cannot be prevented, the agricultural sector through the leadership of MARNDR can **mitigate the impact of natural disasters of smallholder Haitian farmers** by:

- Strengthening and creating where nonexistent, disaster preparedness committees in every commune that include strong representation of farmers and rural women, to develop and implement national plans;
- Strengthening the GOH General Direction of Civil Protection agency in every department (province) and commune (district) and ensuring it collaborates closely with the MARDNR and with the communities in which it works;
- Publicizing impending tropical storms and hurricanes using all available media in rural areas;
- Creating decentralized food distribution channels, prioritizing products made locally in Haiti, to feed affected food insecure populations;
- Creating decentralized stockpiles of supplies from locally produced food reserves to sandbags, and plastic sheets in case of flooding;
- Building levees/trenches around bodies of water prone to flooding;
- Teaching farmers how to effectively secure their crops and livestock before a hurricane;
- Encouraging farmers to quickly harvest crops from uprooted trees and plants whenever possible;
- Making emergency funds available to farmers to enable quick rehabilitation and restoration of their farms.

In addition, the GOH and international donors must refocus their efforts to promote policies and implement programs that meet the following criteria:

- Established through **extensive consultations with Haitian farming communities**, which have a long and deeply rooted grassroots organizing history;
- Designed to **strengthen the ability of the Haitian farming communities to produce sustainably grown crops for the local markets, including reserves to be used in such cases of emergencies**;
- Mainstream gender and otherwise prioritize women farmers to maximize the effect on farming families;
- **Prioritize the production of food staples for consumption in Haiti.** Support initiatives that help smallholder farmers, particularly women, grow food that can feed their family and communities, while allowing them to also take advantage and survive the up and downs of the global agriculture markets;
- Help **create jobs in rural areas** for tasks such as cleaning and repairing irrigation canals and agricultural roads, treating gullies, and strengthening soil conservation, as well as repairing destroyed homes, and ensure that these projects are led by local communities, best positioned to implement and evaluate these projects;
- Help the GOH systematically tackle the important task of **land and agrarian reform in Haiti, including land tenure security for smallholder farmers** – without such reforms, the country will continue to be mired in uncertainties that have hindered the protection of the environment and longer term sustainable agriculture initiatives;
- **Financial and human resources must also be allocated** to implement and sustain these programs **over the long term**;
- **Transparency and accountability** are major principles by which the donor community and the Haitian government can make clear to the Haitian people how agriculture is prioritized and toward what aims.

Multiple organizations contribute on a case by case basis to issue or sector specific recommendations and positions expressed in HAWG materials. These materials are not designed to be consensus positions and have not been explicitly endorsed by each organization active in the HAWG.

Conclusion

Haiti's food crisis and impending famine disaster is a clear Call to Action for the international donor community to refocus its policies and help the GOH, in close consultation with the peasant communities and organizations, implement programs that enhance the ability of farming communities to mitigate the impact of natural disasters, promote sustainable agriculture and increase food security for the nearly 2 million Haitians at risk today. Without such an approach, the fragile progress achieved in the aftermath of the earthquake may quickly vanish and Haiti may once again become mired in a natural disaster of epic proportions, lest we do something about it now.

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